



Isabel Clarendon

George Gissing

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PRESS

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VOLUME I.

CHAPTER I

From Salcot East to Winstoke there are two roads, known respectively as the old and the new. The latter was made about the middle of the present century; the old road is immemorial. By the modern highway the distance between the two parishes is rather less than five miles; pursue the other, and you fetch a compass of well-nigh ten, taking into account all the inexplicable windings and angularities between the "White Hart Inn" at Salcot, where the roads disdainfully part company, to Winstoke Rectory, where they unite and form the village street. It says much for ancestral leisureliness in that north-west corner of —shire, that the old way ever established itself, or, being established, was used to so recent a date; on the other hand, the construction of the new thoroughfare looks remarkably like a practical joke, perpetrated at their own expense by the good people of the country side, seeing that this activity displayed itself just when it was least called for. Formerly, there was a silk manufactory at Salcot East, and direct communication with the neighbouring parish would have been a convenience; only when the industry in question had fallen into complete decay, and when it could not matter to any one whether it took one hour or two to reach Winstoke (where not even a market was held), did the inhabitants tax themselves for the great undertaking.

As regards picturesqueness, needless to say that the old road has enormously the advantage. A pedestrian with time on his hands and walking for walking's sake, could not hesitate between the hard white turnpike, running on into level distance between dusty hedgerows, and that charming glimpse of elm-shadowed lane, grass creeping from the densely verdurous bank on either side to the deep moistened ruts, and, twenty yards away, a sudden turn round a fantastic oak, all beyond a delightful uncertainty. Such a pedestrian was Bernard Kingcote, a man neither too old nor too busy to be rambling aimlessly on this Midsummer Day; over his shoulders a small knapsack, with a waterproof strapped upon it, in his hand a stick he had cut from an oak-tree. Since eleven in the morning the sun had shone as in England it shines but rarely - a steady force of fire which drew the perspiration from every pore of one standing unshaded. Under these circumstances, Kingcote had loitered about

Salcot all the day, having reached the place after a four-mile stroll from another little town where he had passed the preceding night. There were leafy lurking-places here and there along the banks of the stream called Sale, and the "White Hart" gave promise of a comfortable, homely meal at mid-day. The time passed pleasantly enough till late afternoon, for he had a couple of books in his knapsack, and made purchase of another in a musty little shop full of miscellaneous rubbish, into which he was tempted by the sight of a shelf of ragged volumes ; then came tea at the "White Hart" again, and he was ready, after a survey of his Ordnance map, to use the cool of the evening for a ramble on to Winstoke. But as he came forth from the inn, unexpected entertainment presented itself. A dancing bear had just been led into the town, and the greater part of the population had assembled in the broad street to watch the poor dusty-coated beast. With a humorous sadness on his countenance, Kingcote stood in the doorway, observant of the artificial biped and the natural ones which surrounded it. As he waited, a trifling incident occurred which afterwards came back to his memory with more significance than he had attributed to it at the time ; somebody jolted against him from behind, and then a country fellow of evil appearance staggered out of the inn and mixed with the crowd; he was seemingly half-drunk, or but just awakened.

This gave the pedestrian the impulse needed to send him forth on his way. He looked for a moment along the new road, then his eyes wandered to the old, and he turned at once into the latter. There was a sign-post at the parting; both its arms said, "To Winstoke," but one was crumbling, fungus-scored, its inscription barely legible; the other a stout piece of timber, self-assertive, with rounded ends and freshly painted in black and white. Kingcote passed with a mental comment.

The road was just what it promised, perfectly rural, sweet with all summer growths, seldom without trees on both sides, ash predominating, oak and holly frequent. It mounted little hills where the least turn would have enabled it to keep level ; oftener still made a curve or a corner, to all appearances merely for the sake of constructing an exquisite little picture of banks and boughs and luxuriant vegetation. At times nothing was to be seen for the robust old hedges; then would come a peep over open country, a stretch of yellow fields bounded far away by the bare chalk-hills. No cottages, no trim borders of stately parks, seldom a gate giving into a grass meadow. It seemed that no one ever came this way; the new road

had monopolised traffic of every kind. The gnats began to swarm; here and there a spider, acting with the assurance of long impunity, had carried his invisible silken thread right across the road; the birds were softening their multitudinous voices to sunset. Now and then was heard a sound of deep, steady breathing from behind the hedge, and an odour of warm, sweet breath filled the air; it was a cow that lay there chewing the cud. Or a horse, turned out to grass, would put his head up and look over into the lane, half-alarmed at the approach of a human being. The pedestrian had a friendly word for him.

Kingcote's way of walking was that of a man accustomed to his own society; he advanced slowly, yet without pauses, and often became forgetful of the things about him. His face was neither sad nor cheerful, but the tendency of its free play of feature was clearly in the direction rather of the former than of the latter expression. It was plain that he enjoyed to the full the scenes through which he passed, and enjoyed them as a man of poetic sensibilities, but there was no exuberance of vitality in his delight. He looked like one who had been walking all through the heat of the day, and was growing weary for his night's retreat. Evidently he had nothing of the naturalist's instinct; he never bent to examine a flower or leaf, and he could not indeed have assigned its name to any but the commonest; the very trees whose beauty dwelt longest in his eye did not suggest to him their own familiar appellations. To judge from his countenance, the communing which he held with himself was constant and lively; at times words even fell from his lips. It was not the face of a man at ease with his own heart, or with the circumstances amid which his life had fallen. A glance of pleasure hither or thither was often succeeded by the shadow of brooding, and this by a gleam of passion, brief but significant enough. This inward energy was brought to view on features sufficiently remote from any ordinary stamp to prove interesting in themselves; they were those of a young man - Kingcote was not quite thirty.

When he had been walking for a couple of hours, his thoughts began to turn to his plans for the following day; he took the map out again, and examined it as he proceeded. He had been away from home - from London - three days; to-morrow would be Friday and on Saturday he proposed to return. There came into his mind a question about money, and he felt for his purse. For the first time he came to a standstill; neither in the wonted pocket nor anywhere else was his purse to be found. It had contained all his immediate resources, with the exception of a few loose coppers. Then it was that the course of

reflection brought him back to that incident in the doorway of the "White Hart," and he felt little doubt that the seemingly drunken boor who pushed against him had in the same moment dexterously picked his pocket. The purse had been safe when he paid his bill at the inn, and certainly he had not left it behind him by accident. At all events, purse and money were gone, and it was not our friend's temper to fall into useless lamentation over irremediable accidents. If, indeed, the case were one of theft - and no other explanation seemed possible - he wished the rascal luck of his three pounds or so, and, walking slowly on again, began to ask himself what was to be done.

To stop at Winstoke, take up quarters there at an inn, and wait till money could be sent to him from London, was the course which naturally first suggested itself. Yet the reasons against it were not long in being discovered. What guarantee could he give to his landlord - short of remaining shut up in the inn all day - of his honest intention to pay when money arrived? His knapsack and three old books were not much of a pledge. Another would perchance have never given this matter a thought, but a feature of Kingcote's character was concerned in it. He was too proud to subject himself to possible suspicion, especially that of his social inferiors; to explain his position to an innkeeper would have galled him exceedingly, still more so to live for a day under the innkeeper's eyes without an explanation. Things which most men accept as the every-day rubs of the world were to Kingcote among the worst evils of existence; the most ordinary transaction with uneducated and (as he held) presumably uncivilised persons at all times made him uncomfortable, and a necessity such as the present assailed his fastidiousness with no little severity. He reopened his map, and began to calculate the possibility of walking straight on to London. There was no possibility in the matter. He might sleep in the open air this midsummer night, and it would be rather pleasant than otherwise, but the situation would only be complicated by the pressing need of breakfast in the morning. Was there nothing for it but to face the innkeeper?

He moved on, and a turn in the road exposed a scene which for the moment made him lose sight of his annoyances. He had suddenly come in full view of a cottage, and, it seemed to him, a cottage of ideal rusticity. It was very old, built of brick which had become finely toned wherever it was not hidden by ivy, and the tiles of the roof were patched with richest hues of moss and lichen; its low

upper storey had two dormer windows. The dwelling lay a few yards back from the road, and in the middle of the grass before the door stood the bowed trunk of an old, old oak-tree, branchless, hollow, killed by the parasites which clung about it in astonishing luxuriance. To the rear of the cottage, which seemed to be uninhabited, grew a cluster of tall trees, with a quantity of bushy undergrowth; the tree-tops were black with rooks' nests, and the birds themselves were loud in talk. This scene, with its background of magnificent evening sky above remote hills of the intensest blue, might well have brought the pedestrian to a pause; it was something else, however, that checked him with a movement of surprise. He was no longer alone with nature; facing the cottage sat a girl, busy over a water-colour sketch; she was working with rapid eagerness, and, as she sat with her back to him, she could not see, and had not heard, his approach. Kingcote would have liked to stay here awhile, but the stranger's presence made it difficult. Taking a step or two onwards, he speedily drew her attention; she suspended the work of her pencil and looked quickly round. Kingcote experienced a sense of profound disappointment; far from being in harmony with the scene, the face presented to him was irregular in feature and harsh in expression; the eyes seemed very large, and, having met his, did not at once remove themselves, but continued to gaze with something like defiance, whilst the lips worked in a curiously nervous way, not at all pleasant to watch. She was perhaps nineteen; her dress very plain, but that of a lady. With the observance of these details, Kingcote walked past her at a sharp pace, and did not venture to stay his steps again till the ever-winding road had taken him from the sketcher's sight.

"I never saw so uninteresting a girl," was his first thought, but it had scarcely passed through his mind when he felt that its hastiness did not in truth embody his impression. To say that he had never seen a less pleasing girl would be more accurate. A merely uninteresting face would not at once, and so forcibly, have printed itself upon his memory; he already felt that the unpropitiating gaze of those large, cold eyes would remain long with him. He wondered who she might be. Certainly no conventional young lady who came out to sketch in a feeble way, in the ordinary course of her mild domestic existence; more likely than that, a professional artist, or one studying to become such. There had been no opportunity for a glance at her work, but the earnestness with which she gave herself up to it inspired a certain confidence as to the results. Whence did she come,

dressed as if for a brief walk, with her camp stool and sketching apparatus?

One more, and this the last, turn of the old road showed that she need not have come any very great distance. Kingcote found himself entering Winstoke. On his left hand was the village church, a low edifice with a solid, square tower, and, just beyond it, what was evidently the rectory. These occupied the angle made by the two roads as they reunited. Across the churchyard and the rectory garden was visible the white dust of the turnpike, along which on the further side ran a high brick wall capped with tiles, the enclosure of private grounds. The rectory thus stood with its back to the church; its front windows looked upon a large open space, grass-grown and shadowed with fine trees, the whole surrounded with iron chains loosely swinging from post to post. On the left proceeded the high wall just mentioned, leading to gates and a lodge; the dense foliage of a well-wooded park rose behind it. To the right stood a few picturesque houses, with little gardens before them. Straight on lay the main street of the village, the yellow-washed fronts vanishing at length amid yet more trees. Children were playing on the enclosed grass, and with their voices mingled the notes of a piano from an open window near at hand. It was all very beautiful in the light of sunset. For a minute or two Kingcote stood with a face of contentment, soothed and restful.

It was half-past eight; the chiming of the church clock proclaimed it. If he intended to pass the night in Winstoke it was time to make up his mind where he should seek quarters. He began to stray round the enclosure towards the houses of the street, walking slowly and with frequent stoppings, beginning at length to feel the full annoyance of his position, and in his somewhat hasty way inwardly cursing the whole social constitution which made such a disagreeable experience possible. As he drew near the lodge gates in the high wall, he perceived a handsome drinking fountain, built of marble and set in the wall itself. He was thirsty, and went to take a draught of water. Above the basin was an inscription, carved in old English letters, "The Knight's Well," and a recent date beneath it. The name struck him pleasantly; no doubt there was some legend attached to it, which he promised himself to seek out. He drank with delight of the sweet, cold water, and was about to fill the cup a second time, when a little boy, who had come up to his side unobserved, a youngster of six or seven, addressed him with curious gravity.

"That water is enchanted," said the child. "I wouldn't drink more than one if I was you."

Kingcote laughed with pleasure.

"Enchanted?" he exclaimed. "I feared there was none such left in the world. How do you know it is?"

The child was neatly dressed in light summer clothing, in knickerbockers, and round his waist was a green sash which held a toy bugle. He looked up with bright, intelligent eyes, not quite certain how to take the stranger's laughter.

"I know," he replied, "because my father has told me. One cup does you good, but after the first —"

He paused and shook his head. Possibly the evils which would result from a second draught were but darkly vague in his imagination.

"Who is your father?" Kingcote inquired after a moment's reflection.

"My father is the rector," was the little fellow's reply, not without dignity. Even as he spoke he caught sight of a lady and a gentleman walking towards them, the attire of the latter proclaiming the rector himself. The child at once drew out his bugle and blew a joyous blast of welcome - tarantar-ar-a!

"This is my father coming," he then explained to Kingcote. "Ask him about the Knight's Well, and he'll tell you, I've no doubt."

And he ran off to meet the pair. Already Kingcote had perceived that the lady was she whom he had passed in the lane. The reverend gentleman had relieved her of the camp-stool, and was talking in the manner of one who enjoys the exercise of his own voice, with something, too, of the tone and aspect observable in men who believe themselves not on the whole disagreeable to ladies. He seemed to be just on the hither side of middle age, had a very fresh complexion, and kept drawing himself up to the limit of his five feet six, like one who wishes to correct a habit of stooping. As he talked, he held his glasses in one hand, and with them tapped the other; the camp-stool was pressed under his left arm.

Kingcote drew aside, as if he would walk over to the enclosure. At the lodge gates the two paused; the clergyman was politely insisting on carrying the camp-stool up to the house, the young lady refusing with rather a hard smile. Kingcote saw now that she was tall, and held herself with the grace of strong and shapely limbs. When she had persuaded the rector to take his leave, and was on the point of entering the gates, she turned half round, and Kingcote once more found the large eyes fixed full upon him. She cast the glance without any embarrassment, and, having satisfied her curiosity, walked on and disappeared.

The rector and his little boy, to whom the young lady had paid no attention, came away and walked towards the rectory. Kingcote could see that the child was speaking of him. On the spur of a sudden determination, he followed, coming up to the two just as they reached the house. With a courteous raising of his hat, he begged the favour of a few words with the clergyman.

"By all means, sir," was the genial response. "Be off to bed, Percy; you've no business to be up at this hour, you rascal."

The boy blew a farewell blast and ran round to a garden entrance at the side of the house.

"Let us enter," said the clergyman - Mr. Vissian was his name - when he had taken another look at the stranger.

This was better than discussing awkward matters in the open street. Kingcote found himself with satisfaction in a cosy study, the windows of which looked upon a trim garden, with a view of the church beyond. Requested to seat himself he told, as well as he could, the story of his lost purse, dwelling on the humorous features of his situation, and frankly avowing the reasons which led him to apply to the rector of the parish rather than establish himself at an inn and wait for a remittance. Would Mr. Vissian lend him a sum of money sufficient for the night's expenses and for return to London on the morrow?

"With pleasure I will do so," responded the clergyman at once, plunging both hands into his trouser pockets. Then his face darkened. "I - really —" he began with hesitation, "that is if I —."

Pray have the goodness to excuse me for a moment," he added with a jerk, and, his face reddening a little, he hurried out of the room.

Kingcote wondered what this might mean. Was it prudence coming rather late, or unanticipated poverty? He rose and looked at the volumes on the shelves behind him. They were not the kind of books one ordinarily finds in a country rector's library; instead of commentators and sermons there were rows of old English play-books beautifully bound - the collection of an enthusiast in such matters. The binding of a complete set of Dodsley was engaging his admiration when Mr. Vissian returned.

"Do you think a pound would suffice to your needs?" the clergyman asked, still rather disturbed in countenance.

"Amplly," Kingcote hastened to reply; hesitation being impossible under the circumstances.

"You - you are quite sure?"

"Quite. I am greatly indebted to your kindness."

Mr. Vissian held out a sovereign with a smile of embarrassment; the other took it, and, to get past the delicate point, remarked with a glance at the book-shelves:

"You are interested in dramatic literature, I see. Pray let me show you something I picked up in a shop at Salcot this morning."

He quickly unstrapped his knapsack, and extracted from it a thin, backless book, the outside leaves crumpled and dirty, and held it out to the rector. Mr. Vissian had put on his glasses, and took the offered object with an expression of dubious curiosity. Could any good thing come out of Salcot East? But at the first sight of the title-page he positively flushed with excitement. It was the first edition of Otway's "Venice Preserved."

"You found this in Salcot?" he exclaimed. "My good sir, what did you give for it?"

"The sum of one penny," replied Kingcote, with a smile. "It was stuffed among a lot of trash; but for want of something to do I should never have looked through the heap."

"By the Turk!" Mr. Vissian ejaculated. "'As it is acted at the Duke's Theatre . . . Printed for Jos. Hindmarsh at the sign of the "Black Bull," over against the Royal Exchange in Cornhill. 1682.' Upon my word!"

He chuckled with gleeful appreciation; something of envy too was in the side glance he threw upon the happy possessor. Forthwith he became as friendly and unconstrained as if he had known Kingcote for years. Taking from his pocket a bunch of delicate little keys, he stepped up to a book-case with a glass front, opened it with care, and began to draw forth the treasures. He was boy-like in the exuberance of his zeal, rubbed his hands, uttered crows and chirpings, and grew the more delighted the more he became aware of his guest's congenial tastes. Kingcote was nothing of a genuine book-hunter; his years and temperament preserved him from that delightful pedantry; but he knew and enjoyed the literature in question. More than an hour passed in talk; it grew all but dark.

"We must have a light," cried Mr. Vissian.

"Is it not time that I saw after my room at the inn?" Kingcote asked, looking at his watch.

"Inn? Ah! to be sure. But - if I might offer - really I wish you'd let us give you a bed here for the night. It would save trouble."

"On the contrary, I fear it would give trouble somewhat needlessly."

But Mr. Vissian insisted.

"I will give directions at once. It must be supper time too. Mrs. Vissian has thought me busy, I fear, and has let the usual hour go by. Pray come into the sitting room. It's a year since I had any one to chat with over these things. It does me good; it does me good."

In the sitting-room supper was already spread - plain bread and cheese and draught ale. In an arm-chair, busy with sewing, sat the rector's wife. She looked very youthful, and was indeed only five-

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and-twenty, having been married at seventeen. She was delicate, pretty, and a trifle troubled in face.

"A friend of mine, dear," said the rector, with an affectionate courtesy which pleased Kingcote, "who will remain with us for the night."

Mrs. Vissian looked just a little startled, but speedily put on pleasant smiles, and went away to make her necessary preparations. On her return the talk turned to the son of the house, Master Percy.

"What did he mean," Kingcote asked, "by telling me that the water of the Knight's Well was enchanted, and that you must not drink more than one cup?"

Father and mother broke into laughter.

"You thought it an interesting local legend, no doubt," said Mr. Vissian. "I am sorry to disabuse you. That enchantment is merely a sanitary precaution of my own. It's not good for the child to drink much of the water this hot weather, so I hit on a device which has proved more efficacious than anything more literal would have done."

"But is there no legend connected with the well?" Kingcote asked.

"Oh yes. The spring has doubtless been used for centuries. I will show you the story, after supper, in the county history. The marble basin was built five years ago by Mrs. Clarendon, the lady who lives at the house over there, which is itself called Knightswell."

"The lady," Kingcote asked quickly, "whom I saw entering the gates?"

"No, no," corrected Mr. Vissian, with a smile, "Mrs. Clarendon is in London. That was Miss Warren, a - a distant relation."

"A very different person from Mrs. Clarendon," put in Mrs. Vissian, in a low voice.

The rector murmured assent.

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"It was Miss Warren, then," Kingcote pursued, "whom I saw sketching a charming cottage in the lane not far away. What an exquisite spot that is!"

"Wood End - yes. The trees there are all that remains of a forest."

"The cottage is vacant, isn't it?"

"Yes, has been for a year. A labourer and his family left and went to Canada; Mrs. Clarendon gave the poor people the means to emigrate, and we hear they are already doing well."

"No one whom Mrs. Clarendon helps fails to do so," remarked the rector's wife.

"What may be the rent of such a cottage?" Kingcote inquired carelessly, leaning back in his chair.

"Half-a-crown a week is what Yardley wants for that, I think," replied the rector.

The guest sat upright.

"Half-a-crown? A delightful little place like that! Six pounds ten a year?"

"I believe so."

They were rising from the table. Kingcote stood in his place, meditating. Mrs. Vissian again left the room.

"Suppose," began Kingcote at length, "one took a fancy to live in that cottage, would it be possible to find a labourer's wife - or some person of that kind - to come and give one say an hour's service daily?"

"Very possible, I should say," returned the rector, with some surprise. "Do you contemplate such a step?"

"One might do worse, I fancy," was Kingcote's only reply.

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Mrs. Vissian returned, bringing with her a large volume, the county history of which her husband had spoken.

“Always thoughtful, and always helpful,” said the rector, with a smile which made his face look wonderfully good. “Thank you, Lucy. Now you shall read us the story yourself, if you will give us that pleasure.”

Mrs. Vissian consented with a pretty blush. The story told how, in the troublous times of King Stephen, there stood in this place the stronghold of a great baron, who, shortly after he had wedded a noble and beautiful lady, fell in combat with another lord, the origin of their quarrel being obscure, and, indeed, nothing to the point. The lady, thus widowed, shut herself up in her castle and refused to yield to the victor, who had been one of many rejected suitors for her hand in former days, and now saw his opportunity of forcing her to become his wife. The stronghold being closely beleaguered for many days, and the garrison, too weak to make an effective sortie, already nigh to starvation, by the interposition of Providence there appeared upon the scene a certain knight, who also had been one of the lady’s wooers, and who, in despair at her refusal of him, had betaken himself to fight in the Holy Land. Thence he was even now returned with a good band of tried followers. Learning how matters stood, he forthwith gave battle to the besiegers, hoping to rescue the lady he still loved, or, if that might not be, willing and glad to yield his life in her service. As indeed he did, for though victorious in the conflict, he was at the last moment mortally pierced by an arrow. In the ardour of pursuing the foe, his men lost sight of their leader; the wounded knight dragged himself to a spring hard by, and whilst endeavouring to slake his thirst, bled to faintness and so died. There his body was found by the lady of the castle when she came forth to give due thanks to her deliverer. In memory of his devotion, she built a basin of fair stone to gather the waters of the spring, and from that day forth it was known as the *Knight’s Well*.

“We always call Mrs. Clarendon ‘the lady of Knightswell,’” said Mrs. Vissian, when she had ceased to read.

“The name is a beautiful one,” said Kingcote. “It suggests a fair and gracious and noble woman.”

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"Exactly what it should suggest," returned the lady, with a pleased laugh.

"And who is the lord of Knightswell?" asked the guest.

"There is none," the rector made answer. "Mrs. Clarendon has been a widow for a long time. But what say you to a pipe before bedtime, and a look at one or two old books? My dear Lucy," he exclaimed, turning to his wife, "our friend has just captured a first edition of the 'Venice Preserved.' And *where*, think you? In a miserable shop in Salcot East! - And *what for*, think you? One penny, by the Turk! One penny!"

Mrs. Vissian smiled, but at the same time shook her head; and Kingcote wondered why.

An hour later he was alone in a little bed-chamber which looked out from the front of the house. The sun had been so strong upon the roof all day that this upper room was overheated; he extinguished the light as soon as possible, and sat down to get a breath of fresh air at the open window. His eyes turned in the direction of Knightswell. The east lay over there, and already it seemed as though a new day were beginning to touch the heavens; there was a broad region of delicate dusky pink above the dark tops of trees, and outlined against it was visible the roof of Mrs. Clarendon's house. There was no shining of the moon, and but few stars anywhere in the sky; the night throbbed with a passion of silence. Just as Kingcote's eyes perceived the gables of Knightswell, somewhere in the park broke forth the song of a nightingale. For many minutes an unbroken stream of melody flooded the darkness; he all but sobbed in listening. Pain of the past and anguish of longing to the years which waited with unknown gifts of fate made his heart tumultuous. The kindness he had met with touched him; he had tender thoughts of the good rector and his sweet-faced, girlish wife. He loved this place; Knightswell was musical in his ears; he longed to see that gentle lady whose title has such a pleasant and stately sound of romance, and of whom such good things were spoken. As the nightingale sang he kept repeating to himself her name, "the Lady of Knightswell." She had been a widow for a long time, said the rector; yet they had not spoken of her as of one who was old. He pictured to himself the fair, sweet, queenly woman whom that name would become.

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The bird ceased. Over the country passed a leafy murmur, a hushed whisper of the tall dark trees, growing to a sigh, almost to a low wail, dying over Knightswell. Then an owl hooted thrice. The night had turned cold.

CHAPTER II

When Isabel Maddison married Mr. Clarendon she was generally esteemed, among such as had any interest in the matter, a highly fortunate young woman. Handsome, penniless, but nineteen years old, at a step she had achieved social apotheosis. Six months prior to the event Isabel had been on the point of accepting an engagement as a governess at a salary of twenty-six pounds a year. By agreeing to the alternative proposal she became wife of a county member, mistress of a mansion in Mayfair and of a delightful estate in —shire, presumptive possessor, before many years should have passed, of a fortune solidly correspondent with such show of dignity. Whatever might be the drawbacks, there was much to be said for the bargain.

The event was not as entirely romantic as it might have been; she was not positively discovered with ink-stained fingers among school-girls' copy-books, and carried off by a masterful passion to grace a London season. The kindly interposition of a certain Lady Kent, an old friend of her mother's, bridged the gulf between social impossibility and that respectable limbo where every aspiration is sanctioned and a dutiful waiting upon Providence is taught to ally itself with the graces of self-assertion. Isabel was the daughter of a country solicitor, who, dying before middle age, left a widow and two children, a freehold worth about thirty-five pounds a year, and a policy of life insurance for two thousand pounds. Mrs. Maddison thus found herself not particularly well provided for, and, but for the assistance of a brother who farmed some three hundred acres in the same county, would have been at a loss how to educate her boy of ten and bring up (we do not speak of education in the case of girls) her little Bella of seven. With all the aid that others were able or disposed to render: the first years of widowhood saw a good deal of pinching and struggling in the home, which had to be kept on a footing of gentility with firm resistance of that terrible temptation, encroachment upon capital. The boy Richard eventually went to learn farming with his uncle, and, at the latter's death, being then nearly twenty, made use of a legacy of a hundred pounds to transport himself to Australia, where he flourished among sheep. Isabel was then seventeen. Her mother also received a small legacy at the uncle's decease, and it was decided to use this in "finishing off" Isabel, that is to say, in giving her a year or so of that kind of training which would enable her to earn her living as a governess.

Already there was an alternative. The gentleman who had succeeded to Mr. Maddison's practice, or rather, who had managed to establish one where only a shadow had existed, had kept an eye on Isabel through these past ten years, and, now that the girl was to be sent away from home, astonished both her and her mother by a proposal of marriage. He was a young Irishman, blessed with much self-confidence, and holding it for a certainty that he was destined to become Attorney-General. When Isabel reported the proposal to her mother she could scarcely speak for laughter. Mrs. Maddison was grave, and wanted time to think. But Isabel looked in the mirror over the mantelpiece, laughed yet more, and there was an end of the matter.

She went away to school, and remained there for a year and a half. Then it was that Lady Kent, now for two years a widow, her husband having died after a weary invalid vegetation at German baths, came to pay visits in her native county, and renewed a long-interrupted friendship with Mrs. Maddison. The two had been neighbours as children, had married about the same time - the one her luckless solicitor, the other a baronet who promised to live a year and lingered nearly twenty - and now, in spite of social differences, found that they still had a kindness for each other. Isabel was at home, advertising and answering advertisements. The first glance at this young lady satisfied Lady Kent that the projects in hand were not promising.

"I doubt whether any one will have her," she said to Mrs. Maddison. "I'm sure I wouldn't."

The poor lady looked up in astonishment at so unkind a speech.

"My dear," explained the woman of the world, "she is far too good-looking, has too much blood, doesn't at all belong to the governess breed. I would say, don't let her be thrown away, if I were not sure better things were in store for her."

What these better things might be it was not difficult to imagine; but the chance of their attainment seemed so remote that Mrs. Maddison was half disposed to resent such remarks as gratuitous cruelty. Lady Kent went away and reflected. She paid another visit in a day or two, and brought forth a startling proposal.

Isabel Clarendon

"I have no children of my own," she said, "and I shan't marry again - had enough of it. Let me take Bella to London and give her a season."

"But how will that —"

"Never mind; let us trust in Providence. She'll be none the worse, in any case. Depend upon it, she won't be a governess; and for looking about one London is the only place."

Mrs. Maddison shook her head. Her troubles were increased by the arrival just then of that offer of a place at six-and-twenty pounds. Isabel knew nothing of Lady Kent's proposal, and was willing to go away; but the mother's heart had been set in commotion by her friend's talk. There were days of miserable uncertainty, and ultimately Isabel herself was taken into consultation. Lady Kent, who was greatly struck with the girl, and foresaw congenial excitement in a plan which her native kindness made agreeable, repeated her proposal in serious form. Isabel (so she spoke in private to Mrs. Maddison) was made to shine in society. She had just been "finished off" with the ordinary accomplishments, and if she now "came out" there was much probability of her attracting a suitable husband. She should not incur the least danger, that Lady Kent would guarantee. What was the use of beauty to a poor girl if not to get her an establishment in life? There was no disgrace in standing up and proclaiming oneself to be disposed of; the folly and the danger would lie in trying to keep out of sight. Whether was it better, to be pursued by rascals as a beautiful governess, or to meet face to face with honest men who would be likely to fall in love with beauty for its own sake, or at all events be willing to purchase it respectably? In this way was the mother talked into compliance. Isabel herself had only to subdue her exultation. With the beginning of the season she and Lady Kent opened the campaign together.

The details are not of importance. The seat of war is a familiar region to my readers, and the engagements reported year after year so closely resemble each other that they have become by this time rather tedious in the chronicling. Lady Kent's prophecy was fulfilled. Isabel had at least three possible offers, and she selected that of Mr. Eustace Clarendon. For this gentleman's qualifications see above.

For the girl was charming; not beautiful as yet, that was to come later; but so blest with sweetness of virginal feature, so radiant with the joy of maiden health, so abundant in graceful and dainty instincts, with so rapturous a smile, with a laugh which came so direct from the source of nature's music, that her presence smote upon the heart like very sunshine. It mattered not where or when she was discovered, her grace was perfect. In a week she had all the pretty artificialities of the town in complete possession; one would have thought she had been born and bred in the atmosphere of refined insincerity. When she appeared on the Row, who would have thought that she had learned her riding on a saddleless colt at her uncle's farm? When she laughingly consented to play to a few friends, it certainly did not suggest itself that she had toiled at the instrument in order to teach children for six-and-twenty pounds a year. She was, as Lady Kent had seen, born for society; it was her element; it brought out all that was best and loveliest in her; it made her a complete being. Society could not give her more than it was in her to produce; but on the other hand, it planted not one seed of alien evil. Pure-minded she left her home, and, without a shadow on the purity of her thought, she entered the home of the man who had won so priceless a treasure. Throughout her life it was to be the same. Suffering what was in her to suffer, growing in self-knowledge, growing in tenderness of soul and in outward perfection, always a queen of society, always making her food of the best that mere society had to offer, Isabel Clarendon was but Isabel Maddison ripened and subdued in maturity of charm. Not the greatest and highest among women ; falling short of much that marks the noblest woman-soul; failing in force, failing in courage, with eyes too level on the surface of this world, but woman womanly in every fraction of her being, and, as such, infinite in suggestiveness, infinite in lovableness.

Of the two offers which Isabel declined, only one concerns us. One evening early in the season she was taken down to dinner by a gentleman named Asquith. They were introduced to each other just as the movement from the drawing-room began, and the mention of their respective names brought a look of surprise to either face.

"Have I not," asked Mr. Asquith, "the honour and pleasure of being related to you? Are we not cousins in some degree or other?"

"I really believe we are," Isabel replied, with her irresistible smile. "At least, I suppose you belong to the family of which I have heard."

"And assuredly I hope that you belong to the family of which *I* have heard," said the young man, whose arm trembled sensibly as she put her hand upon it.

Question and answer brought about a satisfactory establishment of identity, and the pleasure which Isabel experienced, without attempt at concealment, in having found a kinsman who belonged of right to the fashionable world, was anything but disagreeable to the kinsman himself. The Asquiths were connections of Mr. Maddison, but the family had been in Canada for many years, and since their return of late to England, had not come in contact with the widow and her children. Robert Asquith was three-and-twenty, without any definite occupation, save that he was nominally reading for the Bar, and possessed of an income of five hundred a year, which was not likely to grow to anything more respectable until he should perchance inherit from his father - a hale man with a number of daughters to look after. Very likely Isabel was just a little to blame for what ensued. Glad of having found a relation, she perhaps laid upon the frail tie of consanguinity rather more stress than it could be reasonably expected to bear, allowed, perhaps, rather too much of cousinly intimacy to forthwith establish itself, and, in pure innocence, gave Robert Asquith too much reason to believe that his society was agreeable to her for its own sake. She was never a coquette; but a man had to be as free-thoughted and sunny-tempered as herself to endure the halcyon weather of her intimate friendliness and not be tempted to change a smile for a sigh. Robert was specially exposed to such temptation, for he had rather more than average self-esteem, knew himself to be good-looking, and, despite his tatterdemalion five hundred a year, for the most part bore the attitude of a man who is looking deliberately about him to throw his handkerchief to the fairest and best, sure of its being eagerly stooped for. Of course he was conscious of an understanding that the fairest and best would, in the nature of things, have a gold pedestal for her loveliness, and, of all young men, he seemed the last to forget this essential element of womanly charm. There was a breezy coolness about him, a leisureliness of temperament manifesting itself for instance in perfection of toilette, a touch of ironical humour in his mode of speech, which from the first gave to Isabel a sense of safety in accepting his attentions. Lady Kent, of course, discovered at once the details of Mr. Asquith's position, and, in her lightly suggestive way, imparted the information to Isabel. But the latter smiled at the thought of Robert's seeking such a wife; she felt she understood him better than that. As it happened, she did not.

Isabel Clarendon

Possibly she failed by miscalculation of her own witchery. However it came about, there, at length, was Robert Asquith at her feet, offering her, with a modesty she had not given him credit for, the devotion of his life. With a surprised shake of the head she reminded him that she had not a farthing. The usual tone of their conversation warranted a little levity on her part at this juncture. Behold! he knew it, and cared not. If his own income seemed paltry (alas! it was), would she not wait and let him seek a position? In brief, could she not love him a little, and try to love him more? for indeed his love for her was —

Foolish Robert Asquith! Love cometh not by endeavour; and, as for Isabel, how could she wait? Had it so pleased the Fates that she *could* have loved him, had there but fallen upon these maiden years a spark of that heaven's fire, so that calculation of income and other degradations might all at once have become as naught, to what heights of glorified womanhood might not this soul have risen, and what blessedness like unto his who should have held her in his sovereign hands?

Robert saw her no more. He was in London still at the date of her marriage, but shortly after that he had obtained a Government appointment in Turkey, and the ship bore him to Eastern lands. He was then three-and-twenty. Five years later news of her widowhood reached him in Constantinople, and he exchanged with her one or two cousinly letters. There was an interval, and correspondence renewed itself, this time begun by Isabel. But Robert began to travel; he wrote from India, Japan, California; then he was back in Constantinople. His father died, and Robert was wealthy; he came to England for a month, spent an hour with his cousin, returned to Turkey, still holding a Government appointment. Now at length he had returned to England for good, and was looking about for a settlement. He was forty.

So Isabel married Mr. Eustace Clarendon, M.P. At nine-and-forty he was held to be a handsome man, though in all probability he had been an ugly one twenty years before. His good looks consisted, if in anything, in a clean precision of nose and jaw, allying itself with the gray clearness of a cold eye and the display of a very satisfactory set of teeth. His hair was very scant, but he just escaped the charge of baldness; he had thin whiskers, high upon each cheek. His manners were a trifle frigid, and his eyes wandered absently as he talked with you, but it was said that he could make himself excessively agreeable

when he pleased. Probably he did so to Isabel. He was much addicted to politics, and had all his life nourished political ambition; his failure to reach anything was perhaps responsible for a certain sourness of visage, a certain cynicism of tone, at times. Still, he impressed the ordinary observer as a man of parts; he had a way of uttering sententious truisms which imposed upon the average listener, and drew fine distinctions between Liberalism (which he represented) and Radicalism (which he shuddered at), calculated to make one reflect - on politics. He lived much at clubs, and, though he had purchased the fine estate of Knightswell, cared nothing for country pursuits.

They were married, and lived together for five years. Outwardly there was nothing whatever to suggest that they were not as happy as married people ordinarily are. They had no children, and Mr. Clarendon was said to be vexed at this, but such little vexations a wise man philosophically endures. And Mr. Clarendon laid claim to a certain kind of philosophy. In these latter years of his life his cynicisms of speech became rather more pronounced, but they were of a kind which with most people earned him credit for superiority. One favourite phrase he had which came to his lips whenever he happened to be talking of his worldly affairs; it was: "Après moi le déluge." He seemed to mean something special by this. Isabel grew to hate the sound of those words, as if they had been a formula of diabolical incantation.

At first she had life all her own way. They went on to the Continent, where her young mind grew, then came back to spend the winter at Knightswell. The house was kept incessantly full of guests, and Isabel shone. Mr. Clarendon never rode to hounds, but for his wife's sake hunters were bought, and Isabel proved herself the most splendid horsewoman in the field; that bareback riding at her uncle's farm had been of service to her. She entered into the joy of hunting with almost reckless abandonment; she risked leaps which made men stare, and was in at the death with a face and figure which took away one's breath. Mr. Clarendon stayed at home these days, and was in the doorway to receive her when she returned. They were not seen to greet each other.

Then Mr. Clarendon fell ill of the disease which was to kill him. It was horribly painful, necessitating hideous operations, renewed again and again; an illness lasting for three years. He went to London, and Isabel began her work of tending him. To move about

his bedroom, with that clear, cold, gray eye of his following her wherever she went, was a ghastly trial, but she bore it. Society was renounced; only occasionally she went to see intimate friends. One day her maid, a woman who loved her, begged leave to tell her something - something of which she was not sure that she ought to speak.

"Whenever you leave the house, ma'am," she said, "a man follows you - follows you everywhere, and back home again."

"Why, what man?"

"A man, ma'am, who - who has been to see master several times," said the servant, with apprehension.

"You mean - a paid man? A man employed for this?"

It was enough. Isabel went out no more. A friend or two came to see her, but at length she was deserted. Her mother died, and she could not even attend the funeral. Then Mr. Clarendon was removed to Knightswell, where she tended him for yet another year. At length he died after an agony of twelve hours. His last words were: "Après moi le déluge."

It was said that he had left an extraordinary will; those who cared to do so discovered the details, and talked them over with much enjoyment of the sensation. Outwardly, Isabel's life soon returned to its former joyousness. In the season in London (though not in the former house; she took rooms each year for three months), the rest of the year at Knightswell, she pursued her social triumphs; people held that she was more charming than ever. One curious change there was in her circumstances. Immediately after her husband's death she took to live with her a little girl of seven, a very plain and unattractive child, whose name was Ada Warren. She seemed to have made of her an adoptive daughter. Those who knew Mr. Clarendon's will understood the child's presence in the house. Mrs. Clarendon never directly spoke of her.

And so twelve years of widowhood went by, and time brought the Midsummer Day which found Bernard Kingcote rambling between Salcot East and Winstoke. Mrs. Clarendon's age was now thirty-six.

CHAPTER III

One morning in August Mrs. Clarendon was sitting in the garden at Knightswell, with Ada Warren and a young lady named Rhoda Meres, a guest at the house. They had chosen a spot which was often resorted to for tea on hot afternoons, a little piece of lawn closely shut in with leafage, whence an overbowered pathway led out to the front garden. The lady of Knightswell sat reposefully in a round-backed rustic chair. She wore a pretty garden costume, a dainty web of shawl just covering her head, her crossed feet just showing below the folds of her dress. An open sunshade lay tumbled on the grass beside her, and on her lap was an illustrated paper, of which she turned the leaves with idle interest. Miss Warren sat a couple of yards away, reading a review. Her dress was plain, and of dark material, and she wore a brown broad-brimmed straw hat. The other young lady made no pretence of being occupied. With knit brows and bent head she walked backwards and forwards on the grass, biting a long leaf which she had pulled from a bough in passing. She was a pretty girl, fair-cheeked and graceful of form. She carried her hat by its ribbon, and let the stray sunlight make gleamings upon her golden hair. Her age was not quite nineteen, and the beautiful lines of her maiden figure lost nothing by her way of holding herself, whether she moved or stood.

After several side glances at her silent companions, she presently came to a pause before Mrs. Clarendon's chair, and, still holding the leaf between her lips, asked, rather plaintively:

"Why shouldn't I, Mrs. Clarendon?"

Isabel looked up with suave smiling features, and met the girl's eyes in silence for a moment.

"My dear Rhoda," she said then, "why should you?"

"No," urged the girl, "I think all the reasons are needed on the other side. I must do something, and this is what I think I'm suited for. Why shouldn't I?"

Isabel Clarendon

"For one thing, because you are a lady, and ladies don't do such things."

"There you have Mrs. Clarendon's last word," remarked Ada Warren, without looking up. Her voice contrasted strangely with those which had been just heard; it was hard in tone, giving clear utterance to each syllable, as if to accentuate the irony in her observation.

"Certainly," said Isabel, with good humour; "if Rhoda is content to let it be."

Still biting her leaf, Miss Meres held her head a little on one side, and, after glancing at Ada, turned her eyes again upon Mrs. Clarendon.

"But are you quite sure it is so, Mrs. Clarendon?" she urged. "I mean that ladies don't go on to the stage? It used to be so, no doubt, but things have been changing. I'm sure I've heard that both ladies and gentlemen are beginning to take to acting nowadays. And I can't see why they shouldn't. It seems to be better than —"

She stopped, and looked a little embarrassed.

"Better than doing nothing at all, you were going to say," Isabel supplied; "like myself, for instance? Perhaps it is. But I fancy that the ladies who go on to the stage are generally those who, for some reason or other, have lost their places in society."

"With a large S," put in Ada, still without looking up.

"Yes, a very large one," assented Isabel, smiling.

"And suppose," exclaimed Rhoda, suddenly bold, "I don't care anything about the society which spells itself with a large S."

Mrs. Clarendon shook her head indulgently.

"My child, you can't help caring about it."

"Not if I find something I like better outside it?"

Isabel Clarendon

Mrs. Clarendon crossed her hands upon the paper, and sighed a little before speaking.

"You think it would be nice to become a Bohemian, and live in contempt of us poor subjects of Mrs. Grundy. Rhoda, those Bohemians struggle for nothing so hard as to get into society. If they are successful, the best fruit of their success is an invitation to a lady's 'at home,' the unsuccessful ones would give their ears to be received in the most commonplace little drawing-room. Now you have already what they strive for so desperately. You'll see all this plainly enough when you know a little more of the world."

Rhoda turned away, and recommenced her pacing.

"What does your father say to it?" Mrs. Clarendon asked, after a short silence.

"Father? Oh! he shrugs his shoulders and looks puzzled. Poor father always does that, whatever the difficulty. If I ask him whether the butcher hasn't charged us too much a pound for veal, he shrugs and looks puzzled. I believe he'd do just the same if I asked him whether to morrow wasn't going to be the Day of Judgment."

Isabel raised her forefinger with a warning smile. Ada Warren laughed.

After another turn on the grass, the girl again paused before Mrs. Clarendon.

"Mr. Lacour told me the other day that he thought of going on to the stage himself. He didn't see any harm in it."

As she spoke, Rhoda examined the border of her hat.

"Mr. Lacour!" exclaimed Isabel. "Oh, Mr. Lacour says wonderful things, and has wonderful plans. So you confided your project to Mr. Lacour, did you?"

Isabel threw a rapid glance at Ada whilst speaking; the latter appeared busy with her book.

Isabel Clarendon

"No, no," disclaimed Rhoda rapidly, "I didn't say a word to him of my own idea. It only came out in conversation."

Mrs. Clarendon gave a little "h'm," and stroked the back of one hand with the fingers of the other.

"It's a mistake, my dear Rhoda," she said. "Like it or not, we have to consider our neighbour's opinion, and that doesn't yet regard the stage as a career open to gentlemen's daughters."

"There's no knowing what we *may* come to," remarked Ada absently.

"Then what *am* I to do, Mrs. Clarendon?" cried the other girl almost piteously.

"A great many things. To begin with, you have to help me to make my garden party on Monday a success. Then again oh, you have to become acquainted with my cousin, Mr. Asquith. Here he is!"

From the covered pathway issued a tall gentleman of middle age, dressed in a cool summer suit, holding his hat in his hands. His appearance was what is called prepossessing; by his own complete ease and air of genial well-being he helped to put others in the same happy state, his self-satisfaction not being of the kind which irritates by excess. His head was covered with a fine growth of black hair, which continued itself in the form of full whiskers, and with these blended the silken grace of a moustache long enough to completely conceal the lips. His features were slightly browned by Eastern suns. His eyes, as he viewed in turn each of the three ladies, had a calm, restful gaze which could have embarrassed no one, hinting only the friendliest of inward comment.

Isabel rose and stepped forward to meet him. In the act of greeting she was, perhaps, seen to greatest advantage. The upright grace of her still perfect figure, the poise of her head, the face looking straight forward, the smile of exquisite frankness, the warmth of welcome and the natural dignity combined in her attitude as she stood with extended hand, made a picture of fair womanhood which the eye did not readily quit. It was symbolical of her inner self, of the large affections which made the air about her warm, and of the sweet

receptiveness of disposition which allowed so many and so different men to see in her their ideal of a woman.

"You found the trap at the station?" she asked, and, satisfied on this point, presented him to her companions. Though Asquith had just reached England in time to see his cousin once or twice before she left London, he had still to become acquainted with Ada Warren, who did not go to town with Mrs. Clarendon, but preferred to make her visits at other times, staying with Mr. Meres and his daughters. Ada was silent during the ceremony of introduction, and did not give her hand; Rhoda showed her more expansive nature and smiled prettily in Robert's face.

"I thought you would find it pleasant to come and sit here a little before lunch," said Isabel, by way of leading to conversation.

But Asquith merely bent his head; he seemed all at once to have become a trifle absent, and, after letting his gaze rest on Miss Warren for a few moments, had turned his look groundwards. But the interval was very short.

"That groom of yours who drove me over," he began, in a leisurely tone and with an appreciative smile, "is a wonderful man."

"That's interesting," said Isabel. "I fear I haven't discovered his exceptional qualities."

"They are remarkable. His powers of observation. I make a point of conversing whenever opportunity offers. The suggestive incident was a pig crossing the road; I remarked that it was a fine pig. By a singular accident I must have hit upon the man's specialty; he looked at me with gratitude, and forthwith gave me - you can't imagine - the most wonderful disquisition on pigs. He spoke as if he loved them. 'Now, a pig's hey, sir! Did you ever happen to notice a pig's hey, sir?' I was afraid to say that I had. 'There's more in a pig's hey, sir, than you'd find creditable,' - meaning credible, of course. 'There's that knowingness in a pig's hey, sir, it can't be described in words. *When* it isn't fierce, - and if it *is*, the fierceness of it there's no imagining!'"

This narration, given with much quiet humour, made Mrs. Clarendon and Rhoda laugh. Ada Warren had resumed her review,

or at all events had it lying open on her lap, and showed no smile. Robert watched her with his quiet eyes. In Miss Meres he seemed to have little interest, and he looked far more frequently at Ada than at Mrs. Clarendon.

"By-the-bye, some one we passed on the road," he said presently. He had a curious habit of mentioning in this disjointed way the subject of the remark he was about to make, and, so reposeful was his habit of speech, it often seemed as if the comment would never follow. "A young man, rather good-looking, or perhaps, rather noticeable. My friend the groom told me he was a settler in these parts; a gentleman who has taken a labourer's cottage, and lives in a more or less eccentric way. It sounded interesting. Do you know anything of him?"

"Oh yes," said Isabel, "our rector, Mr. Vissian, knows him, and speaks of him in superlatives. His name is Kingcote."

"But what is he doing here? - reading, rustivating? I suppose he's taken the cottage just for the summer months?"

"Mr. Vissian says he has settled here for good - a philosopher, who is tired of town life. He comes from London. I haven't been favoured with a glimpse of him yet, but several people have spoken of him. I think I must ask Mr. Vissian to bring him here."

"A month or so of summer would be pleasant, spent in that way," observed Mr. Asquith; "but to settle finally! Something morbid about him, I suppose; he looks, in fact, rather bloodless, like a man with a fixed idea. Ten to one, he's on precisely the wrong tack; instead of wanting more of his own society, he ought to have less of it. I suppose he lives alone?"

"Quite."

"The worst thing for any man. I shouldn't dare to converse with myself exclusively for two consecutive days. The great preservative of sanity is free intercourse with one's fellow men - to see the world from all points, and to refrain from final conclusions."

Chat of this kind went on for a few minutes, all taking part in it except Ada.

"You are fond of the country, Miss Warren," Asquith said at length, addressing the latter directly.

"Yes, I'm fond of the country," was the reply, given in a mechanical way, and with a cold, steady look, whilst she ruffled the edges of her review. Asquith had found it at first difficult to determine whether the peculiarity of the girl's behaviour were due to excessive shyness or to some more specific cause; but shyness it certainly was not, her manner of speaking and of regarding him put that out of the question. Did she, then, behave in this way to every stranger, or was he for some reason personally distasteful to her; or, again, had something just happened to disturb her temper?

"Your liking for it, though, would scarcely go to the extent of leading you to take up a solitary abode in a labourer's cottage?"

"I can't say," Ada replied slowly. "One is often ready to do anything for the sake of being left alone."

"Ada would stipulate, however, to be supplied with the *Fortnightly* or the *Nineteenth Century*," put in Mrs. Clarendon laughingly.

"If anything could drive me into the desert," was Robert's remark, "it would be the hope of never again being called upon to look at them. I shouldn't wonder if Mr. - Mr. Kingcote, isn't it? - has fled from civilisation for the very same reason. Probably he has cast away books, and aims at returning to the natural state of man."

"By no means," said Isabel. "He has brought down quite a library."

"Alas!" exclaimed Robert, with a humorous shaking of the head, "then he is, I fear, engaged in adding to the burden which oppresses us. No wonder he hides his head; he is writing a book."

"Perhaps he is a poet, Mrs. Clarendon," puts in Rhoda.

"Perhaps so, Rhoda; and some day we may have pilgrims from all corners of the earth visiting the cottage he has glorified."

"With special omnibuses from Winstoke station," added Robert, "and a colony of licensed victuallers thriving about the sacred spot."

Isabel Clarendon

"Let us be thankful," exclaimed Isabel, "that a poet's fame is usually deferred for a generation or two. Ha, there's the first luncheon bell! It brings a smile to your face, Robert."

"Did I betray myself? I confess I breakfasted early."

The two girls walked towards the house together, their elders following more slowly.

"Isn't Rhoda Meres a nice girl?" said Isabel, when the object of her remark was out of hearing.

"Very," her cousin assented, though without enthusiasm. He seemed to be thinking of something else.

"The poor child has got a foolish idea into her head; she wants to go on to the stage."

"Does she - ha? Most young people have that idea at one time or another, I believe. In default of a special audience of one, you see —"

"And she *is* such a good, dear girl!" pursued Isabel, when Asquith showed no sign of continuing. "Her father is a literary man, the editor of a magazine called *Roper's Miscellany* - do you know it? He and I are the best of old friends. It's only with the thought of helping her father, I'm sure, that Rhoda has taken up this fancy; we must drive it out of her head somehow."

"Yes, I suppose so," remarked Robert, more absently than before.

Isabel glanced at him, and kept silence till they reached the house.

There was nothing remarkable about the structure itself of Knightswell; the front was long and low, built of brick faced with stone, and the level entrance was anything but imposing. The main portion of the building was early eighteenth century, but in the rear there still existed a remnant of the sixteenth century manor-house which had once stood here; the ancient hall now served as kitchen, its fine stone fireplace being filled up with an incongruous modern range. The present hall was surrounded with oak panelling, which Mr. Clarendon had obtained at the dismantling of an old house in the neighbourhood; all else of the interior had become, by successive

changes, completely modernised, with the exception of an elaborate chimney-piece in the drawing-room - massive marble-work resting on caryatides - always said, though without corroborative evidence, to be a production of Grinling Gibbons. The faces of the two supporters were curiously unlike each other: on the one side it was that of a youthful maiden, who smiled, and seemed to be upraising her arms in sport; the other was an aged but not unbeautiful face, wearing an expression of long-suffering sadness, worn under the burden which the striving arms sustained. In the dining-room were a few good pictures, taken with the house from the preceding occupants. For Knightswell was not the ancestral abode of Mr. Clarendon's family; it had passed, by frequent changes, from tenant to tenant, all inglorious. Notwithstanding his historic name, Mr. Clarendon was a *novus homo*; his father had begun life as an obscure stockbroker, had made a great fortune, and ended his life in a comfortable dwelling in Bayswater; his daughters, there were two, married respectably, and were no more heard of.

During luncheon Asquith was still much occupied in observing Ada Warren whenever he could unobtrusively do so. The young ladies were rather silent, and even Isabel showed now and then a trace of effort in the bright flow of talk which she kept up. Between herself and her cousin, however, there was no lack of ease; a graceful intimacy had established itself on the basis of their kinship, though not exactly that kind of intimacy which bespeaks life-long association. Their talk was of the present, or of the immediate past; neither spoke of things or people whose mention would have revived the memory of years ago.

"And what are you doing with yourself?" Mrs. Clarendon inquired, when Robert had abandoned another futile attempt to draw Ada Warren into converse.

"Upon my word," was his reply, "I hardly know. The town; I see a good deal of it, indoors and out; it still has the charm of novelty. I can't say that time has begun to hang heavy on my hands; in truth, it seldom does."

"Fortunate being!"

"Yes, I suppose so. I find that people have a singular capacity for being bored; I notice it more than I used to. For my own part, I

generally find a good deal of enjoyment to be got out of the present moment; the enjoyment of sound health, at lowest. You know how pleasant it is to look back on past days, even though at the time they may have seemed anything but delightful. I account for that by believing that the past always had a preponderant element of pleasure, though disturbing circumstances wouldn't allow us to perceive it. It's always a joy to be alive, and we recognise this in looking back, when accidents arrange themselves in their true proportion."

He glanced at Ada; the girl was smiling scornfully, her face averted to the window.

"The present being so delightful," said Mrs. Clarendon, "what joyous pleasures have you for the immediate future?"

"Grouse on Wednesday next," Robert replied, after helping himself to salt in a manner which suggested that he was observant of the number of grains he took. "An acquaintance who has a moor, or a portion of one, in Yorkshire, has given me an invitation. As I have never shot grouse, I shall avail myself of the opportunity to extend my experience."

"Promise me the pick of your first bag."

There was a project for a long drive in the afternoon; the weather was bright but sufficiently cool, and Robert professed himself delighted. He had a few minutes by himself in the drawing-room when the ladies went up to make their preparations. He gave a careful scrutiny to the caryatides, smiling, as was generally the case when he regarded anything, then glanced about at the pictures and the chance volumes lying here and there; the latter were novels and light literature from Mudie's. Then he took up a number of the *Queen*, and began to peruse it, sitting in the window-seat.

"What a singular choice of literature!" exclaimed Isabel, as she came in drawing on her gloves.

"The *Queen*? It interests me. There's something so very concrete about such writing. I like the concrete."

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"The first time I ever heard so learned a term applied to so frivolous a publication. After all, Rhoda, there may be more in us poor creatures than we gave ourselves credit for."

"Do tell me," said Robert, as he laid down the paper, "what is a - I hope I may ask - what is a 'graduated plastron'?"

"Oh, this is dreadful!" laughed Isabel. "Come along, the carriage is waiting; we'll discuss graduated plastrons on our way."

"Are we not to have the pleasure of Miss Warren's company?" Robert asked, as they entered the phaeton.

"Ada never goes out with us," was Mrs. Clarendon's answer as she took the reins and prepared to drive.

There was no additional guest at dinner; the evening was helped along by Rhoda's playing and singing. Her voice was good, and she had enjoyed good teaching; this at Mrs. Clarendon's expense. It was one of many instances in which Isabel had helped her friends the Meres, her aid being given in a manner of which she alone had the secret - irresistible, warm-hearted, delicate beyond risk of offence. Ada sat in the room, but, as usual, had a book in her hands.

"You read much," said Robert, seating himself beside her and perforce obtaining her attention.

"It is a way of getting through life," the girl replied, rather less abruptly than she had hitherto spoken.

"That means that life is not quite so attractive to you as it might be?" he returned, under the cover of the music which had just begun.

"I doubt whether life is attractive to any one - who thinks about it."

She had folded her hands on the pages and was leaning back in her chair. Robert examined her and came to the conclusion that she was not quite so disagreeable in countenance as the irregularity of her features at first led one to think. She had large eyes, and, to meet them, was to be strangely impressed, almost as with the attraction of beauty. Her evening dress was of black satin, a richer and more tasteful garment than he had expected she would wear, judging from

her appearance earlier in the day. Her hair, too, was very carefully arranged. The foot, which just showed itself, was not small, but beautifully shaped. Ornaments she had none.

"That is censure clearly directed against myself," Robert said, with good humour. "And yet I fancy I have thought a good deal of life."

Ada did not seem disposed to pursue the argument.

"What are you reading?" Asquith inquired.

It was a volume of Comte. She showed the title without speaking.

"You are a Positivist?"

"No; merely an atheist."

The confession was uttered in such a matter-of-fact tone that Robert was disposed to think she used the word just for the pleasure of startling him. There was, in fact, a barely perceptible glimmer in her eyes as she sat looking straight before her.

"That's rather dogmatic, isn't it?" he remarked, smiling. "The word Agnostic is better, I fancy."

"I believe it comes to very much the same thing," said Ada. "The new word has been coined principally to save respectability."

"A motive with which you have small sympathy?"

"None whatever."

There was a silence between them.

"You play?" Robert asked, Rhoda Meres having risen from the piano.

"Only for my own amusement."

"Then certainly you play things which I should like to hear. Will you play me something that has a tune in it? I don't mean to reflect upon

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Miss Meres' playing; but my ear is in a rudimentary state. I should be very grateful if you would play something."

Ada seemed to harden her face against an intruding smile. She rose, however, and walked over to the piano. Mrs. Clarendon and Rhoda looked at her with undisguised surprise. Asquith noticed that her walk might have been graceful, had she not affected a sort of indifference in gait.

She seated herself at the instrument and played an operatic air; it lasted about three minutes, then she ceased. Robert looked in expectation of her resuming her former seat, but she walked straight to the door and disappeared.

Mrs. Clarendon and Rhoda Meres exchanged glances, and for an instant there was a rather awkward silence. Isabel found a subject, and talked with her wonted vivacity.

Ada did not return. About half-past ten Rhoda began to make preparations for departure; she went to one of the windows, and held the blind aside a little to look out at the night.

"Oh I what a moon!" she exclaimed. "Mrs. Clarendon, do let us just go out for a minute on to the lawn; the country is so wonderful at night."

Wrappers were at hand for the ladies, and the three went out together. The whole scope of visible heavens was pale with light; the blacker rose the circle of trees about Knightswell. The leaves made their weird whispering, each kind with its separate voice; no other sounds came from the sleeping earth.

"We often hear the nightingale," Isabel said, lowering her voice. "Perhaps it's too early yet."

Then she added:

"This is the hour of our poet's inspiration."

"What poet?" asked Robert.

"Our poet in the cottage; don't you remember?"

"Ah, the morbid young man, Poor fellow!"

Isabel suppressed a low laugh.

"Come, Rhoda dear, it's cold," she said to the girl, who had drawn a little apart.

Rhoda followed in silence, her head bent. In the hall she took her candle, and bade the two a hasty good-night.

"Why is she crying?" asked Robert, under his voice, as he entered the drawing-room again with Isabel.

The latter shook her head, but did not speak. She moved about the room for a moment; the shawl had half slipped from her shoulders, and made a graceful draping. Asquith stood watching her.

She approached him.

"I half hinted," she began, "that I had a selfish object in asking you to come here. We are good friends, are we not? - old and good friends?"

There was a beautiful appeal upon her face, anxiety blending with a slight embarrassment. She had put aside the mask of light-heartedness, and that which it had all day been in her countenance to utter freely exposed itself. It was not so much as distress; rather, impatience of some besieging annoyance. She was more beautiful now than when Robert had read her face seventeen years ago. Still, he regarded her with his wonted smile. There was much kindness in his look; nothing more than kindness.

"The best of friends, Isabel, I hope," he replied to her.

"I am going to ask you to do something for me," she continued. "Will you sit down and listen to me? I am not sure that I do right in asking this favour of you, but you are the only one of my relatives whom I feel able to talk freely with, and I think I had rather you than any one else did this thing that I am going to ask. Perhaps you will

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find it too disagreeable; if so, tell me - you will promise to speak freely?"

"Certainly, I promise."

They had taken their seats. Asquith rested one of his arms on a small table, and waited, the smile lingering. Isabel gathered the shawl about her, as if she felt cold. She was a trifle pale.

"You understand perfectly," she resumed, with a certain abruptness, which came of the effort it cost her to broach the subject, "the meaning of Ada Warren's presence in this house?"

"Perfectly, I think," her cousin replied, with a slight motion of his eyebrows.

"That is to say," pursued Isabel, looking at the fringe of her shawl, "you know the details of Mr. Clarendon's will?"

He paused an instant before replying.

"Precisely," was his word, as he tapped the table.

Isabel smiled, a smile different from that with which she was wont to charm. It was one almost of self-contempt, and full of bitter memories.

"I had never heard of her," she continued, "until I was called upon to take her as my own child. Then she was sent to me from people who had had the care of her since she was three years old."

Asquith slowly nodded, wrinkling his forehead.

"Well, we will speak no more of that. What I wish to ask you to do for me is this: - Oh, I am ashamed to speak of it! It is something that I ought to have done myself already. But I am a coward; I have always been a coward. I can't face the consequences of my own - my own baseness; that is the true word. Will you tell Ada Warren what her real position is, and what mine?"

Asquith raised his head in astonishment.

"She is still ignorant?"

"I have every reason to believe so. I don't think any one will have told her."

Robert bit his upper lip.

"Has she never asked questions about her origin?"

"Yes, but only once. I told her that her parents were friends of Mr. Clarendon, and that she was an orphan, therefore I had taken her. That was several years ago."

Again there was a pause in the dialogue. Isabel had difficulty in keeping her face raised; her cheeks had lost their pallor, the blood every now and then made them warm.

"She seems a strange being," Asquith remarked. "I am not as a rule tempted to puzzle about people's characteristics, but hers provoke one's curiosity."

"I cannot aid you," Isabel said, speaking quickly. "I know her as little as on the day when I first saw her. I have tried to be kind; I have tried to —"

She broke off. Her voice had begun to express emotion, and the sound seemed to recall her to self-command. She looked up, smiling more naturally, though still with a touch of shame.

"Will you help me, cousin?" she asked.

"Certainly I will do what you wish. Do you desire me to explain everything in detail —"

"The will, the will," she interposed, with a motion of her hand. "Yes, the full details of the will."

"And if she asks me —?"

"You know nothing - that is best. You cannot speak to her on such a subject. Will you wait for me a moment?"

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She rose hastily and left the room. Asquith remained standing till her return. She was only a few moments absent, and came back with a folded paper in her hand.

"This," she said, "is a full copy of the will. It might be best to read it to her, or even to let her have it to read herself. She may keep it if she wishes to."

Asquith took the paper and stood in thought.

"You have well considered this?" he asked.

"Oh, for long enough. I thank you for your great kindness."

"When shall I see her? To-morrow is Sunday. Does she go to church?"

"Never."

"Then I will take the opportunity, whilst you and Miss Meres are away."

Isabel gave him her hand, and they exchanged good-nights.

CHAPTER IV

Robert Asquith was in the garden before breakfast next morning, with untroubled countenance, scrutinising objects in detail, now and then suppressing a tendency to give forth a note or two of song. He walked with his hands in his pockets, not removing them when he stooped to examine the gardener's inscription stuck by the root of a flower or shrub. He had no special interest in these matters, but the bent of his mind was to observation; he avoided as much as possible mere ruminativeness. The course of his wandering brought him round to the stables; the sight of their admirable order and of the beasts in the stalls - the carriage-horse, the two beautiful ponies that Mrs. Clarendon drove, and the five-year-old chestnut which at present she rode - gave him an Englishman's satisfaction. Isabel was as active and practical in the superintendence of her stables as in every other pursuit which she regarded as duty or pleasure; the most exacting squire could not have had things in better condition. Here Robert came in contact with his acquaintance, the groom, and received from him much information about the animals, also concerning their predecessors in the stables. Strolling back to the front lawn, accompanied by the house-dog, he met Ada Warren. She wore her ordinary brown straw hat, and seemed to be coming from the park. The dog began to leap about her, barking joyously.

She spoke a quiet good-morning, but did not offer to shake hands. Robert talked a little about the fine weather and the pleasure of breathing morning air; he elicited in reply a series of assents. Ada had taken one of the dog's silky ears in her hand, and the animal suffered himself very patiently to be led thus.

"Do you remain at home this morning, Miss Warren?" Robert inquired, as they approached the house.

"Yes."

"In that case, may I ask if you will favour me with half-an-hour's conversation some time after breakfast?"

She looked round with frank surprise, only turning away her gaze when she had assured herself of his seriousness.

"I shall be in the library till one o'clock," she said.

"Thank you; I will come there."

Watching her at breakfast, Robert thought he perceived some traces of curiosity and anticipation in the girl's face; once, too, he caught her eyes straying in his direction. "Come," he said to himself, "there is something human in her after all. We shall see if we can't make the exhibition yet more pronounced."

As soon as Mrs. Clarendon and Rhoda Meres were gone to church, Asquith made his way to the library, carrying the document which Isabel had entrusted to him the night before. The room remained very much as it had been in Mr. Clarendon's days. When gentlemen were at Knightswell, it was used as a retreat for smoking; Isabel herself scarcely ever entered, but Ada Warren used it regularly. There were on the shelves not more than four hundred volumes, and half of these were calf-bound legal literature and blue-books, representing periods of Mr. Clarendon's career. On the table lay volumes of a different kind, many of them showing Mudie's tickets; they were works of human interest of the day, food - or at least refreshment - for an active and independent mind; French and German books were here too. Asquith glanced at the names on one or two of the yellow backs in passing, and suppressed a smile. But he thought all the better of the girl for her intellectual enterprise.

Ada sat with her back to the window, reading; at his entrance she closed her book, but did not move. He placed a chair at a little distance from her, and leaned forward, as if about to talk in a familiar manner.

"I surprised you by my request?" he began, with a smile. "It was rather formal, and necessarily so, for it is strictly a matter of business that I wish to speak of."

Ada's position had not allowed him to get a clear view of her face at first. Raising his eyes after this introduction, he was startled by what he saw. The girl was the hue of death; all the natural tint had left her cheeks, and her lips were unnaturally pale. She was pressing one hand against her left side, and her eyes showed that she was suffering from scarcely controllable agitation. He was in doubt

whether to take notice of it or not, when she suddenly rose from the chair.

"You are unwell, Miss Warren —?"

She turned sharply away, and walked the length of the room.

"Shall I postpone - this business?" said Robert, remarkably interested in observing her.

"Thank you, no," was her reply, as she seated herself further from him than before. "I shall be obliged to you if you will speak plainly and directly, whatever the business is. I have a headache; a long conversation will be disagreeable to me."

"I will speak as directly as possible. At Mrs. Clarendon's request I have undertaken to make known to you certain facts regarding your - your future, of which, I understand, it has not been deemed necessary to speak hitherto. I have, in short, to tell you what were the provisions of the late Mr. Clarendon's will; they concern you nearly."

Ada's aspect was calm, but he saw that her bosom rose and fell in a way which showed an inward struggle. She gave no sign of a wish to speak.

"I have here a copy of the will," he continued, unrolling the paper. "It is long, and of course full of technicalities. Perhaps I shall do best to put the gist of it into a few plain words. To begin then, Mr. Clarendon made you heiress of all but the whole of his real and personal estate, with possession upon your attainment of your majority, or, should you marry before that age, then at your marriage. Under the will two trustees are appointed, gentlemen who were Mr. Clarendon's friends - I need not mention their names. Until either of the events which should give you possession, Mrs. Clarendon had the use of Knightswell, with all it contained, and an income from the estate of two thousand pounds a year; this, however, only on condition that she took you into her house and brought you up in every way as her own child, with care for your education such as the trustees should approve. If Mrs. Clarendon declined to accept this condition, or if she married again prior to

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your entering into possession, her benefit by the will was limited to an annuity of three hundred pounds."

Robert paused. His tone was as matter-of-fact as if he were demonstrating a proposition of Euclid, but a smile had at length risen to his face. It came of his observation of the listener. Ada had closed her eyes; her hands were nervously clasped upon her lap.

"You follow this, Miss Warren?"

She raised her lids and regarded him. Her bosom had ceased to heave; she seemed to have regained her ordinary state of mind.

"I follow it," she said.

"Should you die, unmarried, before the end of your twenty-first year," Asquith pursued, "the whole of the estate goes to certain very remote connections of Mr. Clarendon. - No other contingency is provided for."

"No other contingency is provided for," repeated the girl mechanically. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean —"

Robert interrupted himself; and resumed in an off-hand way:

"Oh, other possible cases which will occur to one thinking the matter over."

Ada appeared to reflect. Her face was turned slightly upwards, and a restful expression had come upon it.

"Is it," she asked at length, "within your province to tell me any more than this?"

"I think," Robert replied, "that I have nothing more to tell. If you wish it, I will leave this copy with you; I understood Mrs. Clarendon to say that you might keep it."

"Thank you, I will do so."

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She rose and took it from his hand.

"There is one thing," she said, "that I should like to ask you; I dare say you will have no objection to answer. Are the provisions of this will generally known - to Mrs. Clarendon's friends, I would say?"

"In all probability they are," was his reply.

"Thank you."

Clearly there was nothing more to be said on either side. Any comment from Asquith was of course out of the question, and Ada, at all times so chary of her conversation, was not likely to give utterance to her feelings under the present circumstances. She moved away, slightly returned the other's bow, and went from the room.

At luncheon Ada did not appear. It was not an uncommon thing for her to take meals by herself; but Mrs. Clarendon and Robert felt that her absence to-day had a significance. She was at dinner, however, and behaved as usual. Nothing in her betrayed a change in her state of mind.

Whilst Rhoda was reading in the garden in the afternoon, Mrs. Clarendon strayed apart with her cousin.

"You have told her?" she said, meeting Robert's look.

"Yes, and left the copy of the will with her. It seems to have made her oblivious of lunch."

"Poor girl!"

The exclamation was a sincere one. Robert looked surprised.

"Did she ask you many questions?" Isabel continued.

"Two: whether I had anything more to tell her; and whether I thought that the will was generally known? To the former I said 'No;' to the latter 'Yes.'"

"Whether it was generally known," repeated Isabel, with a low laugh of a not very mirthful kind. Then, after a pause, "What do people say of me? What is the common talk about me? What do the men say? and - oh! the women?"

"My dear cousin, you know perfectly well what they say; what they have been saying since they first began to talk about you - that you are a charming woman, and so goodhearted that no one can for shame breathe a word against you."

Isabel sighed.

"Rather, so shameless that gossip has not yet found the proper term to characterise me. Well, never mind myself; happily I shall soon cease to be an object of any general interest. But did she not ask any question about the value of the property?"

"No word of it. She kept me strictly at arm's length."

"And she displayed no - no emotion?"

"At first, yes; she was extremely agitated. But she held it down. I imagine she is what is called a woman of character. I had rather not be her husband."

Isabel made no reply, but walked on with her head bent.

"Will you let me ask you," Robert began, "had you any particular reason for wishing to inform her of these matters just now?"

"Yes, I had. There is no reason why I shouldn't tell you. There is a certain Mr. Lacour - you'll meet him here to-morrow afternoon - a young man whom I have known for some time as a friend of the Bruce Pages; their place is at Hanford, five miles off. He's a brother of Sir Miles Lacour. Well, Mr. Vincent Lacour has called on me often in town, and a week ago he lunched with us here; he's staying at the Bruce Pages' again. I rather like him, and I believe there's not a bit of harm in him really; but he seems to have been terribly wild, and he's quarrelled with his brother, the baronet. I don't suppose he's anything left to live on, and Sir Miles refuses to help him any more. We learn all this from young Lacour himself; he's remarkably frank, embarrassingly so at times. Now I half fancy he's made an

impression on Ada; certainly I never knew her talk so freely with any one, or show such healthy signs of interest. It wouldn't be surprising; he's a charming young fellow, decidedly handsome, and the strangest talker. I fancied Ada looked pleased when I mentioned that he was coming to the garden party tomorrow. I don't know whether he ought to be put in the girl's way, but I had to ask the Bruce Pages, and I couldn't leave him out very well. Now you see my reason. I have never before been obliged to think of such a thing. It would be unjust to Ada to leave her in the dark as to her true position."

"This Mr. Lacour is doubtless aware of the circumstances?"

"Without a doubt."

"And you think he might —"

"It is not impossible. He must be in desperate straits."

"How old is the individual?"

"About three-and-twenty, I think. He had ten thousand pounds of his own when he came of age."

"Wherewith he has purchased experience. He must be rich in that article."

"I'm afraid he is; but I confess I like him. I don't think he would be a bad husband. I believe his oats are sown."

"I can, of course, have no opinion; but the situation is an interesting one."

They turned about, and walked a stretch of the lawn in silence.

"I wish it were over," Isabel said with a sigh. "I wish the poor girl had a good husband and all were well settled. I am tired of playing the farce."

"You look forward with - with equanimity?" Robert said hesitatingly, with a glance at her face.

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"More, with eagerness. I want to throw off a weight. I shall be the happiest woman in England."

"On three hundred a year, cousin Isabel?" ventured Asquith.

"On three hundred a year, cousin Robert. I wish I had never had more. Come, we must go back to Rhoda. Isn't Rhoda a dear girl?"

CHAPTER V

On specified occasions of assembly at Knightswell, Ada did not ordinarily present herself. Mrs. Clarendon made excuses for her on the plea of indifferent health; habitual visitors understood that Miss Warren suffered much from headaches, and that she could not with impunity expose herself to unusual excitement. The headaches were a fact, but it was probably not on their account that Ada preferred as a rule her own company. Her frequent caustic utterances on the subject of the persons whom society considers, and the things with which society occupies itself, were a sufficient index of her views; the views themselves being a natural outcome of her temperament and the circumstances of her life.

But on the present Monday she appeared. To the last moments Mrs. Clarendon had been in uncertainty as to the likelihood of her doing so, though she had laughingly prophesied the event to Rhoda Meres, and persisted in spite of the latter's incredulity. Ada had made no great preparations, but was well and suitably dressed. Robert Asquith, to whom all the girl's movements were of extreme interest, promised himself the pleasure of closely observing her throughout the afternoon.

"Tell me something of the people who are coming, will you?" he asked, as he met her in the hall. "The interesting people, I mean, of course."

"That limitation will make the task an easy one," Ada replied as she buttoned a glove. Her colour was rather higher than usual, and her tone was less dry; she looked almost cheerful.

"Then of the less uninteresting; that will leave a margin for conversation, surely?"

"It all depends, of course, on one's point of view. I believe you have considerable powers of being interested, have you not?"

"Yes; I fear I boast of them. You see I find the gift valuable. In my sane moods I had rather have the dullest conversation than none at all."

"Therefore you come to me, waiting for others to arrive."

"Spare me, Miss Warren. You wouldn't believe what toil it costs me to frame and polish a compliment. I am sure you are naturally humane."

"You are sure of that? To dumb animals, I hope."

"Alas! it brings us back to the animals who are gifted with speech. Shall we have any one who talks well, independently of the matter of discourse? Remember, I am new to English society. I enjoy the gossip of idle people, provided it be good of its kind."

"I am no judge," said Ada; "but I should think Mrs. Bruce Page will satisfy you. Her tongue is so trained in current forms of speech that it has come at last to save her all trouble of superintendence. As far as my experience goes, she is nearly all that the most exacting could require."

"I must study that lady. And what of Miss Saltash, of whom I have heard?"

"Oh, *she* is interesting!" Ada exclaimed. "I have seen her grow red in the face in support of faith in eternal damnation. If that goes, she has nothing to live for."

Robert was obliged to confess to himself that Miss Warren was yet a trifle crude; she amused him, but he took an early opportunity of refreshing his palate from a less acid source. His thoughts continued, however, to busy themselves with her; he awaited impatiently the arrival of the young man who was supposed to have tenderly impressed this singular heiress.

But the Bruce Pages were late. Before them came Mrs. Saltash of Dunsey Priors, accompanied by her daughter Irene, whom Ada had characterised, and Lady Florence Cootes. The latter was a daughter of the Earl of Winterset; she was a constant guest at Dunsey Priors, being united in bonds of the closest friendship with Irene Saltash. It was a union very greatly indebted to ecclesiastical cement, the young ladies both holding the most pronounced views on the constitution of the world to come, and seemingly desiring to compensate themselves for a gloomy future by enjoyment of a present fruitful in

consolations. They seldom quitted each other, and their chatter was lively in the extreme. Other maidens there were, who, in company with two or three young men of unimpeachable dress and converse, speedily betook themselves to lawn-tennis. Mr. and Mrs. Vissian were shortly to be seen among the guests, the lady looking very young and very pretty; she and Rhoda Meres seemed to have a good deal to say to each other. Then, as Asquith walked about with his hands behind him, the wonted smile on his lips, he heard the bustle of a new arrival, and turning, was aware of Mrs. Bruce Page. He felt sure of her identity before he had heard her name pronounced. She seemed about the same age as Mrs. Clarendon, and in some eyes probably excelled the latter in attractiveness. With rather too high a colour, she was still decidedly good-looking; not handsome, nor beautiful, but beyond dispute good-looking. Her bodily activity was surprising; she walked with the grace and liveliness of a young girl, and, as she shortly showed at tennis, could even run without making herself in the least ridiculous. Her voice, though a note or two higher than it should have been, had yet musical quality. And the use she made of it! Her greeting of the hostess was one unbroken articulate trill, lasting two minutes and a half; it embodied inquiries, responses, information, comments, forecasts, and ejaculation. All who stood around came in one by one for a share of her exhaustless utterances. She was never at a loss for an instant. Robert was presented to her, and she at once talked to him as if they had been on a footing of intimacy for years. When she interrupted her speech, it was to laugh, and this laugh was perhaps a yet more wonderful phenomenon, so clear and fresh and buoyant was it, and yet so obviously a mere outcome of the automatic contrivance which formed this lady's social vivacities. She laughed because it helped her to show her teeth, and in general became her features.

"How is it she doesn't lose breath?" Robert whispered presently to Mrs. Clarendon, his face expressive of amazement.

"Hush, that is a secret!" was the reply.

Yet Mrs. Bruce Page was not (I use the conventional standard) vulgar; she never said (as far as one could follow her) a malicious thing, was guilty of no bad taste in choice of expressions, seemed to overflow with the milk of human kindness. A silly woman, but scarcely an offensive one; probably in intimacy capable of making herself delightful and something more. Society was to be credited

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with this public manner of hers, and society on the whole admired the fruit of its systems.

Behind her came a young lady of seventeen, her daughter, and two young gentlemen, one her brother, the other Mr. Vincent Lacour. The girl was extremely shy, and had not a word to say for herself; having secured Mrs. Clarendon's hand, she continued to hold it, shrinking, as it were, into the shadow of the dear lady whom all who needed a protector loved. The brother, Mr. Selwyn Parkes, was a pleasant-looking young fellow, of eight-and-twenty. It was in the quality of Mr. Parkes's friend that Vincent Lacour resided at present with the Bruce Pages. Mr. Lacour himself was the last to shake Isabel's hand; her greeting was that one gives to a favourite, of whom one yet entertains a certain amount of moral disapproval. That Vincent should be a favourite where ladies were concerned was natural enough. His personal advantages were striking. Tall, slim, with a handsome head poised on a delicate neck, he exhibited much of female grace and delicacy, without the possibility of being regarded as effeminate. Of a man's health and muscle he had all that even women demand in their ideal. Black hair and a well-educated black moustache, fine, irresponsible eyes; these also were properties not to be resisted. If anything, he looked a trifle too intellectual, but this would be pardoned by those to whom it was merely suggestive of the mysterious. Of course Mr. Lacour was conscious enough of the attention he drew, and, to judge from his smile, not at all disposed to shrink from it. He might be a trifle fatuous, but he was very far from being a fool; his forehead suggested capacity for better things than those he was at present put to.

One of the first things he did was to draw Mrs. Clarendon a little aside, and speak to her in a hasty whisper.

"I beg of you to keep Mrs. Bruce Page occupied somehow or other. She'll never let me go, and I'm bored unspeakably. Help me, and I am your slave for ever!"

Isabel subdued a smile, and made no direct answer. Just as Vincent made off into a cluster of people, the lady in question hastened to Isabel's side.

"What has that boy been whispering to you?" she asked. "He's in the most execrable temper; it was all we could do to persuade him to

come. He vows that his liver is out of order, and that he is possessed by diabolical promptings. Pity me for what I suffer in discharging a mother's duties to him. And, oh, Mrs. Clarendon! let him talk to your cousin - that really charming man! He's got the Civil Service into his head, now, and I'm sure Mr. Asquith can give him useful advice - about offices, and that kind of thing, you know. What is to become of the poor boy, I *can't* imagine! I've been at Sir Miles, in letters, for the last ten days, till at length he's as good as told me to mind my own business. Surely, never were brothers so unlike! One satisfaction is that Sir Miles can't possibly live long - if it isn't wicked to say such a thing, and I suppose it must be. He has heart disease, my dear, and in an aggravated form; so Doctor Norman Rayner tells me. I fear I have increased it by my correspondence. Where is the boy gone to? I must take him to Mr. Asquith."

"The boy" had found a pleasant seat by the side of Miss Rhoda Meres.

"You're not going to play?" he asked, seeing a racket in her hand.

"I'm in the next set," Rhoda answered. She had flushed a little as he took his place by her, and there was a sparkle in her eyes as she looked up at him.

"Can't you throw it over? Do get Sophy Page to take your place."

"Why shouldn't I play?" she asked, examining the handle of the racket.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Vincent languidly, leaning back and half-closing his eyes. "Do if you like, of course."

"Have you a headache, Mr. Lacour?" asked. "Don't you feel well?"

"The fact is I don't. I feel seedy and bored."

"Pray don't let me bore you —"

She half rose.

"You know very well you don't bore me," he said, looking directly at her. Then he added, "I — I half supposed you would have left Knightswell."

She had a quick reply on her lips, but checked it, and merely said:

"I have not."

"When do you go back to London?" he inquired, throwing one leg over the other and clasping his hands behind his head.

"On Wednesday."

"I suppose I shall be back there before very long," said Vincent, looking meditatively at the sky. "Probably I shall get a clerkship at five-and-twenty shillings a week."

"I'm afraid you don't show much energy," said Rhoda, in a voice which lacked something of the indifference she meant to put into it.

"I've told you often enough I have none, Miss Meres. I'm like a piece of sea-weed; my condition is dependent on the weather."

"It's fine enough now, at all events," she said, with an attempt at a laugh.

"Oh, yes; but there's the very deuce brewing," returned Vincent, with characteristic freedom of expression. "I wish," he added slowly, "I'd somebody to help me - somebody who has energy."

"Doesn't Mr. Parkes —"

"Pooh!"

There was silence. Cries came from the tennis players, who were just out of sight, and a hum of conversation from nearer groups.

"What are you going to do when you get back to town, Miss Meres?" Vincent asked, regarding her again.

"I don't know, I'm sure," she answered vaguely. "Live as usual, I suppose; unless I take some decided step."

"Decided step? By Jove, how it refreshes me to hear you speak like that! What decided step?"

"I don't know. I'm very much in your own position, you know; I shall have to earn a living somehow."

She said it very simply, looking down, and making marks on the grass with the handle of the racket.

"A living? Women don't make a living; that's all done for them."

"Is it?" said Rhoda, and, as soon as the words were spoken, she rose, averting her face.

"There's our set called!" she exclaimed; "I must go."

He made a slight gesture as if about to exert himself to detain her; but she was gone. His eyes followed her dreamily.

"Oh, here you are, Vincent!" cried Mrs. Bruce Page, close at hand. "Have you *really* a headache, now? Poor boy! you don't look well. Come along with me, I want you to talk with Mr. Asquith, Mrs. Clarendon's cousin, you know. He knows all about the Civil Service."

Robert received the young man with a look critical indeed, but good-humouredly so. He did not seem to be able to take Mr. Lacour quite seriously, yet could not refuse a certain admiration.

"You are thinking of the Civil Service examinations?" he began.

"Well, I can't say I've thought much about them," Vincent replied, in his manner suggestive of easy achievement. "I suppose they're very much a matter of form - the elements - and - and so on?"

"Not quite that. And competition, you remember."

"Yes. The truth is, I haven't looked into the thing. What do they expect you to know?"

Asquith gave an outline of the attainments looked for in a candidate for the higher clerkships.

"By Jove, that's pretty strong!" was Vincent's comment.

"The competition," remarked Asquith, "makes it about the severest examination you can undergo."

"Then *that's* all up!" exclaimed the young man. "What would the screw be?"

"You would begin with a hundred a year, and by slow degrees rise to four," said Robert, curling his moustache.

"The deuce you would! Then I may with honour withdraw from so ignoble a competition. You can't suggest any way of making the four hundred at start? I dare say Mrs. Clarendon's told you all about me. I don't mind who knows. There's a great deal of false shame in the world, it seems to me; don't you think so? But I really think it's time I turned to something, and what's the good of one's friends if they can't suggest a plan? Of course the social structure is radically wrong. A man like myself - I have brains, I beg you to believe - oughtn't to find himself thrown out of it in this way. I shall be infinitely obliged to any one who suggests something."

It seemed to Robert, as he listened, that this young man had a turn for affecting an imbecility which was not in truth part of his character; in the matter and manner of his talk, Lacour appeared rather to yield to physical inertness than to disclose natural vacuity. It might be that he was, as he professed, suffering in body; it seemed more probable that he found a luxury in abandoning his mind to sluggish promptings, even as he showed a pronounced disinclination for activity in the disposal of his limbs. His disastrous circumstances displayed their influence in the whole man. The rate at which he had lived for the past two years was no doubt telling upon him, and nothing tended to counteract, everything rather to foster, the languor which possessed him. His vanity, doubtless, was extreme; the temptation to indulge it no less so. Mrs. Bruce Page, with her semi-sentimental coddling, her pseudo-maternal

familiarity, was alone enough to relax the springs of a stronger individuality than Vincent's. Reflecting thus, Asquith maintained silence; when he raised his eyes again he saw that Ada Warren had drawn near.

Lacour gave the girl his hand, and, in a tone of almost ludicrous dolorousness, asked her how she was.

"I think I should rather ask you that," she said, with a laugh; "you have a woful countenance."

"You, at all events, are in excellent spirits," he returned.

It was true, comparatively speaking. A sudden access of self-confidence had come to her, and her manner was at moments almost joyous.

"Have you observed Ada?" Isabel took an opportunity of saying to her cousin apart. "I see now how wrong and selfish I have been."

And to Ada herself she spoke, finding the girl standing aside whilst general attention was being given to tea and ices.

"You feel well to-day?" she said, with her kindest smile.

Ada murmured something unintelligible and turned away. Mrs. Clarendon reddened slightly and, passing on, met with Vincent Lacour, who was pacing with his hands behind his back.

"Won't you have an ice?" she asked.

"Ice? Great heavens! I should die of dyspepsia. But, Mrs. Clarendon, what is it? Why do you speak and look at me in such an unfriendly way?"

"I am not conscious of doing so. Sit down, and tell me what you have been talking about with Mr. Asquith. Has he given you useful information?"

"Decidedly useful; he's effectually knocked all those plans on the head."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. What is the difficulty?"

"There are just seventeen, one for every minute of our conversation. But very seriously, want your advice. You know, Mrs. Clarendon, I think a good deal more of your advice than of any one else's; pray don't begin to be rusty just when I've most need of you."

"Go on; I promise not to be rusty," said Isabel, laughing.

"But you are a little rusty, for all that. You're not so free and easy with me as you used to be. I suppose you've heard something new. I can't get on with people - especially women - who won't take me just as I am. You're beginning to disapprove of me, I can see that."

"My dear Mr. Lacour, I have always disapproved of you - in a measure."

"Of course; but the measure is extending. There's something in your tone I don't like. I always say yours is the one woman's voice I would walk a mile to hear, and to-day it has lost something of its quality for me."

"I grieve exceedingly - except that henceforth you will be saved from the terrible temptation to over-exert yourself. But hadn't we better talk seriously? What can I advise upon?"

"Well, it has come to this. Either I go on to the stage, or I go to Texas. Which do you recommend?"

"Of the two, Texas."

"That is not complimentary, you know."

"I only mean it to be sincere. And I think it not unlikely that you would do well in Texas. You need that kind of shaking up."

"On the other hand, my advantages are thrown away," remarked Vincent, stroking his chin. He spoke with the completest frankness; it was scarcely possible to call the speech conceited.

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"I doubt whether you have any advantages for the stage," said Isabel gravely.

"But, my dear Mrs. Clarendon —"

The talk was interrupted. Lady Florence Cootes came running up.

"Oh, Mrs. Clarendon, I had all but forgotten! I am charged with a message for you from my father. He bids me tell you that he has won his bet, and that it *was* Charibert won the Two Thousand the year before last. It seems you had an argument about it. Do tell me what you've lost?"

"I can't, because I don't know," replied Isabel merrily.

"You don't know? Have you forgotten what the bet was?"

"The stakes were kept secret. If I won I was to ask for anything I chose if Lord Winterset won he was to do the same."

"If Lord Winterset originated that," observed Vincent, "he's an uncommonly shrewd man. I shall introduce the idea forthwith to all my female acquaintances."

Lady Florence turned away, with the face of an English virgin.

"Not with mention of the source, Mr. Lacour," said Isabel, in a manner which he could not misunderstand.

And she moved away to mingle with other ladies, a slight shade of vexation on her countenance.

Lacour rose with rather a sour face, and strolled across the lawn, looking about him as if in search of some one. Apparently his search was unsuccessful. The sun was still warm, and he sought for a shady spot, eventually getting to the east side of the house, the opposite to that where the tennis-court lay. A yew-tree hedge divided this part of the garden from the front lawn, and it was free of people. Vincent found himself by the library window, which was low, not more than three feet from the ground. The window standing wide open, he

glanced in, and no sooner had done so than he laid his hands upon the sill and neatly vaulted into the room.

Ada Warren was sitting alone. She looked, and was, in fact, a little tired, and had come there for the sake of quietness.

"I have been looking for you, Miss Warren," was Vincent's excuse for the intrusion. "You'll let me sit here, won't you?"

"I shall not be so rude as to tell you to go away," she answered in a rather undecided tone.

"That's good of you. Do you know I find it restful to talk to you? I do believe you're the only person I ever spoke to quite seriously. - You don't answer?"

"I was wondering how far that might be a compliment."

"To the very tail of the last word."

"And that was - *ly*, if you remember," said Ada drily, giving the letter *y* its broader value. She looked confused as soon as she had spoken, feeling that the remark ought to have been made in a lighter tone to be quite within the limits of becoming repartee.

Vincent looked at first surprised, then leaned back and laughed.

"I'd no idea you were so witty."

"Nor, perhaps, so ill-mannered?"

It was a little piece of reparation, and probably carried her further than she intended. Vincent leaned forward on a chair which stood between them.

"You study here, don't you?" he asked, with a glance at the books on the table.

"I read here sometimes."

"I suppose you're very clever and very learned, Miss Warren?"

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She moved her head slightly, and seemed unable to find a ready answer.

"Your contempt for me," he pursued, "must be unbounded."

"I don't allow myself to despise people with whom I am very slightly acquainted," said Ada; again rather more positively than she had meant. She found such a difficulty in striking with her voice the note corresponding to that which she had in her mind - a difficulty common in people who talk little and think rapidly.

"Well, yes, I suppose there is only a slight acquaintance between us," admitted Vincent. "Not so much, for instance, as would warrant my jumping in by the window just now. I do things on impulse a good deal."

"So do I," said Ada.

"You do? Why, then, there's a point of contact - of sympathy - it would be better to say, I suppose. There are very few people whom I find sympathetic. Do you fare better?"

"I can't say that I do."

Lacour allowed a moment or two to this assertion before he continued

"I've been trying to get Mrs. Clarendon's help in my difficulties," he said. "She's generally pretty sympathetic, but I believe she's giving me up. Have you heard her say anything rather savage about me of late?"

"It would be unusual energy in Mrs. Clarendon," was the girl's reply.

"Energy? Well, I don't know; I always thought she had plenty of that. But I understand you. You mean that that kind of society life doesn't conduce to activity of mind - to sincerity, shall we say?"

Ada had meant this, but it did not exactly please her to hear it from Lacour's lips.

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"I don't think I ever heard Mrs. Clarendon speak evil of any one," she said, with seemingly needless emphasis, measuring her words as if in scrupulous justice.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," he observed; "and it's just what I should have thought. I like Mrs. Clarendon very much, but - well, I can't say that I find in her the moral support I am seeking."

"You are seeking moral support?" Ada asked, looking at him in her direct way, with no irony in her expression.

"Well, that's rather a grand way of putting it, after all, for one who isn't accustomed to pose and use long words. I want help, there's no doubt of that, at all events."

"Help of what kind?"

"Moral help - it's the only word, after all. Material help wouldn't be out of place, but one doesn't go round with one's hat exactly - till, that is, one's driven to it by what Homer calls a shameless stomach. Don't think I know Homer, Miss Warren; it's only a phrase out of a crib, which somehow has stuck in my mind."

Ada laughed.

"Now, if you hadn't told me that," she said, "I might have been greatly impressed."

"Pay tribute to my honesty then."

He rose from his leaning attitude and walked a few paces.

"You've no idea," he resumed, facing her, "how much better I feel since I've been talking to you; upon my word I do. As I said, there's something so restful in your society. You give me ideas, too. I don't feel sluggish as I do at other times."

He paused again, and again resumed. This time with a rather pathetic resignation in his voice.

"I suppose Mrs. Clarendon's advice is the best."

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"What was that?" Ada inquired, her tone colder.

"She said I'd better give up hope in England, and go to some other country. Texas was proposed."

The girl kept silence. If Lacour gauged her rightly she was reflecting upon this advice as coming from Mrs. Clarendon. Her brows drew together, and there was the phantom of a bitter smile at her lips.

"Mrs. Clarendon thinks you would be better off in Texas?" she asked, with indifference not so skilfully assumed but that this shrewd young man could see through it.

"Yes; she seems to think I should be better off anywhere than in England. I dare say she's right, you know. My friends are about getting tired of me; it's time I made myself scarce."

"And what would you do in Texas?"

"Oh, pretty much anything. The kind of work you see farm labourers doing here - rail-splitting, sheep-washing and driving, and so on."

"You feel a call to such occupations?"

"Well, I have Mrs. Clarendon's advice."

"Mrs. Clarendon's advice!" she repeated. "Is Mrs. Clarendon's advice decisive with you?"

"I believe she has a friendly interest in me, and I shouldn't wonder if she's right. Other people have advised the same thing. They've given me up, you see, one and all."

His voice was more pathetic still. He had reseated himself; and leaned back with his eyes closed. Mr. Lacour did this not unfrequently when speaking with persons whom he desired to interest.

She did not speak, and he rose, as if with an effort.

"Well, I'll be off; I bore you. Will you permit me to make use of the window for exit?"

"Why not?" she replied mechanically.

He turned and faced her again.

"Of course fellows sometimes make a fortune out there. I might do that, you know, if only - well, if I only had something to work for."

"A fortune," Ada suggested.

"No, I don't mean that," he replied, with fine sadness. "That doesn't appeal to me. If you can only believe it, I have other needs, other aspirations. The fortune would be all very well, but only as an adjunct. A man doesn't live by bread alone."

She smiled.

"Of course it's absurd," he resumed, making an impatient motion with his hand; "but if only I had a little more impudence I should like to tell you that - well, that it was never so hard for me to bring a talk to an end as this of ours, Miss Warren. You've given me what no one else ever did, but you've - you've taken something in exchange. I dare say I shan't see you again; will you shake hands with me before I go?"

She stood looking straight into his face, her eyes larger than ever in their desperate effort to read him. Vincent approached to take her hand.

"Ah, there you are!" cried a voice from outside the window. "Vincent, I've been looking for you everywhere; you're keeping us waiting. Miss Warren, I beg your pardon a thousand times; I was so taken up with the thought of that boy that I only saw him at first. I know I shall have your gratitude, however; poor Mr. Lacour is decidedly *ennuyé* to-day."

His face seemed to indicate a rather more positive state, but it was only for an instant. Then he shook hands hastily, without speaking, and vaulted out into the garden.

Isabel Clarendon

"Well!" exclaimed Mrs. Bruce Page, "that's a nice way of leaving a lady's presence. But I suppose he's practising Texan habits. Good-bye, Miss Warren. Do so wish you'd come over and see us. May I shake hands with you through the window? Indeed, we are bound to be off this instant. Good-bye!"

Rhoda Meres was standing by Mrs. Clarendon in front of the house when Mrs. Bruce Page came round with her captive.

"You'd never believe where I found him!" cried the voluble lady. "Having exhausted the patience of every one else, he'd positively tracked poor Miss Warren - who I'm sure isn't looking very well - to the library, and was boring her shockingly."

Lacour did his bowing and hand-shaking with the minimum of speech. When he touched Rhoda's hand there was something so curious in its effect upon his sense of touch that he involuntarily looked at her face. She was very pale.

CHAPTER VI

On the following morning Robert Asquith returned to London, to make ready for his grouse-shooting expedition on Wednesday. Rhoda Meres remained at Knightswell one more day. On Tuesday she was not at all well. Between Ada and her very fair relations existed; the girls were not intimate, but they generally discovered a common ground for companionship, which was more than could be said of Ada's attitude towards any other female acquaintance. When Rhoda kept her room in the morning it was natural that Ada should go to her, and seek to be of comfort. She could be of none, it proved; after a few efforts, Rhoda plainly begged to be left alone with her headache.

At midday Mrs. Clarendon herself entered the room, bringing in her hand a little tray. Rhoda was by this time sitting in a deep chair, and professed herself better. She had not slept during the night, she said, and was feeling the effects; doubtless the unwonted excitement of the party had been too much for her. Isabel talked to her quietly, and saw that she ate something, then sat by her, holding the girl's hands.

"I have a letter from your father this morning," she said. "He seems to miss you sadly. But for that, I should keep you longer."

"I'm afraid he must get used to it," was Rhoda's reply, cheerlessly uttered.

"Why, dear?"

"I shall not stay at home."

"What shall you do?" Isabel asked quietly.

"Go somewhere - go anywhere - go and find work and earn a living!"

"But I think you have work enough at home."

"I am not indispensable."

"I believe you are. I don't think your father can do without you."

"Why can't he? Hilda is at home quite enough to look after the servant. What else does he want with me?"

"Much else, dear Rhoda. Your sympathy, your aid in his work, your child's love. Remember that your father's life is not a very happy one. You are old enough to understand that. You know, I think, that it never has been very happy. Can't you find work enough in cheering him?"

For reply the girl burst into tears.

"Cheer him!" she sobbed. "How can I cheer any one? How can I give comfort to others when my own life is bare of it? It's easy for you to show me my duty, Mrs. Clarendon. Tell me *how* I am to do it!"

Isabel put her arm about the shaken form, and there was soothing in the warm current of her blood.

"I cannot tell you how to do it, Rhoda," she said, when the sobs had half stilled themselves. "My own is too much for me. But I can - with such force of love as is in me - implore you to guard against mistakes, beseech you not to heap up trouble for yourself through want of experience, want of knowledge of the world, through refusal to let older ones see and judge for you. My own life has been full of lessons, though I dare say I have not suffered as much as others would have done in my place, for I have a temperament which easily - only too easily - throws aside care. If only I could live it over again with all my experience to guide me!"

"You don't understand me," said the girl, with a fretfulness she tried to subdue. "You don't know what my trials are. No amount of experience could help me."

"Not against suffering; no. I won't talk nonsense, however well it may sound. But you speak of taking active steps, Rhoda. There experience can give very real aid."

"Mrs. Clarendon," said Rhoda, after a short silence, "I'm afraid I haven't a very good disposition. I don't feel to my father as I ought; I

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don't care as much for anybody as I ought - for any of my relations, my friends. I'm not happy, and that seems to absorb me."

"You don't care for me, Rhoda? - not for me, a little bit of sincere affection?"

The voice melted the girl's heart, so wonderful was the power it had.

"I love you with all my heart!" she cried, throwing her arms about Isabel. "You make me feel it!"

"Dear, and that is what I cannot live without," said Isabel. "I must have friends who love me - simple, pure, unselfish love. I have spent my life in trying to make such friends. I haven't always succeeded, you know, just because I have my faults - oh, heaps of them! and often I'm as selfish as any one could be. But a good many do love me, I think and trust. Love has a different meaning for you, hasn't it, Rhoda? I don't think I have ever known that other kind, and now I certainly never shall. It asks too much, I think; mine is not a passionate nature. But if you could know how happy I have often been in the simple affection of young girls who come and tell me their troubles. If I had had children, I should have spoilt them dreadfully."

Her eyes wandered, the speech died for a moment on her lips.

"Rhoda," she continued, taking both the girl's hands, "some day, and before long, I shall want your love and that of all my dear friends more than ever. Something - never mind, I shall want it, and I have tried so hard to earn it, because I looked forward and knew. All selfish calculation, you see," she added, with a nervous laugh, "but then it's only kindness I ask for. You won't take yours away? You won't do anything that will put a distance between us? Nothing foolish? Nothing ill-considered? You see, I'll put it all on my own account. I can't spare you, I can't spare one who loves me!"

Mrs. Clarendon accompanied Rhoda next day to Winstoke station. On her way back she drove to several cottages where it was her custom to call, and where the dwellers had good cause to welcome her. Of sundry things which occurred to her in the course of these visits, she desired to speak with Mr. Vissian, and accordingly stopped at the rectory before driving through her own gates. The

front door stood open, and with the freedom of intimacy, she walked straight in and tapped at the parlour door, which was ajar. That room proving empty, she passed to the next, which was the rector's study, and here too tapped. A Voice bade her enter - to her surprise an unfamiliar voice. She turned the handle, however, and looked in.

A young man was sitting in the rector's easy-chair, a book in his hand. He rose on seeing an unknown lady. They looked at each other for a moment, with a little natural embarrassment on both sides. Each rapidly arrived at a conclusion as to the other's identity, and the smile in both cases expressed a certain interest.

"Pardon me," Mrs. Clarendon said; "I am seeking the rector, or Mrs. Vissian. Can you tell me if either is at home?"

"The rector, I believe, is still away," was the reply, "but Mrs. Vissian is in the garden. I will tell her."

But in the same moment Mrs. Vissian appeared, carrying a basket of fruit. She had garden gloves on her hands. Behind her came Master Percy. There was exchange of greetings; then, in response to a look from Mrs. Clarendon, the youthful matron went through a ceremony of introduction. Mrs. Clarendon and Mr. Kingcote were requested henceforth to know each other, society sanctioning the acquaintance.

"Your name is already familiar to me," said Isabel; "I have been looking forward to the pleasure of meeting you some day. It was in fear and trembling that I knocked at the sanctuary; Mr. Vissian will congratulate himself on having left a guardian. Those precious volumes; who knows, if there had been no one here —?"

"And how are you, Percy?" she asked, turning to the child, who had come into the library, and holding to him her hand. Percy, instead of merely giving his own, solemnly knelt upon one knee, and raised the gloved fingers to his lips. His mother broke into a merry laugh; Mrs. Clarendon smiled, glanced at Kingcote, and looked back at the boy with surprise.

"That is most chivalrous behaviour, Percy," she said.

Mrs. Vissian still laughed. Percy, who had gone red, eyed her reproachfully.

Isabel Clarendon

"You know I am a page to-day, mother," he said, "that's how a page ought to behave. Isn't it, Mr. Kingcote?"

Isabel drew him to her and kissed him; a glow of pleasure showed through her smiling.

"Percy is a great many different people in a week," explained Mrs. Vissian. "To-morrow he'll be a pirate, and then I'm afraid he wouldn't show such politeness."

"That shows you don't understand, mother," remarked the boy. "Pirates are always polite to beautiful ladies."

There was more laughter at this. Kingcote stood leaning against the mantelpiece, smiling gravely. Percy caught his eye, and, still confused and rather indignant, went to his side.

"Percy still has ideals," Kingcote observed, laying his hand on the child's head.

"Ah, they're so hard to preserve!" sighed Isabel. Then, turning to Mrs. Vissian, "I want a word or two with you about things that are painfully real. Shall we go into the sitting-room?"

She bowed and said a word of adieu to Kingcote, who stood looking at the doorway through which she had disappeared.

Two days later fresh guests arrived at Knightswell, and for a week there was much riding and driving, lawn-tennis, and straying about the garden and park by moonlight. Then the house of a sudden emptied itself of all its occupants save Ada Warren. Mrs. Clarendon herself went to stay at two country places in succession. She was back again about the middle of September. Ada and she found themselves once more alone together.

Early on the day after her arrival Isabel took a turn of several miles on horseback. She had risen in the morning with somewhat less than her customary flow of spirits, and the exercise would no doubt help her to become her self again. It was a very soft and balmy autumn day; the sky was cloudy, but not with presage of immediate rain, and the distance was wonderfully clear, the rolling downs pencilled on sky of bluish gray. Sounds seemed unnaturally audible; she often

stayed her horse to listen, finding something very consonant with her mood in the voices of the resting year. When she trotted on again, the sound of the hoofs on the moist road affected her with its melancholy monotony.

“Am I growing old?” she said to herself. “It is a bad sign when riding fails to put me into good spirits. Perhaps I shall not care to hunt; a good thing, if it prove so. I lose less.”

She was returning to Winstoke by the old road from Salcot East, and presently rode past the cottage at Wood End. A window on the ground floor was open, and, as she went by, Kingcote himself came to it, having no doubt heard the approaching horse. Isabel bowed.

“Why didn’t I stop and speak?” she questioned herself. “It would have been kind. Indeed, I meant to, but my hands somehow wouldn’t obey me at the moment.”

A hundred yards farther she met a village lad, carrying a very unusual burden, nothing less than a book, an octavo volume. Isabel drew rein.

“What have you got there, Johnny Nancarrow?” she asked.

The youngster turned the book over, regarding it much as if it were a live thing.

“Fayther picked un oop corner o’ Short’s Aacre,” he replied. “He says it b’longs to the stranger at Wood End, and I’ve got to taake it there.”

“Let me look.”

It was a volume of the works of Sir Thomas Browne. Turning to the fly-leaf; Isabel saw the name, “Bernard Kingcote,” written there.

“How did it come at the corner of Short’s Acre, I wonder?”

“Fayther says the stranger ligs aboot, spellin’ over his books, and he’ll have left this behind un by hap.”

Isabel Clarendon

She turned over the leaves, absently; then her face brightened.

"Don't trouble to go any farther, Johnny," she said. "I'll take the book to its owner myself; I know him. And here's something for your good intention."

She turned her horse. The boy stood watching her, a gape of pleasure on his face, and still gazed, cap in hand, till a turn of the road hid her; then he jogged back home, whistling. The sixpence had something to do with it no doubt; yet more, perhaps, the smile from the Lady of Knightswell.

Isabel rode at a very gentle pace; once she seemed on the point of checking her horse. But she was already within sight of the cottage, and she went at walking pace up to the door. The window still stood open, and she could see into the room, but it was empty. Its appearance surprised her. The flagged floor had no kind of covering; in the middle stood a plain deal table, with a writing desk and books upon it, and against the opposite wall was a bookcase full of volumes. A less luxurious abode it would not have been easy to construct. The sides of the room had no papering, only whitewash; one did not look for pictures or ornaments, and there were none. A scent of tobacco, however, came from within.

"One comfort, at all events, poor fellow," passed through her mind. "He must have been smoking there a minute or two ago. Where is he now?"

She knocked at the door with the handle of her whip. At once she heard a step approaching, and the door was opened. Kingcote stood gazing at her in surprise; he did not smile, and did not speak. He had the face of one who has been in reverie, and is with difficulty collecting himself.

"How do you do, Mr. Kingcote?" began Isabel. "I am come to restore to you a book which has been found somewhere in the fields. I fear it has suffered a little, though not so much as it might have done."

He took the volume, and reflected for an instant before replying.

Isabel Clarendon

"I thank you very much, Mrs. Clarendon. Yes; I had quite forgotten that I left it behind me. It was yesterday. I should have been sorry to have lost him."

"The book is evidently a favourite; you handle it with affection."

"Yes, I value Sir Thomas. You know him?"

"I grieve to say that I hear his name for the first time."

"Oh, you would like him; at least, I think you would. He is one of the masters of prose. I wish I could read you one or two things."

"I'm sure I should be very glad. Will you come and lunch with us to-day, and bring the book with you?"

Kingcote had his eyes fixed upon her; a smile gathered in them.

"I'm afraid —" he began; then, raising his eyebrows with a humorous expression, "I am in no way prepared for the ceremony of visiting, Mrs. Clarendon."

"Oh, but it will be in no way a ceremony!" Isabel exclaimed. "You will do me a great pleasure if you come wholly at your ease, just as you would visit Mr. Vissian. Why not?" she added quickly. "I am alone, except for the presence of Miss Warren, who always lives with me."

"Thank you," said Kingcote, "with pleasure I will come."

"We lunch at half-past one. And you will bring Sir Thomas? And let me keep him a little, to remove the reproach of my ignorance?"

Kingcote smiled, but made no other reply. She leaned down from her horse and gave him her hand; he touched it very gently, feeling that little Percy Vissian's fashion of courtesy would have been far more becoming than the mere grasp one gives to equals. Then she rode away. Isabel was, as we know, a perfect horsewoman, and her figure showed well in the habit. Kingcote fell back into his reverie.

He had but one change of garments at all better than those he wore; not having donned them for more than two months, he found himself very presentable, by comparison, when he had completed his toilet before the square foot of looking-glass which hung against the wall in his bedroom. His hair had grown a trifle long, it is true, but that rather became him, and happily he had not finally abandoned the razor. His boots were indifferently blacked by the woman who came each day to straighten things, so he took a turn with the brushes himself.

"After all," he reflected, "it is a ceremony. I lack the courage of the natural man. But I would not have her accuse me of boorishness."

And again: "So this is the Lady of Knightswell? The water of the well is enchanted, Percy told me. Have I already drunk the one cup which is allowed?"

He reached the house-door just before the hour appointed for luncheon. With heartbeats sensibly quickened he followed the servant who led him to the drawing-room. Mrs. Clarendon and Ada were sitting here together. Isabel presented him to Miss Warren, then took the volume from his hands and looked into it.

"You know Sir Thomas Browne, no doubt, Ada," she said.

"I know the 'Urn-burial,'" Ada replied, calmly examining the visitor.

"Ah me, you put me to shame! There's the kind of thing that I read," she continued, pointing to a "Society" journal which lay on the table. "By-the-bye, what was it that Mr. Asquith said in defence of such literature? I really mustn't forget that word. Oh, yes, he said it was concrete, that it dealt with the concrete. Mr. Kingcote looks contemptuous."

"On the whole I think it's rather more entertaining than Sir Thomas Browne," remarked Ada. "At all events, it's modern."

"Another argument!" exclaimed Isabel. "You an ally, Ada! But don't defend me at the expense of Mr. Kingcote's respect."

"Mr. Kingcote would probably respect me just as much, or as little, for the one taste as for the other."

Isabel Clarendon

"Miss Warren would imply," said Kingcote in a rather measured way, due to his habits of solitude, "that after all sincerity is the chief thing."

"And a genuine delight in the Newgate Calendar," added the girl, "vastly preferable to an affected reverence for Shakespeare."

Kingcote looked at her sharply. One had clearly to take this young lady into account.

"You sketch from nature, I believe, Miss Warren?" he asked, to get the relief of a new subject.

"To please myself; yes."

"And to please a good many other people as well," said Mrs. Clarendon. "Ada's drawings are remarkably good."

"I should so much like to see your drawing of the cottage at Wood End," said Kingcote.

"When was that made?" Isabel inquired, with a look of surprise.

Luncheon was announced. As they went to the dining-room, Kingcote explained that he had passed Miss Warren when she was engaged on the sketch, before ever he had thought of living in the cottage.

"Was it that which gave you the idea?" Isabel asked.

"Perhaps it kept the spot in my mind. I was on a walking tour at the time."

"Not thinking of such a step?"

"No; the idea came subsequently."

During the meal, conversation occupied itself with subjects such as the picturesque spots to be found about Winstoke, the interesting houses in that part of the county, Mr. Vissian and his bibliomania, the precocity of Percy Vissian. Ada contented herself with a two-

Isabel Clarendon

edged utterance now and then, not given however in a disagreeable way; on the whole she seemed to like their guest's talk. Kingcote several times found her open gaze turned upon himself; and was reminded of the evening when she parted from Mr. Vissian at the gates of Knightswell.

The drawing-room had French windows, opening upon the lawn. When they had repaired thither after lunch, Ada, after sitting in silence for a few moments, rose and went out into the open air. Mrs. Clarendon followed her with her eyes, and seemed about to speak, but in the end let her pass unaddressed.

Kingcote was examining the caryatides on either side of the fireplace. He turned, saw that his hostess was alone, and came to a seat near her.

"Are you not very lonely in your cottage?" Isabel asked.

"Sometimes, yes. But then I went there for the sake of loneliness."

"It isn't rude to ask you? You are doing literary work, no doubt?"

"No; I am doing no work at all."

"But however do you spend your time in that dreadful place?"

"Dreadful? Does it show to you in that light?"

"Picturesque, I admit; but —"

She paused, with her head just on one side.

"I can well understand the horror with which you regard such a mode of life," said Kingcote, laughing. "But I have never had the habit of luxury, and, so long as I am free, nothing else matters much."

"Free from what?"

Isabel Clarendon

"From sights and sounds which disgust me, from the contiguity of mean and hateful people, from suggestions which make life hideous; free to live with my fancies, and in the thoughts of men I love."

Isabel regarded him with a half-puzzled smile, and reflected before she spoke again.

"What and where are all these things which revolt you?" she asked.

"Wherever men are gathered together; wherever there is what is called Society, and, along with it, what is called a social question."

"But you are not a misanthropist?"

Kingcote was half amused to perceive the difficulty she had in understanding him. Suggestions of this kind were evidently quite new to her; probably she did not even know what he meant by the phrase "social question."

"I am not, I believe, a misanthropist, as you understand the word. But I had rather alone than mix with men in general."

"To me it would be dreadful," said Isabel, after a moment's thought. "I cannot bear solitude."

"The society of refined and cultured people is the habit of your life."

"Refined - in a sense. Cultured? - I am not so sure of that. You would not call them cultured, the people I live amongst. I am not a clever woman, Mr. Kingcote. My set is not literary nor artistic, nor anything of that kind. I am disposed to think we should come into the category of 'mean and hateful people' - though of course you wouldn't like to tell me so."

"I was thinking of quite other phases of life. My own experience has not been, on the whole, among people who belong to what is called society. I have lived - in a haphazard way - with the classes that have no social standing, so, you see, I have no right to comment upon your circles."

Isabel Clarendon

Isabel glanced at him, and turned her eyes away. A fan was lying on the table close by her; she reached it, and played with the folds.

"But at all events," she resumed, as if to slightly change the tone, "you have had the Vissians. Don't you find them delightful? I do so like Mr. Vissian, with his queer book-hunting, and Mrs. Vissian is charm itself. These are congenial associates, no doubt?"

"Very; I like them extremely. Has Mr. Vissian told you how my acquaintance with him began?"

"Nothing, except that you met somehow in connection with the cottage."

"The good rector is wonderfully discreet," said Kingcote, with a smile. And he related the story of the Midsummer Day on which he walked from Salcot to Winstoke.

"It really was an act of unexampled generosity on Mr. Vissian's part, to trust a stranger, with so dubious a story. But the first edition of 'Venice Preserved' no doubt seemed to him a guarantee of respectability. I had the book bound during the few days that I spent in London, and made him a present of it when I returned."

"You have friends in London?" Isabel asked. "Relations?"

"A sister - married. My parents are not living."

"But of friends, companions?"

"One, an artist. Did you visit the Academy this year? There was a picture of his - his name is Gabriel - a London street scene; perhaps you didn't notice it. You would scarcely have liked it. The hanging committee must have accepted it in a moment of strangely lucid liberality. By which, Mrs. Clarendon, I don't mean to reflect upon your taste. I don't like the picture myself; but it has great technical merits."

"Is he young, like yourself?"

"Like myself?" Kingcote repeated, as if struck by the expression.

"Certainly. Are you not young?"

"I suppose so," said the other, smiling rather grimly. "At all events, I am not thirty in years. But it sounded curious to hear the word applied to myself."

Isabel laughed, opening and closing the fan.

"But Gabriel is a fine fellow," Kingcote exclaimed. "I wish I possessed a tenth part of his energy. There he works, day after day and week after week, no break, no failing of force or purpose, no holiday even - says he hasn't time to take one. He will make his way, of course; such a man is bound to. Resolutely he has put away from himself every temptation to idleness. He sees no friends, he cares for no amusement. His power of working is glorious."

"He is not, of course, married?"

Kingcote shook his head.

"That singleness of purpose - how splendid it is! He and I are opposite poles. I do not know what it is to have the same mind for two days together. My enthusiasm of to-day will be my disgust of to-morrow. I am always seeking, and never finding; I haven't the force to pursue a search to the end. My moods are tyrannous; my moods make my whole life. Others have intellect; I have only temperament."

There was no excitement in his way of uttering these confessions, but he began reflectively and ended in a grave bitterness.

"I think I know something of that," Isabel said in return. "I, too, am much subject to moods."

"But they do not affect the even tenor of your life," said Kingcote. "They do not drive you to take one day an irrevocable step which you will repent the next. They have not made your life a failure."

Isabel Clarendon

"Have they done so in your case?" Isabel asked, with a look of serious sympathy. "Pray remember your admission that you have not yet thirty years."

"The tale of my years is of small account. I shall not change. I know myself; and I know my future."

"That you cannot. And, from what you have told me, I think your present mode of life most unfortunate, most ill-chosen."

There was a shadow at the window, and Ada re-entered the room.

"Won't you let us see the sketch that was spoken of?" asked Mrs. Clarendon, turning to her.

"I don't know where to find it at present," Ada replied, moving to a seat in a remote part of the room.

"Do you think of living in that cottage through the winter?" Isabel asked of Kingcote, when there had been silence for a moment.

"Probably through many winters."

"You remember that there is a considerable difference between our climate at present and what it will be in a couple of months or less."

"I shall lay in a stock of fuel. And it will interest me. I have never spent a winter in the country; I want to study the effects."

"The effects, I fear," said Isabel, smiling, "are more likely to be of interest to our good friend Doctor Grayling."

"Or even to the respectable undertaker, whose shop is in the High Street?" added Kingcote, with a laugh. "It doesn't greatly matter."

He rose and walked to the window.

"Do you remain here through the winter?" he asked.

Isabel Clarendon

"I believe so; though I cannot say with certainty. I like to be here for the meets."

"The meets?"

"The hunting, you know."

"Ah, you hunt?"

"Mr. Kingcote is shocked, Ada. He thinks that at my age I should have abandoned all such vanities."

"Or perhaps wonders more," remarked the girl, "that you ever indulged in them."

Kingcote looked from one to the other, but kept silence.

"Oh, but we have altogether forgotten Sir Thomas!" Isabel exclaimed. "Where is he? Do read us something, Mr. Kingcote."

Kingcote hesitated.

"There are many passages marked in the book," he said. "Will you let me leave it with you, that you may glance through it? Perhaps it is better suited for reading to oneself."

"Very well; but I will do more than glance. I *once* knew what it was even to study, Mr. Kingcote, though you will have a difficulty in believing it."

"The idea is not so incongruous," he said, half seriously.

"Though passably so. You are not going?"

"I will, if you please."

A heaviness seemed to have fallen upon him during the last few minutes; a smile was summoned only with difficulty, and his eyes had a weary look.

Isabel Clarendon

"But now that we know each other by more than hearsay," said Isabel, "you will come and see us again?"

"Yourself and Miss Warren, gladly; but if I am remiss in visiting you will not misunderstand the reason that keeps me away?"

"It shall be as you wish. Ada and I will let you know when we are alone."

Kingcote made his way back to Wood End.

CHAPTER VII

Since the disclosure made by Asquith to Ada Warren, the latter and Mrs. Clarendon had continued to live on precisely the same terms as before; no reference, however little explicit, had been made on either side to the subject which naturally occupied the thoughts of both. Ada was not in herself the same as before she understood her position; many little indications which had been wrought in her showed themselves involuntarily. But not in her behaviour to Mrs. Clarendon; that, as hitherto, was cold and reserved, at most the familiarity which comes of companionship in the external things of life.

It had always been so; there was a barrier between the two which only united effort could remove, and, though there had been impulses on both sides, a common emotion had never arisen to overthrow the obstacle. They did not understand each other, and, after so many years, there was small chance that they ever would.

Very dear in the memory of both was that day when Ada was first seen at Knightswell. Mr. Clarendon died at the end of January; a fortnight later the child was brought over from London by a member of the deceased man's firm of solicitors. She was poorly dressed, and her teeth chattered after the cold journey. She was handed over to a servant to be attended to, whilst Mrs. Clarendon held a conversation with the lawyer in the library. When the legal gentleman had lunched, and was on his way back to town, Ada was sent for to the boudoir.

An overgrown girl of seven years, with a bad figure, even for a child of that age when grace is not a common attribute, with arms which seemed too long, and certainly were so in relation to the sleeves which cased them, with a thin neck, and a positively ugly face - that was what Isabel saw when she raised her eyes in anticipation at the opening of the door. A face decidedly ugly, and, for Isabel, with something in it more repellent than mere ugliness; something for which she had at once looked, and which she found only too unmistakably. The face regarded her half in fear, half in defiance; there seemed no touch of shyness in the gaze, and Isabel was not in a mood for perceiving that it was really excess of shyness which

formed the expression. The child had been washed and warmed, but had not eaten yet; she had refused to eat. She and Isabel looked at each other for a little space; then the latter summoned the attendant maid by a gesture to her side.

"Have her properly clothed," she said in a low voice, "and do what you can to make her at home in the room upstairs. Her own maid will be here to-morrow."

"Yes, ma'am," said the servant; adding, with a nervous cough, "must it be mourning, ma'am?"

Mrs. Clarendon uttered a very clear "No," and gave a few other directions.

"Let her be put to bed at seven o'clock, and tell me to-morrow morning how she has passed the night."

All that was as living to-day in Ada's memory as if but a week had intervened. She saw the beautiful black-clad lady sitting by the fire, holding a fan to guard her face against excessive heat, and she heard several of the orders given. That night she had gone to bed hating the beautiful lady with a precocious hatred.

Three days went by before the two met again. Ada was now neatly attired, and her long hair, previously unkempt, had been done up and made presentable. It only made her neck look the longer and thinner, and put into relief the hard lines of her thin face. The probability was she had hitherto been half-starved. She was brought to the boudoir, and Mrs. Clarendon bade the servant go.

"Will you come and sit here by the fire?" Isabel said, speaking as softly as she could.

A low seat had been put by the hearth-rug in readiness. The child approached, swinging her long arms awkwardly, and seated herself on the edge of it.

"Your name is Ada, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Isabel Clarendon

"You haven't a father or mother, have you, Ada?"

"No."

"That is why you are come to live with me. I haven't a little girl of my own, so I'm going to take care of you, and treat you like my own child. Do you think you can be happy with me?"

"I don't know."

The child spoke with a detestable London-working-class accent, which made her voice grate on Isabel's ears even more than it otherwise would have done.

"I shall do my very best to be kind to you," Isabel continued, after a struggle with her feelings. "Have you been happy till now - I mean with the other people in London?"

"No," was the decided answer.

"Weren't they kind to you?"

"I don't know."

Isabel rose and walked about the room. The little creature was loathsome to her.

"Do you like the toys I've got for you?" was her next question from a distance.

"I don't care for toys."

There was another silence.

"Would you rather sit here with me, or be up in your own room?"

"Rather be upstairs."

"Then I'll take you. Will you go hand-in-hand with me?"

Isabel Clarendon

She led the child back to the room which had been made into a nursery, and where there were dolls, and bricks, and other things of the kind supposed to be delightful to children.

"Wouldn't you like to dress this nice doll?" Isabel asked, taking up one of the unclad abortions.

"No."

"Have you been to school yet, Ada?"

"Yes."

"And can you read?"

"Yes."

Isabel tested her, and found that the reply had been accurate; but for the ear-jarring pronunciation, the reading was remarkable for a child of seven.

A person answering to the description of nursery-governess had been found for the child, and to her care Ada was for a long time almost exclusively left. Isabel went into the nursery daily and spoke a few words. More than this she could not do, her soul was in revolt.

She did not quit Knightswell throughout the summer, but in September she went with friends to the south coast. On her return she paid an early visit to the nursery. It was afternoon, and darkness was gathering. Ada was lying on the floor asleep, a book which she had been reading lying beside her. Isabel knelt down and looked at the child, whose face was still almost haggard, and had an expression of suffering beyond her years.

"You poor, poor thing!" she said to herself, pitying at last, though she could not do more. "I will try hard to do my duty by you. You will never love me, and will think meanly enough of me some day."

As Ada grew older, the extreme sullenness, which seemed to be her disposition, wore off a little. She was outwardly civilised, she learned to speak the English of refinement, she made for herself all

manner of interests, none of them very childlike; and to Mrs. Clarendon she assumed the demeanour which was to persist, with very slight alteration, from that time onwards. When she was ten years old Isabel engaged a better governess for her. It became evident that the girl had brains. She showed, too, a pronounced faculty for drawing; a teacher accordingly came over once a week from the nearest town. At the age of fourteen she for the first time accompanied Mrs. Clarendon to London, and stayed with her there for the couple of months which were all that Isabel permitted herself that year. Ada had her own rooms, and only saw Isabel's most intimate acquaintances; her time was chiefly devoted to lessons of various kinds.

Isabel took this step in consequence of troublous symptoms in the girl's life. Ada had always been a perfectly tractable child, and had given as little trouble as a child could. She never cried; her way of expressing indignation or misery was to hide herself in the remotest corner she could find, and there remain till she was discovered, when she suffered herself to be led away in silence. Only once had Isabel, softly approaching the half-open door of Ada's bedroom at night, believed that she heard a sob. She entered and spoke; Ada was awake, but indignantly protested that she had not been crying. Isabel felt that there was not a little obscure suffering in the child's existence, and once or twice, overcome by her compassionate instincts, tried to speak warmly, if perchance she might find a means of winning the confidence which she had not felt able to seek; but the result was not encouraging. At length it seemed that the hidden misery was taking a form which could not be disregarded, which demanded sympathy and motherly tenderness. Hitherto Ada had shown no objection to meet and speak with the visitors or guests at Knightswell; all at once she refused to see any stranger, and resolutely kept her own rooms whenever Mrs. Clarendon had company. She would give no explanation; her eyes flashed passionately, as if in irrepressible irritation, when she was appealed to. And, for the first time in her life, she suffered from ill-health; severe headache racked her for days in succession.

The attempt which Isabel made to draw near to her in this crisis was the occasion of a scene entirely new in their relations, and not thereafter to be repeated. There were guests at Knightswell, and Ada did not appear. Isabel went to the girl's room, and obtained admission.

Isabel Clarendon

"Have you a headache, Ada?" she asked.

The reply was a short negative.

"Then, why don't you come down? I very much wish you would. Will you come down to please me?"

The girl was sitting at a table, seemingly engaged with her books. In reality she had been motionless and unemployed for a couple of hours. She was pale and her eyes bloodshot.

"No, Mrs. Clarendon," she exclaimed; "I cannot come down to please you! Why should I torture myself to give you pleasure?"

She had risen, and stood with a face of passionate anguish.

"Torture yourself?" Isabel repeated, almost in fear.

"Yes; it is torture, and you might know it. You ask me to meet your friends because you think it, I suppose, a duty to do so; in truth, you are ashamed of me, you had far rather not see me downstairs. I know myself well enough, and I have glasses in my room. I know what these people say and think of me. I can bear it no longer; I want to leave you! I cannot live with you!"

Isabel could not find words to reply. There was a horrible element of truth in the girl's suspicions, though Ada did not and could not know its meaning. It was, indeed, out of mere consideration for her feelings that Isabel was pressing her to show herself.

"You can't live with me, Ada?" she said at length, in despair that she could not speak with the utterance of true feeling. "Am I unkind to you?"

"You are nothing to me!" was the passionate reply. "Neither kind nor unkind - you are nothing to me, and I am nothing to you! Why did you take me into your house? What interest had you in me? Who am I?"

Isabel Clarendon

"Ada, you are the child of a friend of Mr. Clarendon's. Mr. Clarendon desired that I should take you and bring you up, as you had lost your own parents. That is all I know of you - all."

"Then you have done your best, and now let me go. We shall never like each other. You took me from a poor home, and I suppose my parents were poor people. It is not in my blood to like you, or to live your life. When I was a child it didn't matter; but, now I see and understand, I know the difference between us. I will *never* meet people who look on me with contempt! Let me go. I will be a servant; it is what I am suited for. You can't keep me against my will, and I wish to leave you!"

For more than an hour Isabel strove against this resolve. Her task was a hard one. By mere cold reasoning she had to face the outburst of a nature which was all at once proving itself so deep and vehement. Could she but have called emotion to her aid! Her own impassiveness was her despair. That Ada should leave her was out of the question, yet by what means could she restrain the girl if the latter proved persistent? She could not tell her the truth; that was something she had put off to an indefinite future, it was beyond her strength to face it as a present necessity. The only appeal she could make was one which it cost her unspeakable self-contempt to utter. To tell Ada that it would be gross ingratitude to make this return to her mother by adoption. Well, what else could be said? The misery of degradation brought the first tears to her eyes.

"You don't care whether I am grateful or not," Ada replied, calmer at length, because weak from nervous overstrain. "You care for me less than for your servants. No soul cares for me."

It was this feeling of desolation which had suddenly taken hold of the developed girl. A heart craving for warmth had come to life within her; her senses had awakened to desperate hunger. The pathos in her last utterance was infinite; it touched Isabel to the core.

"It shall not be so, Ada," was her answer to the cry. "We will be more to each other; you shall not suffer from loneliness, poor child! I will never ask you to see people you do not wish to, and I will give you all I can of my own life. Be kind and childlike with me. My heart is not hard, dear."

Isabel Clarendon

Not hard, the heart of Isabel Clarendon, but very human, very womanly. It could not throw open its gates unreservedly to this child who had been forced upon her. The tears she shed at Ada's side were bitter and choking; they brought no solace of moved tenderness.

It was the first and the last of such scenes. A couple of years later Ada looked back upon her part in it with that brain-scorching shame to which an intense nature is so subject in recalling immature impulsiveness. For a week or two at most it made anything of sensible difference in her own or Mrs. Clarendon's behaviour, then the unconquerable coldness returned, with an appearance of finality. Their conversation limited itself to superficial matters, and even here occasions of difference not seldom offered, exacting self-control on both sides. Lacking conscious spiritual life, and all but void of intellectual interests, Isabel Clarendon could hardly be credited with principles, but for that reason her prejudices were the stronger. As Ada grew in mental stature, she found it difficult at all times to avoid involuntary collision with these prejudices, or even to refrain from impatient comment of a kind very irritating to Isabel. Small points of social observance first began to excite the girl's indignant or ironical remark, then graver matters of tradition arose between them - stumbling-blocks for the one, to the other accepted sign-posts. Ada read much, and procured books from very various sources; even had Isabel been sufficiently familiar with the characteristics of authors to judge from their outsides the books she saw. Lying about, she did not feel strong enough to attempt to impose restrictions on her ward's reading; such a step would assuredly have led to conflicts, and from this Isabel shrank. Ada's tastes seemed to her deplorably masculine; it was very likely, she said to herself, that no positive harm would result to such a nature from literature poisonous to ordinary girls. Fortunately Mrs. Clarendon's conception of responsibility was not that ever-besieging consciousness which leaves some women no rest in a position of superintendence. The instinct of procrastination was strong in her; a thought which troubled her she could, without much difficulty, set aside for entertainment on the morrow. Promising herself that some day she would have a long and very serious talk with Ada on the grave matters which she ordinarily shunned, for the present she allowed the girl to take her course, and the opportunity to which she often mentally referred never seemed to present itself.

Had Mrs. Clarendon understood the progress of Ada's development she would have been greatly struck with the girl's moderation and

self-restraint, instead of being, to her own distress, repelled and hardened by each new manifestation of independence. Regarding Ada's expressions of revolt as mere disconnected phenomena, she was puzzled to account for such evil features in a girl who had been well taught, held apart from the contamination of low associates, and trained in the habits of a refined and wealthy home. One explanation alone occurred to her - the base blood in the child's veins manifested itself in spite of education to a different social sphere. Such a thought was natural and characteristic. Isabel called herself a Conservative in politics; in social matters she reconciled maxims of intolerance with practical virtues such as we are apt to call divine, because we find them so seldom in humanity. What is called the spirit of the times had access to her only in frivolous babble or inimical caricature. Living on the surface, she had never been instructed to think for herself in any matter of grave concern; the criminality of doubt and the obligation of social conformity were formulæ which served her sufficiently for guidance whenever she might feel herself in danger of going astray. With pretty extensive knowledge of the world, her acquaintance with human nature was elementary; to be forced upon the study of a typical case of divergence from the broad characteristics of respectable upper-class mankind was to have demanded of her an exercise of intellectual charity of which she was incapable.

From one friend alone did she derive assistance in the practical details of her task. This friend was Mr. Thomas Meres, of whom we have already heard as Rhoda's father. His acquaintance she had made in the earliest days of her married life; he acted as secretary to Mr. Clarendon. Thomas Meres was then a man of thirty; he had attempted literature, and failed to get a living by it, and had gladly accepted a position which for a time brought means of support for himself and others dependent upon him. These others - Isabel only discovered it after Mr. Clarendon's death - were a wife and two children. One day, when Isabel had been six months a widow, she received from the late secretary a letter of appeal for aid in desperate circumstances; a letter which she answered by at once summoning to Knightswell the writer and his two children, girls of four and six respectively. She had always regarded Mr. Meres with favour; without information as to his private life, she felt that some hidden misery weighed upon him, and that he was a man of much capability and goodness sadly at odds with fortune. At Knightswell she won his confidence, and heard from him a dismal tale of domestic wretchedness. Happily, the main cause of his sufferings

had at length abandoned the home she had made no home, and the only present difficulty was to find a means of livelihood. The man himself was starving; the children were sad-looking little creatures, victims of cruelty and a hard lot. The three remained at Knightswell for several weeks, being of course on the footing of visitors, and receiving kindness which put poor Tom Meres into spiritual bondage for life, bondage he would not have cast off for any luxurious freedom the world could offer him. Eventually a position was found for him, and he returned with his children to London.

Having made Ada's acquaintance in those early days of her rescue from savagery; Meres continued to regard her with living interest, often prophesying to her guardian that she would grow into a remarkable woman. At least once a year he was at Knightswell, and he followed the course of the child's education with attentive scrutiny. Ada came to like him; she displayed no childlike fondness for him, any more than for any one else, but she listened with pleasure to his talk, and in turn spoke to him of things of which to all others she kept silence. If Tom did not positively encourage her critical propensities, he was at all events at no pains to check them, and it was from his library that she received books which set her on the track of modern literature, which otherwise she would have discovered much later. Isabel, when her troubles of conscience began, taxed her friend with this.

"It is true," Tom admitted, "I have advised her to read books which I shouldn't give to ordinary girls. Ada is not an ordinary girl. Do not distress yourself, dear lady; no ill will come of it. It is only making smooth for her a path which would otherwise be intolerably rough."

"But isn't it leading her where she wouldn't otherwise be tempted to go?" asked Isabel.

"I can assure you, no. Rough or smooth, she will take this direction. But would you rather I did no more? Your wish is supreme."

"You are a vastly better judge in these matters than I am," said Isabel modestly (meaning what she said, though not perhaps quite feeling it), "and I know you will be careful. I myself am helpless with Ada; my guardianship is nominal, I am sorry to say."

Isabel Clarendon

To this friend it was that Ada had now of late been in the habit of going when she wished to have the change of London life, and now that she no longer accompanied Mrs. Clarendon during the season. The arrangement was a good one. Isabel had in the first place protested, trying to point out to the girl the advantage of making acquaintances in London other than those which Mr. Meres could offer her. Ada smiled in her least pleasant way, and Isabel surrendered the point, not in her heart sorry to be free when she took her own recreation.

"What do you think of Mr. Kingcote?" Isabel asked Ada, as they drank tea together after the visitor had left.

"I can't judge him on so slight an acquaintance," the girl answered. "I like his voice."

"Strange that I was going to say the same thing. You shouldn't have gone out whilst we were talking. He, at all events, will not drive you away with - what do you call it? - imbecile chatter."

"He seems to be a man of some culture. I don't know that he will find us very attractive."

"My poor self, certainly not. But it would be pleasant if he and you found some interest in common, wouldn't it? We must have him with the Vissians to dine."

"Your social instincts are really remarkable." It was a noteworthy point that Ada had never learnt to address Mrs. Clarendon by any name save the formal one. "Do you think Mr. Kingcote is prepared for formal dining?"

"By-the-bye, most likely not," said Isabel, laughing. "But it will be a charity to persuade him to come here sometimes. However, I don't think he'll live there through the winter."

"Doesn't it occur to you that he may have gone there because he finds a difficulty in living in ordinary ways?"

Isabel Clarendon

"Yes, very likely."

She reflected, adding presently:

"He has a nice voice."

CHAPTER VIII

Ada was outwardly more restless than usual. A taste for rambling possessed her; she disappeared for long afternoons, and did not take her sketching implements, though the country was in its finest autumn colouring. Probably she was weary, for the time, alike of books and drawing. In all her interests she had periods of enthusiasm and of disgust; days when she worked incessantly from dawn till midnight, grudging scanty intervals for meals, and others when nothing could relieve her *ennui*. She did not ride, in spite of her opportunities; walking was the only out-of-door recreation possible to her.

One evening, a week after Mr. Kingcote's visit, she returned only just in time for dinner at seven o'clock, and, after sitting in silence through the meal - she was alone with Mrs. Clarendon, who was likewise indisposed for talking, and had a look of trouble seldom seen on her face - went to the library to read or otherwise occupy herself. A servant brought a lighted reading-lamp, lowered the blinds, and drew the heavy red curtains across the window recesses.

Left alone, Ada consulted her watch, and, stepping to the window which looked from the end of the house on to a shrubbery, put aside one of the curtains. She had scarcely done so when she heard a light tap on the outside of the pane. The sound made her start and draw a little away; she looked nervously to the door, then ran across the room and, with precaution, turned the key in the lock. Her face was slightly flushed and her manner nervous. After the lapse of a minute there came a repetition of the tapping from without. She quickly raised the blind and lifted the lower sash of the window, then again drew back. A man forthwith vaulted into the room. He looked about him, closed the window, drew down the blind, and, turning once more, presented the familiar figure of Mr. Vincent Lacour.

"This is really awfully kind of you, Miss Warren," were his words, as he came forward to shake hands. He spoke with subdued voice, and his demeanour was not quite as self-possessed as usual "I was beset with doubts - whether you had my note safely, whether you could manage to be here alone, whether you would admit me at all. I know it is an unwarrantable step on my part, but I was bound to see you

Isabel Clarendon

once more, and see you alone. I'm leaving England in a few days, so I'm not likely to annoy you after this."

He had expressive eyes, and put much into them, as he gazed at the girl after speaking thus. Ada's hands hung before her, nervously clasped, with the backs together.

"I of course ought not to consent to an interview of this kind," she said coldly. "Mrs. Clarendon would be much displeased - would altogether misunderstand it. I hope you will say what you wish to very quickly."

"Are we safe from disturbance?" he asked. "Do people come in?"

"No one will come in."

He uttered a sound of satisfaction.

"I discovered," he said, "that you and Mrs. Clarendon were alone, or of course I couldn't have ventured. If you knew what I've gone through in the last month, since I was talking with you in this room! And not an hour but your voice has been present with me. Do you know that your voice is unique? I have heard voices more musical - don't think I'm talking mere nonsensical flattery - but never one that dwelt with me for long after, as yours does. I suppose it is half your manner of expressing yourself - your frank directness."

Whether he was sincere or not, it was impossible at least to gather evidence of insincerity from his words and the way in which they were uttered. There was no touch of a wheedling note, not an accent which jarred on the sufficiently discriminating ear of the listener. He seemed more than half regardless of the effect his speech might produce; the last sentence came forth in a rather absent way, whilst his eyes were apparently occupying themselves with a picture hanging near him.

"What was it you wished to say to me, Mr. Lacour?" Ada asked, when she had let a moment of silence pass. She still stood in the same attitude, but was now looking at him, her hard features studiously impassive.

"To say good-bye to you, and - and to thank you."

It was uttered with an effort, as if the tone of mere frankness had been rather hard to hit, and might easily have slid to one of softer meaning.

"To thank me for what, pray?"

She was smiling slightly, perhaps to ease her features.

"For having shown me my ideal woman, the woman in whose existence I believed, though I never hoped to see her. I was tired of the women who cared for and studied nothing but the art of fooling men; I wanted a new type, the woman of sincerity. I don't know whether you've noticed it - I'm something of an artist in my way. I can't paint, and I can't write, but I believe I have the artist's way of looking at things. I live on refinements of sensation - you know what I mean? There's nothing good or valuable in me; I've no moral force; I'm just as selfish as I can be; but I have a sort of delicacy of perception, I discriminate in my likings. Now you've heard all sorts of ill of me, of course; you've been told I pitched away ten thousand pounds in less than a couple of years; that I've — Well, never mind. But, Miss Warren, I haven't lived a life of vulgar dissipation; I have not debased myself. My senses are finer-edged than they were, instead of being dulled and coarsened. I've led the life a man ought to lead who is going to be a great poet - though, as far as I know, I haven't it in me to be that. But at least I understand the poetical temperament. I couldn't help my extravagance. I was purchasing experience; the kind of experience my nature needed. Others feed their senses grossly that would have cost less money, but my tendencies are not to grossness. I had certain capacities to develop, and I obeyed the need without looking very far ahead. Capacities of enjoyment, I admit; entirely egoistic. An egoist; I pretend to be nothing better. But believe me when I tell you that the admiration of a frank egoist is worth more than that of people who pretend to all the virtues. It is of necessity sincere."

Ada had seated herself whilst these remarkable utterances were falling upon her ear. Lacour knelt upon a chair near her, leaning over the back.

"You are leaving England?" she said, quietly reminding him of the professed object of his visit.

"A place has been offered me in a house of business in Calcutta; I have no choice but to take it. Or, rather, there is an alternative; one I can't accept."

"Will you tell me what that is?"

She looked up, and he smiled sadly at her. His face just then had all that a man's face can possess of melancholy beauty. The fineness of its lineaments contrasted remarkably with Ada's over-prominence of feature. Hers was the individual countenance, his the vague alluring type.

"My brother," he replied, "had been persuaded to offer me an allowance of two hundred a year, on condition that I do what I originally intended, read for the Bar."

"And that you can't accept? Why not?"

"For the simple reason that I *should* not read. I should take the money, get into debt, do nothing. I am past the possibility of voluntary work. In a house of business I suppose I shall be made to work, and perhaps it may lead to a competence sooner or later. But for reading here at home I have no motive. I lack an impulse. Life would be intolerable."

Ada did not raise her eyes. He was still leaning forward on the back of the chair, but now at length held himself upright, passed his fingers through his hair, and uttered an exclamation of weariness.

"So I go to India!" he said. "The climate is of course impossible for me; I suffer enough here. Well, it can't be helped."

He sat down opposite the girl, bent forward, and let his face fall upon his hands.

"Other men of my age," he murmured, "are beginning the work of their life. My life is as good as over. I have capabilities; I might do something if I had an impulse."

He looked at her. Her face was as impassible as stone, her eyes closed. Lacour reached forward and touched her hand, making her start into consciousness.

"Will you lend me your hand one moment?" he asked in an irresistible voice, a low, tired breathing.

Ada did not resist. She had to bend forward a little; he put her palm against his forehead. The man was not merely acting; not purely and simply inventing poses; if so, how came his brow so terribly hot? Yet at this moment the question uppermost in his brain was - whether Ada knew the contents of Mr. Clarendon's will. He had no means of ascertaining whether or not she had been enlightened. He could scarcely ask her directly.

The girl drew her hand away, and rose from her chair. She breathed with difficulty.

"How cool that was!" he said. Perhaps he had not noticed that her palm was like fire. "That is again something I never yet felt." Then, with sudden energy: "Miss Warren, what on earth do you think of me? Do you think I am unconscious of the supremely bad taste I show in coming here and talking to you in this way? I have kept away as long as ever I could - a whole month. I was absurd that last time I talked to you. I don't charge myself with iniquities; in fact, I don't know that I recognise any sin except sins against good taste. This present behaviour of mine is in the very worst. You understand me as well as if I had spoken out the whole monstrous truth; you judge me. Well, you shall do it in my absence. Good-bye."

She let him take her hand again. He looked at the palm, appeared to be following the lines.

"That is the line of the heart; that of the head. Both strong and fine. If I were a man of means, or even a man with a future, I would ask you to let this hand lie a little longer in mine, now and afterwards —"

He looked once more into her face; she saw that his eyes were moist.

"Mr. Lacour, please to leave me!" Ada suddenly exclaimed, rousing herself from a kind of heaviness which had held her inactive and irresponsive. Then she added: "I cannot aid you. We all have our lives to live; yours is no harder than mine. Try your best to be happy; I know nothing else to live for."

Isabel Clarendon

"Will - you - help me?" he asked, plainly enough at last. "It has come, you see, in spite of everything. Will you help me?"

"I cannot. You mean, of course, will I promise to be your wife. I shall make that promise to no one till I am one-and-twenty."

It was a flash of illumination for Lacour.

"Not even," he inquired, with a smile of quiet humour, "when Mrs. Clarendon marries?"

"When Mrs. Clarendon marries?" Ada repeated, not exactly with surprise, but questioningly.

"You know that she is going to marry Lord Winterset, and very soon? Why, there is another terrible mistake; I ought not to have mentioned it if you do not know it. I thought it was understood."

"Perhaps it is," returned Ada, a curious expression in her eyes. "It does not matter; it does not affect me. I beg you not to stay longer. Indeed, we have no more to say to each other."

"May I write to you from India?"

"If you still have the slightest interest in me; I shall be glad to hear you have got there safely. I must leave you now."

He had retained her hand for the last few moments, and now she felt herself being softly drawn towards him.

"My hand!" she exclaimed almost hysterically. "Release it I order you to leave me!"

She tore it away and fell back several paces; then, as he still remained motionless, she went to the door and opened it. Lacour turned away; it was to hide the smile which rose when he heard the lock. In another moment he was once more in the garden.

There was moonlight by this time; the lawn was unshadowed, and he had to pass before the house in order to get into the park, and thence by a track he had in mind which would bring him into the

high road. Close at hand, however, was the impenetrable gloom of the shrubbery, and, just as he was moving away from the end of the house to make a bold start across the open, there issued from the trees the form of a lady, who stepped quickly up to him.

"Mr. Lacour," she said, recognising him without difficulty, "will you have the goodness to explain this to me?"

He had never yet heard Mrs. Clarendon's voice speaking thus; it impressed him.

"What is the meaning of your presence in my house, and your very unusual way of leaving it?"

Vincent owed it to himself to make the most of this present experience. He was not likely again to see such an embodiment of splendid indignation, nor hear a voice so self-governed in rich anger. It was a pity that he had for the moment lost his calmer faculties it cost him no little effort to speak the first few words of reply.

"I can only ask you to forgive me, Mrs. Clarendon —"

He was interrupted.

"Kindly follow me," Isabel said. She led the way along the edge of the bushes and out of sight of the house. Then she again faced him.

"It is all grievously irregular," Lacour pleaded, or rather explained, for the brief walk had helped him to self-command. "I need not say that I was alone in devising the plan. I wanted to speak with Miss Warren, and I knew her habit of sitting alone in the library. The window stood open; I entered."

"May I ask for what purpose you wished to speak with Miss Warren?"

"I fear, Mrs. Clarendon, I am not at liberty to answer that question."

"Your behaviour is most extraordinary."

"I know it; it is wholly irregular. I owe you an apology for so entering your house."

"An apology, it seems to me, is rather trivial under the circumstances. I don't know that I need pick and choose my words with you, Mr. Lacour. Doesn't it occur to you that, all things considered, you have been behaving in a thoroughly dishonourable way - doing what no gentleman could think of? If I am not mistaken, you were lately in the habit of professing a desire for my good opinion; how do you reconcile that with this utter disregard of my claims to respect?"

"Mrs. Clarendon, it is dreadful to hear you speaking to me in this way. You have every right to be angry with me; I reproach myself more than you reproach me. I did not think of you in connection with Miss Warren. I could not distress or injure you wittingly."

"I don't know that you have it in your power to injure me," was the cold reply. "I am distressed on your own account, for I fully believed you incapable of dishonour."

"Good God! Do you wish me to throw myself at your feet and pray you to spare me? I cannot bear those words from you; they flay me. Think what you like of me, but don't say it! You cannot amend me, but you can gash me to the quick, if it delights you to do that. I won't ask you to pardon me; I am lower than you can stoop. The opinion of other people is nothing to me; I didn't know till this moment that any one could lash me as you have done."

Isabel was frightened at the violence of his words; they must have calmed a harsher nature than hers. His earnestness was all the more terrible from its contrast with his ordinary habit of speech, and his professed modes of thinking. His voice choked. Perhaps for the first time in her life Isabel recognised the fulness of her power over men.

"Mr. Lacour," she said with grave gentleness, "is this the first of your visits to Miss Warren?"

"It is the first."

"Will you promise me that it shall be the last - I mean of secret visits?"

Isabel Clarendon

"I will never see her again."

"I exact no such promise as that; it is beyond my right. What I do regard as my right is the assurance that my ward has fair play. Her position is difficult beyond that of most girls. I have confidence in Ada Warren; I believe she respects me - perhaps I should say she recognises my claims as her guardian. My house is open to you when you come on the same footing as other gentlemen."

"I cannot face you again."

"Where do you intend to pass the night?" Isabel inquired, letting a brief silence reply to his last words.

"I have got a room at the inn in Winstoke."

"And to-morrow morning you return to London?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Bruce Page tells me your brother is making you an allowance. I am glad to hear that, and I hope you will heartily accept his conditions."

"I shall try to read, but there's small chance of it ever coming to anything. I'm one of those men who inevitably go to the dogs. A longer or shorter time, but the dogs eventually."

"That is in your own hands. Shall I tell you what I think? Just one piece of my mind which perhaps you will rate cheaply enough. I think that a man who respects himself will make his own standing in life, and won't be willing to be lifted on to smooth ground by any one, least of all by a woman's weak hands. And now, good night to you."

She left him and entered the house by the front door.

After breakfast next morning, Ada was in the library, walking from window to window, watching the course of clouds which threatened rain, at a loss, it seemed, how to employ herself. She was surprised by Mrs. Clarendon's entrance.

Isabel Clarendon

"You haven't settled to work yet?" Isabel said, looking at her rather timidly.

Ada merely shook her head and came towards the table. Mrs. Clarendon took up a book and glanced at it.

"What are you busy with now?" she asked lightly.

"Nothing in particular. I've just finished a novel that interests me."

"A novel? Frivolous young woman! Oh, I know that book. It's very nice, all but the ending, and that I don't believe in. That extravagant self-sacrifice is unnatural; no man ever yet made such a sacrifice."

"It doesn't seem to me impossible," said Ada.

"No? It will some day."

Isabel's way of speaking was not altogether like herself; it was rather too direct and abrupt.

"Of a man, you think?"

Isabel laughed.

"Oh, of a woman much more! We are not so self-sacrificing as they make us out, Ada."

She took a seat on a chair which stood edgewise to the table, and rested her head against her hand.

"Will you sit down?" she asked invitingly, when the girl still kept her position at a distance.

"You wish to speak to me?"

Ada became seated where she was.

"You wish the distance to represent that which is always between us?" Isabel remarked, half sadly, half jestingly.

Ada seemed about to rise, but turned it off in an arrangement of her dress.

"When Mr. Asquith told you something from me a month ago," Isabel continued, "did it occur to you that I had any motive in - in choosing just that time, in letting you know those things just when I did?"

Ada had fixed a keen and curious look on the speaker, a look which was troublesome in its intensity.

"I supposed," was her measured reply, "that you thought I had come to the age when I ought to know something of the future that was before me."

"Yes, that is true. You will credit me, will you not, with a desire to save you from being at a disadvantage?"

"Certainly."

The word was rather ironically spoken.

"You perhaps think I ought to have told you sooner?"

"I have had that thought."

"On the other hand, you do not forget that nothing obliged me to tell you for another year and a half."

"Nothing obliged you."

Isabel suffered from the keen annoyance which this dry manner of the girl's always occasioned her. She did not speak again till she felt able to do so with a voice as quiet as before.

"When I spoke of your being at a disadvantage, I meant, of course, that it was hardly right for others to be aware of facts about you which you yourself did not know."

"I gathered that from your words."

"Ada, I wish I had more of your confidence. I am not very good at this stagey sort of talk; it is not natural to me; it brings me into a tone which is the very last I wish to use to you. I asked my cousin to relieve me of the duty of telling you about the will because I did not feel quite able to do it myself; I was rather afraid of myself - of being led to say things I should be sorry for. As you know very well, I'm quick-tempered, and not quite as wise a woman as I might be. I feared, too, lest *you* might say things I couldn't bear to hear. Well, what I want to ask you is this: Do you understand how difficult my position is with regard to you? Do you see how we differ from ordinary guardian and ward, and how all but impossible it is for me to give you those pieces of advice, those warnings which, as an older woman, I should be justified in offering?"

"Advice, warning?" repeated Ada, without much curiosity.

"Both. You have had very slight opportunities of getting to know the world. You prefer your books to society, and perhaps rightly; but that must not bring you to forget that you are heiress to a large fortune, and - and that other people - our friends - are well aware of it."

Ada laughed silently.

"You wish, Mrs. Clarendon, to put me on my guard?"

"I do."

The silent laugh had covered a distortion of features, as if by bodily pain. The girl's eyes began to take on that wide, dangerous look which Isabel knew well and feared; there was a motion of her shoulders also, like a result of physical uneasiness.

"Wishing me," Ada pursued, in a higher note, "at the same time to understand that no one is at all likely to seek me out for my own sake."

"Ada, I did not say that, and I did not mean it; you might at least spare to charge me with malice which is not in my nature. Let us speak freely to each other now that we have begun." Isabel's colour had heightened, and her words lost their deliberateness. "I know too well what your opinion of me is. You think me a vain, superficial,

worldly woman, ready to make any sacrifice of my pride - the poor pride that every creature has - just for the sake of keeping my place and the means to support it, and overflowing with bitterness against the one who will some day take everything from me. It is natural; you have never exerted yourself to know me better. It is natural, too, because I *have*, in fact, made an extraordinary sacrifice of my pride, have eaten my own shame with every mouthful under this roof since my widowhood - oh, since my marriage! For all that, I am not evil-natured; it is not in my heart to cherish malice. I do not feel hardly to you. Put it down to my poor spirit if you like, but the resentment I once had I have quite got over, and I wish you nothing but good. Why do I say all this? Only because I want to convince you that, if you ever take me into your confidence, I shall not advise you with selfish motives. And there was no selfishness in what I said to you just now. It was my duty to say it, misunderstand my words how you may."

The silence which followed seemed a long one. Isabel had hidden her face. Ada was making marks on the table with a pencil.

"I don't think," replied the latter at length, "that I have ever charged you in my mind with this kind of selfishness; you are quite mistaken in what you say of my opinion of you. Please to remember, Mrs. Clarendon, that I too have my difficulties. I have not reached this age without questioning myself about many things. I have long ceased to be a child; the world is not so simple to me as it was then. Many things require explanation which as a child I scarcely troubled about or explained as a child does."

Isabel uncovered her face and regarded the girl gravely. Ada returned the look.

"I once asked you," the latter continued, in a lower voice, and with hurried utterance, "to tell me something about myself - how I came to be living with you. You only tell me that I was an orphan. Am I ever to know more?"

"I cannot tell you more than was told to me," Isabel replied coldly. "When I myself sought an explanation of Mr. Clarendon's will, Mr. Ledbury, one of the trustees, for answer put into my hands two papers. One was a formal letter addressed to Mr. Clarendon, and signed 'Marian Warren,' in which the writer said that she consented

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to her child Ada being given into Mr. Clarendon's care, and renounced all authority over the child henceforth. The other was a certificate of the same child's birth; the parents' names, Henry and Marian Warren. That, as you know, is how you are described in the will. My solicitor made inquiries for me. Your mother was found to be a widow; her husband had been dead not quite a year."

She paused, then added in the same distant way, but with a softer voice:

"I know nothing more, Ada."

"Not whether my mother still lives or not?"

"No. If you wish to seek further, it is to Mr. Ledbury, I suppose, that you must apply. I am not in personal communication with him, but I can give you his address."

"Will you kindly do so now, then we shall not need to speak of this again."

Ada wrote it as it was spoken. Then they both sat in silence, Ada playing with her pencil. When Mrs. Clarendon rose the girl did not at once seem to notice it; but Isabel remained standing before her, and Ada, rising at length, stood with averted face. Isabel spoke:

"Only one word more, Ada. We will not speak again of my duties, but I think you will admit that I have certain rights. Will you promise me that I shall not be left in ignorance of any - any step of importance that you may take - anything you may do that - selfishly speaking - could affect my own position?"

"That is clearly your right," was the answer. "There is no need to ask me for such a promise."

Isabel bowed her head and passed from the room, Ada standing with her face still averted, a nervous tension in her whole frame. They were no nearer to each other for this scene, ending in humiliation which was mutual though differently felt.

CHAPTER IX

Here are portions of two letters written by Bernard Kingcote to correspondents in London. The first is to his friend Gabriel, the artist.

"... There is no doubt about its being a mistake, but what step that I have hitherto taken in my life of nine-and-twenty years has been anything else? Whether I act on impulse or after grave deliberation, is all one. You prophesied that I should be miserable in three months; it was a generous limit. I have been here three months, and have been miserable already for two. The idea of this kind of life for a permanency was as absurd as most other ideas which I embrace in splenetic moods. The serious thing is that circumstances seem conspiring to keep me here; I am considerably poorer than when I came, and the possibility of returning to live in London grows dubious. And why should I return? I have as little business there as here.

"I believe I had a thought in coming to this cottage, something more definite than the mere revolt of weariness with old conditions. It ran in my head something like this. If I was such a superlatively bilious and contumacious being, if life refused to present to me any feature by which I might clutch it, if eating my heart out appeared to be the sole occupation which I pursued unremittingly, surely there must be some discoverable reason of all this, must be some explanation of myself to be got at by diligent search. It struck me that in absolute solitude, in the remoteness of a corner of the world such as this, I might perchance have it out with myself, grip myself by the throat as it were, and force a confession of my own secret. There in London I was too closely guarded by habits, occupations, prejudices, conventional modes of thought; the truth would not be uncovered. Perhaps an utter change of conditions would make me clearer-brained, more capable of discerning the powers at work in me, of discovering whether there was not some compromise with life still possible. This was not unreasonable, it seems to me, and indeed I persuade myself that one or two points have come out where before was nothing but darkness. Unfortunately, to formulate my needs is not the same thing as to satisfy them, and satisfaction being as remote as ever, I fear I am not much advanced.

"I pass my days in a dream, which too often becomes a nightmare. It is very likely you are right, and that with every day thus spent I only grow more incapable of activity, instead of making advance by a perception of what I could and ought to do. I find myself regarding with a sort of dull amazement every species of active and creative work. A childish wonder at the commonest things besets me. For example, I fall a-thinking on this cottage in which I live, speculating as to who may have originally built it; and then it strikes me as curious that I dwell beneath its roof, waking and sleeping, with such complete confidence, taking for granted that the workmanship was good, the material sound; no flaw here or there which will some day bring the timbers down upon my head. It leads me on to architecture in general; I ponder on huge edifices, and stand aghast before the skill and energy embodied in them. In them, and in all the results of the world's work. The sum of human endeavour weighs upon me, something monstrous, inexplicable. I try to realise the motive force which can have brought about such results, and come only to the despairing conclusion that I am not as other men, that I lack the primal energies of human life. You and your ceaseless striving come before me: I marvel. What is it that drives you on? What oestrus possesses you? What keeps your brain resolute and your hand firm?

"I buy a newspaper now and then. You cannot imagine how strangely those world-echoes impress me. The sage gravity of leading articles, the momentousness of this or that piece of news, the precision of reports, the advertisements, - is it I who am moonstruck, or the living puppets that play in this astonishing comedy? Once or twice I have been so overcome with a perception of ludicrousness as to fall back in my chair and make the roof ring with laughter.

". . . A favourite walk is up to the old entrenchments on the Downs, six or seven miles away. They are of præ-Saxon times, I am told, points of desperate resistance by the aboriginal people against vaguely-named invaders, scenes of battle whereof no spear-clang echoes in the pages of history. I like to lie on the ground and dream myself into realisation of those old struggles, to make the fight a present fact, and hear the cries of victory and death. *They* were in earnest! If one could have lived in such times, when the conditions of life were frankly bestial, and every man's work was clear before him, not a doubt to begin with, so no regret in the end! One would have been dead so long since, resting so long.

"... I delight in the conditions of rustic life as it exists here about me. At times I talk with a farm-labourer, for my solace; to do so I have to divest myself of the last rag of civilisation, to strip my mind to its very kernel. Were oxen suddenly endowed with speech they would utter themselves even as these peasants do so and no otherwise. The absence of any hint of townish Radicalism is a joy to me; I had not expected to find the old order so undisturbed. Squire and parson are still the objects of unshaken reverence. It is not beautiful, but how wholesome! If only the schoolmaster could be kept away; if only progress would work its evil will on the children of the slums, and leave these worthy clodhoppers in their ancient peace! They are happy; they look neither before nor after, for them the world has no history, the morrow no futile aspirations; their county is the cosmos, and around it still flow the streams of ocean. Local charity abounds; in the cottages there is no hunger, no lack of clothing. Oh, leave them alone, leave them alone! Would I had been born one of these, and had never learned the half knowledge which turns life sour!

"But I have news for you. I have lunched at Knightswell, and in a manner have made acquaintance with Mrs. Clarendon. She astonished me by presenting herself at my cottage door, holding in her hand a book which I had left by chance out in a field, and which had been shown her by the finder. Here was condescension! However, she spoke to me with extreme friendliness, seemed anxious to know more of me, asked me at once to lunch. I went, and was alone for a couple of hours with her and Miss Warren. The latter is as cold and hard as I expected to find her; intellectual, I should fancy, but in the way one does not desire in a woman. She says disagreeably sharp things in precisely the most disagreeable manner. It puzzles me to imagine the kind of life those two lead together, or what may be the explanation of their living together at all. I fancy the Vissians know all about it, but their loyalty to the Lady of Knightswell is magnificent. I am sure they would not feel justified in uttering a word about her private concerns, in however harmless a fashion.

"Mrs. Clarendon is to me a new type of woman - new, that is, in actual observation. She is a woman of the world; perhaps even a worldly woman. I was never before on terms of friendly intercourse with her like, and she interests me extremely. She is beautiful, and has every external grace, I should think, wherewith woman can be endowed; but I am disposed to think her cold. I mean she does not seem to me capable of passion; probably she never loved any one.

About her husband - dead for twelve years - I can learn nothing; her marriage with him was most likely one of convenience. At all events she lives in joyous widowhood; enough to show - all things considered - that her nature is very placid. The kind of woman, no doubt, who appreciates this freedom and realises no disadvantages attendant upon it. Another conclusion I have arrived at is, that her charm has gained in the course of years; she is more delightful now than she was in her girlhood, it may be, even more beautiful. This is mere assumption, of course; but warrantable, I think. It may come of my distaste for young girls. I never met one who did not seem to me artificial, shallow, illiberal, frivolous, radically selfish. A girl's ignorance of the world is portentous, the natural result of her education; and it is only with knowledge of the world that sweetness and charity and steadfastness develop. Heaven preserve me from falling in love with a young girl who still has her first man's heart to break!

"Her charm is, I think, largely unconscious. I mean, though she must know that she is charming - how many must have told her so! - she does not appear to use the quality as another would. What strikes one from the first is her frankness, her exquisite openness. She seems to speak to you from her heart, to conceal nothing. Of course it may very well be that there is nothing to conceal, that her life is on the surface, that she displays at once the whole of a being which has no complexity. Still, I do not rate her so poorly. Though she is anything but intellectual, her mind has delicacy and activity; her judgments of people are probably not wide of the mark. Then her tenderness, she shows it in every glance; and her bright, free gladness. A woman to the tips of her fingers, a womanly woman - everything that Miss Warren, for instance, is not. In fact, the latter's presence throws Mrs. Clarendon's womanliness into relief. Mrs. Clarendon will henceforth be to me the type of perfectly sweet womanhood.

"Of course, her interest in me is a mere freak. She is at a loss for entertainment now and then at Knightswell - for, alas! she does not read - and the discovery of a curious creature like myself is a source of amusement. I do not flatter myself that anything like friendship between us is possible; social distance would hinder that, if nothing else. She was kind in her manner, kinder than I can at all convey to you, and, I am sure, with complete sincerity; it is her nature to let her light shine on all, to be sweet and gracious to every one with whom she comes in contact. If, indeed, I thought friendship were attainable, I would pursue it as the main end of my existence. Her presence

refreshes me, her talk is like the ripple of cool waters, her smile makes its healing way to all the hidden wounds of my wretched being. But I dare not hope for more than she gives to hundreds of others, calling them friends. She will exhaust my novelty, she will find my talk wearisome - great heavens! is it worse than that she listens to in her drawing-room in London? - she will pass on her way and leave me with a memory as of a cool, delicious summer day.

"Why should she enjoy life as she does? Why is there given to her this calm, this happy grace, the freedom from apprehension, regret, desire? I have written thus praisingly of her, and yet I could unpack my heart of a whole burden of fierce, and injurious, and reproachful words when I compare her existence with mine. Could not I, too, be gently gracious to all and sundry if I had wherewith to keep my soul from the bitterness of hunger? How easy to cultivate a charm of manner when every need is so waited upon with fruition! How easy to be sweetly placid when nature has spared you the abiding of a furious passion in your heart of hearts! I shall see as little of her as may be. She breaks my sleepy habit, and reminds me of things I want to forget.

". . . Oh! I am weary of this solitude, this daily sameness of empty life. My books are no comfort; I can no longer interest myself in what is really so precious to me; the chiming of sweet words is a burden to my ear. I have no will; mere whims make a plaything of me. When I have dragged my chain to the limit of the day, I lie down in miserable anticipation of what waits me on the morrow, whether I shall rise to an hour or two of resigned quiet, or in dull wretchedness, which makes me curse the return of the sun; the fate which tortures me will choose. If I had but something to distract my thoughts. What I would give for the feeblest novel in red or blue back which lies to-day on the library counter, smelling sweet from the press. Anything, so that it were new, so that it spoke to me of men and women who are at this moment looking into the eyes of destiny, even as I am. Those old writers, who have so long ago solved the problem and gone to their rest, burden me with their unconscious gravity; their time-tested wisdom goads me to peevishness. What to them the present anguish which makes my life a disease? Nay, what to any one, what to you, long-enduring friend, who go your way to join hands with the immortals?"

The other letter, written on the same day, is to his sister, Mrs. Jalland.

"I suffer in your distress, dear Mary, and would that I could do more to help you. We have drifted so far from each other that it is difficult for me to try to comfort you with words; to my own ear they sound inefficient, and to you they would come much like mockery. In truth, no one of us poor mortals has it in his power to heal another's wounds; in our suffering we can only look forward to the end of all things.

"I cannot grieve with you at your husband's ill-health, that you know; but neither shall I speak words of him that would pain you. I hold no man responsible for his deeds in this world; we all act and refrain from acting as fate will have it, and to rail against fate will not, I fear, avail us much. It's good, however, that the children are well and happy; they, I doubt not, are often a solace to you. I suppose they are much grown and changed since I saw them. Do not grieve, dear sister, that you are unable to give them the kind of education you would desire. Of no greater unkindness can parents be guilty than to train as if for a life of leisure children whose lot will inevitably be to earn a livelihood by day-long toil. It is to sow in them the seeds of despair. Do not heed the folly of those who say that culture is always a blessing; the truth is that, save under circumstances favourable to its enjoyment and extension, it is an unmitigated curse. Had I children, I would have them taught just enough to aid them in such craft or trade as a man without means could put them to. It is no reason for lament that you have not books to put into their hands, rather be glad that they are thus saved from drinking of a well which for them would be poisoned. I give you this counsel in saddest sincerity. What seems to you now cruelty, will hereafter prove to have been the best.

"And now for the only way in which I can aid you. I have written to R—, asking him to sell for me, as soon as possible, a certain number of my shares, and this money I will gladly send you as soon as it is in my hands. I suppose it is necessary to speak of the matter to your husband, though I wish that could be avoided. It will help you out of immediate embarrassments, and leave you at peace for a little while. But — well, why should I hesitate to tell you frankly, Mary? I shall henceforth have an income of something less than sixty pounds a year. I do not mean that this involves hardship; for me, nothing of the kind. But I do not well see how I can draw further upon the principal and still be able to live. It is less probable than ever that I shall find a way of earning my own living, unless I bring myself to the point of abandoning civilisation, and going to work with my

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hands in some other part of the world. I have no doubt that would be the very best thing for me, the gulf once crossed. Yet it would be a hard thing to leave you alone, struggling in that inferno; in truth, I could not bring myself to do that. Imagine you left with your children, and not a friend to turn to! Poor girl! that would be more than I could bear to think of.

“I write to the address you have given me. Do you fear to receive my letters at home?”

CHAPTER X

The rectory was at all times open to Kingcote. Mr. Vissian welcomed him as the only man within reach who could talk on congenial topics; Mrs. Vissian liked him personally, and for the sake of the romantic stories which she wove about him in her imagination. To Percy Vissian he had become an object of a child's affectionate regard, as well as of the reverence which attaches to men of mystery. Percy not infrequently made his way to the cottage, but never outlived that fairy-tale sensation with which he had first crossed its threshold. That Kingcote lived here absolutely alone, that he passed nights in the dread solitude of this ivy-wrapped cell, that he had nothing to do but to read the books which contained such deep and wondrous things, invested him in the child's eyes with something of the unearthliness of a wizard. Anything but a youngster of boisterous instincts, Percy moved about in the cottage with the gravest gait; as he never went up the dim, narrow staircase, there still remained a portion of the abode of which his fancy was free to make what it would, and it often seemed to him that a strange light footfall came to his ears from the floor above. He would not have ventured to ask about this, which in truth was only the product of his excited imagination. When he had tea with his friend everything tasted to him quite differently from the flavours of home; the mere bread became cake - he munched dry pieces with a strange relish, and the milk did not come from ordinary cows. But his great delight was when, after such a meal, he settled himself on his uncomfortable chair and saw Kingcote preparing to read to him. Often the reading was of English poetry, and that was enjoyable; but better still was when the wizard took down one of those books of which the mere character suggested magic lore - a German book, and, turning it into free English, read a tale of Tieck, or Musäus, or Grimm, or Bechstein, or Hauff. Then did the child's face glow with attention, his features become elf-like with the stirring of phantasy; and, when Kingcote ceased, he would move with a deep sigh and peer curiously about the room. He would beg to be allowed to look at these volumes for himself, touching the pages with delicate finger, spelling here and there a word and asking its meaning. There was a book of German ballads, plentifully illustrated, and over these pictures the boy was never tired of musing. Percy Vissian owed not a little to his friend for these afternoons at Wood End.

With the elder people Kingcote's intimacy was not one of unrestrained confidence, though it only fell short of it by that degree which marks the superficiality of most friendships. For instance, he never felt tempted to speak to Mrs. Vissian, even after months of familiar intercourse, as he had spoken to Isabel Clarendon in their first conversation. The bright little woman did not exercise a compelling power upon his inner self, as Isabel had already done. There was much mutual kindness between them, and, it might be, as nearly a genuine friendship as is possible between man and woman; for such association gains in completeness only at the loss of the characteristics which justify it for friendship's name. Mrs. Vissian showed this supreme wisdom, of never offering sympathy. It was by no means always with a conventionally smooth face that Kingcote came into her presence; at times he sat in her parlour, a picture of wretchedness, and scarcely answered when she spoke to him. For to Kingcote there came more of misery than of consolation from the aspect of this gentle peaceful home; often enough he was stirred to bitterness by the sight of this perfect content, this ideal domesticity, this sweet assuagement of the evils of life; the contrast with his own position was not fruitful of soothing. When he sat with her in that state of mind Mrs. Vissian seemed not to perceive it, or at most uttered a light word about low spirits. Of course she thought a good deal about it, but the blessed wisdom of content was strong in her, and not even by a look did she display special interest.

Mr. Vissian himself was amusing. His bibliomania and kindred interests never for an instant lost their hold upon him. When Kingcote once asked whether he did not at times weary of such things, the rector stared in amazement. The study was not the only room in which precious books were stored; upstairs was a chamber packed almost solidly with volumes, old and new. Mr. Vissian boasted that he knew every book in the mass, and could at any time make his way to any he desired to consult; it was only a matter of excavation. One slight anxiety his collection cost him; the upper walls of the house had begun to show rather large cracks, and it was possible that eventually the burden of literature would bring the roof down. But that was a risk which must take its place in the ordinary count of human contingencies. The rector subscribed to a considerable number of literary societies: the "Shakespeare," the "Chaucer," the "Early English Text," and others of the kind, receiving their publications and having them duly bound for a place on shelves in some commodious dwelling of the future. In the course of talk over such things, Kingcote was by chance enlightened as to

the meaning of that little incident which had struck him in his very first interview with Mr. Vissian - the latter's momentary doubt, or seeming doubt, whether he could produce the money which was requested. Kingcote discovered that his friend lived in perpetual pecuniary embarrassment. Mrs. Vissian exercised control over her husband's expenditure to the point of preventing its exceeding their income, but that was all. The quarterly cheque was invariably demanded by outstanding liabilities as soon as it arrived, and unfortunately the cheque was not a very large one. It often happened that neither the rector nor his wife had half a sovereign in the world, a singular state of things in so otherwise orderly a household. In lending Kingcote that sovereign they had just then left themselves literally penniless. Fortunately the cheque was due. Mrs. Vissian dreaded the arrival of a bookseller's second-hand catalogue; whenever it was possible, she intercepted all such, and mercilessly committed them to the flames. Yet the subject never occasioned a moment's trouble between husband and wife; Mr. Vissian pursued his course in calmness. He was working (as a volunteer, of course) for a great English dictionary, which a certain society had it in view to produce. Also, he had taken up the new ideas of textual criticism in Elizabethan literature, and spent hours in counting the syllables in each line of a scene of this or the other dramatist. Though such a placid little man, he revelled in literary horrors. It delighted him to read aloud ghastly scenes from Webster, dwelling with gusto on the forceful utterances. Withal his orthodoxy was unimpeachable, it never occurred to him to carry his criticism into Biblical spheres. To please him, Kingcote now and then attended his services; naturally there was no further discussion on religious topics between the two.

As October drew on, and evenings began to be dark and cold, the comfort of Mr. Vissian's study and of his wife's sitting-room assuredly lost nothing in the eyes of the hermit of Wood End, yet his visits became less frequent. He presented himself, however, about nine o'clock one night, and was received by Mrs. Vissian with the usual friendliness. The rector was expected home every moment.

It had been raining all day, and the temperature justified the first fire, which crackled merrily and made the bright little room look cheerier than ever. The table was laid for supper (the Vissians dined at one o'clock) and a pleasant odour as of toasted cheese took advantage of the door being ajar to creep insidiously about the room. Mrs. Vissian sat with her feet on a stool, mending a pair of Percy's stockings.

"You look tired," she said, as Kingcote sat in silence and watched her out of half-closed eyes.

"I am, a little. I have been walking."

"But in this dreadful rain?"

"Has it rained? I don't think I noticed it."

Mrs. Vissian regarded him for an instant with surprise, then laughed a little, and bent over her work. Her left hand and arm were thrust into the stocking, and she held her head sideways, observing the growth of her darning with a kind of artistic earnestness and pleasure. A small black cat, which had just come in licking its mouth, put its fore feet on to the stool and looked up into its mistress's face. The fire crackled, and a sound of clattered plates came from the kitchen. Then was heard another sound, that of the rector's latch-key at the front door. Mrs. Vissian quickly put down her work, and, with a bright look, went from the room.

Kingcote gripped the arm of his chair and uttered a low moan.

"Ha, well met!" exclaimed the rector, as, after divesting himself of a wet overcoat, he entered, flicking his black trousers with his handkerchief and dubiously regarding his boots. His cheeks, as always, were aglow with health and spirits; on his whiskers gleamed drops of rain. He stood with his back to the fire, and passed his finger round between collar and neck, a habit of his which always seemed to give him ease. "I have a message for you —"

The servant entered with a tray of savoury viands. The rector broke off in his speech to regard the goods which the gods were providing; he did so with a critical, yet a satisfied, eye.

"A message for *me*?" Kingcote asked indifferently.

"Ha, yes!" Mr. Vissian had been led off into a different train of thought, it seemed. "Mrs. Clarendon wants you to go to see her."

"Indeed!"

Isabel Clarendon

"Where did you meet her, dear?" Mrs. Vissian inquired, as she bundled away her work in preparation for the meal.

"She's going to sit through the night with Mrs. Stigard. I shall be surprised if the poor old woman lives till morning; ten to one I shall be sent for Lucy," he added, as if a semi-conscious process of reflection had just come to clear issue in his mind, "that parcel for the binder is still lying upstairs. I saw it this morning with amazement; thought it had gone a week ago."

"I'll see to it, dear," replied his wife, without looking up from the bread she was cutting. Pity it has been forgotten."

"Forgotten! And you, who never forget anything!"

Then, turning to Kingcote, he declaimed, with humorous gesture and emphasis:

"Brother Cosroe, I find myself aggrieved,
Yet insufficient to express the same,
For it requires a great and thundering speech!"

"By-the-bye," he continued, as he poured out a glass of ale from the foam-capped jug, it's beyond all doubt that Grubb is wrong in his calculation. He says, you remember, that the proportion of unstoppt lines in the 'Two Gentlemen' is one in eleven. Now I make it one in nine decimal fifteen, and I've been over it twice with the utmost care. This is a point of considerable importance. Take that chair, Kingcote."

"Thank you," Kingcote said, "I shall not eat."

"Why not? There's pippins and cheese to come. Then, at least, as Claudius said to the chickens, drink."

Kingcote declined, in spite of much hospitable pressure, and kept his arm-chair. Mr. Vissian applying himself to his supper, talked in intervals of mastication.

"Mrs. Clarendon wishes you to call tomorrow or next day; pray do so. I can't quite make out that mistake of Grubb's; he must have calculated from an edition in which the lines are differently

arranged. I shall communicate with him. Lucy, my love, I beg of you to see that those books are dispatched the first thing to-morrow; the dilatory scoundrel always keeps me waiting, and there's a 'Cursor Mundi' I want to work at."

Kingcote suddenly rose and stepped to Mrs. Vissian to bid her good night.

"Going, what?" exclaimed the rector, turning round, with an end of his napkin in each hand. "But I wanted to ask your opinion about — You don't look well, my dear fellow; what is it?"

"Nothing, nothing. I've tired myself with walking. I'll get home."

"You have an umbrella? Then you must take one of mine. But, I tell you, you must; it's raining like a waterspout. Shall I walk with you?"

Kingcote had gone off into the darkness with inaudible replies.

"What is the matter with him?" asked the rector, standing in surprise. "Is he going to be ill? An awkward look-out in that cottage, with not a soul near."

"He was very strange when he came," Mrs. Vissian remarked. "He said he'd been walking, and yet wasn't aware that it had rained."

"Wasn't aware? Curious fellow, Kingcote."

"Don't you think, Walter, there's something about him we don't understand - something in the circumstances of his life, I mean?"

"A good deal. But he's a thoroughly good fellow; I must look in at Wood End the first thing in the morning."

They resumed their seats.

"Lucy," observed the rector, "you are blooming to-night! Upon my word, every year makes you younger and more beautiful."

"What makes you think of such a thing just now?" asked the other, laughing as she shook her head.

"I don't know. I suppose half the joy of happiness comes of contrast with others' less fortunate lot."

"Oh, I don't like to think that, Walter," protested the wife rather sadly.

"Many things are true, my dear, which we don't like to think."

Lucy moved to reach something, and took the occasion to kiss her husband's forehead.

And Kingcote, plodding through the lane's mud, reached his door. The old oak-stump in front of the cottage stood like a night-fear; the copse behind, all but stripped of leaves, gave forth dismal whisperings; rain beat hard upon the roof-thatch. The tenant took the key from his pocket and entered the cold room; he could not see his hands. Without seeking any light he felt his way up the crazy stairs, and lay down to such rest as he might find.

It rained till noon of the following day, then began to clear. When a couple of hours of pale sunshine had half dried the hedges, Kingcote set forth to walk to Knightswell. Mr. Vissian had been as good as his word in calling.

"Oh, nothing; a headache," was the answer he received to his anxious inquiries. "I hope I wasn't more than usually ill-mannered; pray ask Mrs. Vissian, to try and tolerate me."

"You're getting a little low, it strikes me; too much solitude. By-the-bye, you'll look in at Knightswell this afternoon?"

"I suppose Mrs. Clarendon feels obliged to ask me; I dare say she'd rather I kept away."

"My dear sir, these are outcomes of the black humour; you are not yourself. Mrs. Clarendon will be very glad indeed to see you; so she assured me. I pray you, fight against this tendency to melancholia."

It was difficult to reach the gates without having previously collected considerably more mud than one cares to convey into a lady's drawing-room. Kingcote endeavoured to remove some of this

superfluous earth as he walked up the drive by rubbing his boots in the wet grass; the result was not inspiring.

"Pooh!" he exclaimed impatiently. "If she really cares to see me, she won't regard the state of my boots; any one who accepts such as I am, must take mud and all."

The thought appeared to amuse him, he walked on with a laugh.

As he entered the garden, he met the trap just driving away from the house. A gentleman was seated in it. He had rather the look of a man of business, and was reading a letter. He scanned Kingcote, then resumed his reading.

Disturbed with the thought that there might be other visitors in the house, Kingcote hesitated, doubted whether to go on. He made up his mind to do so, however, not without sundry fresh communings with himself of a bitter kind. On inquiry he found that Mrs. Clarendon was at home, and, after a moment in the hall, he was led to the dining-room. Mrs. Clarendon was writing letters at a table by the window; as she rose, he thought he detected annoyance on her face.

"I fear I disturb you," he said coldly.

"You don't at all; or rather, you will not, if you'll let me treat you as a friend. I have just one letter I am obliged to write; I asked the servant to bring you here, thinking you might like to look at the pictures till I have done. One or two are thought good, I believe - that Veronese, and that Ruysdael, and the Greuze yonder. May I?"

It was hard not to smile in reply to her voice and look as she spoke the last two little words, the more so that it was clear she had something just now to trouble her quite other than the inopportune arrival of a visitor. Kingcote walked to the picture she had indicated as a Veronese, and, affecting to view it, let his eyes wander to Isabel at the writing-table. She was thinking, previous to commencing her letter. Her left arm rested on the desk, and the thumb and middle finger of the hand pressed her forehead; with the end of the penholder she tapped her chin. He noticed how beautiful was the outline of her head, relieved against the bright window; noticed, too,

Isabel Clarendon

the grace of her neck when she bent forward to write. The scratching of her pen - she wrote very rapidly - was the only sound in the room.

Kingcote went from picture to picture, his mind not quite tuned to judge and enjoy their merits. One, however, held him. When lunching here, he had sat with his back to the wall of which this canvas was the central ornament, so had not observed it. It was a portrait of Mrs. Clarendon, painted probably at the time of her marriage, an excellent picture. As he gazed at it, Isabel came forward.

"Do you recognise it?" she asked, tapping on one hand with the letter she held in the other.

"Without doubt."

"And moralise? But," she added quickly, "I want you to look at this child's head. Isn't it exquisitely sweet?"

His eyes wandered back to the portrait, and, on their way to the door, he again paused before it.

"Did I show you my ferns the last time you were here?" Isabel asked. "Will you walk so far?"

She led to the rear of the hall, thence, by a glass door, into a short glass-roofed passage, the door at the end of which opened into the conservatory. The first section was a small rotunda, twenty feet in diameter and twelve feet high. The floor was of unglazed tiles, the ceiling of ornamental stucco; round the wall was a broad cushioned seat, above which, commencing at a height of some four feet from the ground, were windows of richly coloured glass, pictured with leaves and flowers and fruit. A stand for plants occupied the centre, but at present the shelves were almost bare.

Mrs. Clarendon threw back one of the windows.

"There is a good view from here," she said. "A tree used to intercept it, but we had it cut down in the spring to clear a piece of ground for tennis."

Isabel Clarendon

From the hill, on which the house was built, a broad stretch of green park led the eye to a considerable distance in the direction of Salcot. The roof of the cottage at Wood End was just visible. Kingcote drew attention to it.

"I don't see any smoke from the chimney," Mrs. Clarendon remarked, with a pleasant glance. "It is to be hoped you keep good fires this damp weather. Is the place rain-proof? These last two days will have tested it."

"It seems to be sound."

"And you still find it your ideal?"

"The cottage? I did not choose it as an ideal abode."

"But the quietness, the retirement, I mean. In that, at all events, you have not been disappointed."

"Certainly not."

Isabel shuddered.

"How you live there I can't understand. But I suppose you find it best for your studies."

"I don't study," returned Kingcote, rather vacantly, looking at the pictured glass of the window.

Isabel closed the window and passed to the next door.

"I am so sorry Miss Warren is not at home," she said. "I quite thought she would be, but at the last moment she decided to go to London to see something in the South Kensington Museum - oh, Schliemann's discoveries!"

"Does Miss Warren read Greek and Latin?"

"Latin she does, and is just beginning Greek. She's a wonderfully clever girl, but it's difficult to get her to talk. I am sure you will find

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her interesting when you have had opportunities of talking with her."

They were now in an ordinary hot-house. Isabel pointed out the plants which interested her.

"I have just had a visit from my lawyer," she said, as she plucked away some dead leaves. "What tedious people lawyers are, and so dreadfully indispensable."

"I suppose I passed him on the drive."

"No doubt. But I mustn't speak ill of the good man; he came all the way from London to save me a journey."

They moved about for a few moments in silence.

"There's nothing here to look at, really," Mrs. Clarendon said. "If I could afford it I should have the place kept in good order; but I can't."

She did not appear to notice the look of surprise which Kingcote was for a moment unable to suppress. Leading the way back to the rotunda, she placed a loose cushion and seated herself. The warmth here was temperate, not more than the season required for comfort.

"So you don't study?" she began, with friendly abruptness, when she had pointed to a place for her companion. "What, then, do you do? I am rude, you see, but - I wish to know."

"I wish I could satisfactorily account for my days. I read a little, walk a good deal, see the Vissians now and then —"

"And cultivate *ennui* - isn't it so? A most unprofitable kind of gardening. I believe you are thoroughly miserable; in fact, you are not at much pains to hide it."

"Scarcely as much as courtesy requires, you would say. I wish I could be more amusing, Mrs. Clarendon."

"I don't ask you to be amusing - only to show yourself a little amused at my impertinent curiosity. Why should you have so forgotten the habit of cheerfulness?"

"The habit?"

"Certainly. Is it not a habit, as long as we are in health?"

"In people happily endowed, I suppose. Temperament and circumstances may enable one to keep a bright view of life."

"Rather, a reasonable effort of the will, I should say. I am often tempted to be dreary, but I refuse to give way."

Kingcote smiled, almost laughed.

"You think I have nothing to be dreary about?" she asked, gazing at him as if trying to read his thoughts. "That is a mistake; I don't speak idly. It would be excusable enough if I lost my cheerfulness. But with me it *is* a habit. Under any circumstances there's a great deal of entertainment to be got out of life. Of course, if one puts oneself under the most unfavourable conditions - goes to live in a remote hermitage, shuts oneself from social comforts, reads doleful books about funeral urns —"

She caught his eye, and broke off with bright laughter.

"You don't care for Sir Thomas Browne?" he asked.

"I shouldn't be honest if I said I did. I am afraid that kind of reading is beyond me. Ada - Miss Warren - enjoys it; but she is intellectual, and I cannot pretend to be."

"What do you read, Mrs. Clarendon?"

"The newspapers, and now and then a novel - *voilà tout!*"

"There are better things than books," observed Kingcote.

A footstep was heard in the inner house.

Isabel Clarendon

"Is that you, Reuben?" the lady called, causing the gardener to put his head through the door with the admission, "It be me, ma'am."

She exchanged words with him, then proposed to Kingcote that they should go to the drawing-room for tea. On their way she paused in the hall, with talk about the panelling. Pointing to a fox's head:

"A trophy of last season. We killed that day, a couple of fields behind Wood End."

Tea appeared in a few minutes. As Isabel poured out two cups, her guest made a feint of closely examining a framed photograph of Knightswell, which stood on the table. He was less at his ease than on the tiled floor of the conservatory; the dried mud upon his boots showed brutally against the dark carpet, disposing him to savage humorousness. He became aware that the beverage was silently held out to him. Her own cup in hand, Mrs. Clarendon reclined in her chair, and gradually her eyes fixed themselves upon him. He was conscious of the look before he returned it, and, speaking at length, did so as if in reply to a question, though himself interrogative.

"Did you ever visit a London hospital?"

Isabel manifested no surprise; her face had even a quiet smile of satisfaction.

"Yes," she answered. "I once went to see a servant in St. Thomas's."

"Ah, I was studying there - let me see, six years ago. My father was a medical man, and determined that I should be the same. At his death I gave it up; I hadn't finished my course."

"It was not to your taste?"

"I loathed it. My bad dreams are still of hospital wards and dissecting-rooms. I cannot bear to see the word 'hospital' in print. The experience of those years has poisoned my life, as thoroughly as a slip of the lancet would have poisoned my blood."

"Had you that dislike from the commencement?" Isabel asked, after putting down her empty cup, and crossing her hands on her lap with an air of attention.

"No, not in the same degree. I thought this profession would do as well as another. I believe I even had philanthropic glows now and then, and perhaps even a period of scientific interest. The latter did not survive the steps from theory to practice; the former —"

He made a motion with his hand, and smiled.

"The very last thing I should ever have associated with you," remarked Isabel, with puzzled thoughtfulness.

"A philanthropic zeal?"

"I didn't mean that, but I am not sure that I mayn't include it. Please go on."

Kingcote was resting his forehead on his palm; he resumed without raising his eyes.

"My father practised at Norwich - by-the-bye, our friend, Sir Thomas Browne's city. When he died, I went to live with my mother for a while; my sister had just married and gone to London and a sister of my father's shared our house. I thought of all sorts of things - law, literature (of course), even commerce. For I had a small capital - some shares in a joint-stock bank; they gave me a sufficient income, and I could realise when I needed. For a year I made plans; then of a sudden I found myself in Paris. You know the Continent?"

"I was in the Riviera for a month, some years ago," Isabel answered, without interest. "I can't afford to go abroad now."

It was the second time she had used this phrase. Kingcote watched her countenance.

"What took you to Paris?" she inquired, ignoring the diversion.

"Nothing. I was turning over an old Bradshaw, and details of the journey caught my eye. Next morning I left Norwich. I was abroad two years."

"In France all the time?"

"No. France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy. Perhaps I saw the countries all the better for the necessity I was under of travelling very cheaply - so cheaply, indeed, I wonder how I did it. I walked oftener than rode, and dispensed with hotel dinners whenever possible. I have a diary of the two years' travel."

"You will let me read that?" Isabel asked quietly.

He hesitated; his eyes fixed absently on the windows.

"Yes, I will let you read it. It is foolish, boyish; I dare not read it myself."

"For what reason?"

"Because there is nothing I hold more in horror than the ghost of my former self. I deny identity," he added with sudden bitterness. "How can one be held responsible for the thoughts and acts of the being who bore his name years ago? The past is no part of our existing self; we are free of it, it is buried. That release is the pay Time owes us for doing his work."

Isabel regarded him earnestly; her cheek gathered a warmer hue for a moment.

"You may read it if you care to," he resumed, falling back to calmness. "There is no one else to whom I would show it."

Isabel waited for him to continue. He sat, bent forward, his hands about one knee.

"And you returned to England with plans?" she asked at length, finding him persevere in silence.

"No, only with experience. I came back because I had news of my mother's illness. She was dead and buried before I got home."

"It strikes me as curious," he resumed rapidly, "that my childhood, boyhood in fact, has utterly gone from my memory. I suppose that is why I have such slight sympathy with children. I have often tried desperately to recover the consciousness of my young days: it has

gone. My father, my mother, I cannot recall their relations to me, nor mine to them. Nay, facts even have left my memory. I know scarcely anything before the beginning of my student years, and even those are vanishing, I find. I live only in the present."

"But the future?"

"No, from looking forward I shrink as much as from looking back."

There was another silence.

"But since you returned to England?" Isabel inquired, "have you never thought of another profession?"

Kingcote laughed.

"I had crazy projects for studying art. Gabriel put that into my head. But my zeal did not last. It is the same in everything; I lack persistence."

"And you have —"

"Done nothing, you would say," Kingcote supplied in the pause she made. "Literally nothing; wasted my time, lost my best years. The necessary consequence of being made up of *wants*, without the powers which could satisfy them. At present I am engaged in the first work I have done for years."

"At last, then!" Isabel exclaimed.

"Yes, the work of resigning myself to being nothing, of casting off the last foolish flattery of self-conceit, of resolutely bidding myself understand that fate will bear any amount of idle fuming and remain unchanged. It is a task which has its difficulties; rather harder, on the whole, than the realisation of death. Did you ever force yourself to realise death, not to admit it in idle words, but to —"

Isabel motioned him to silence; her face was darkened with a look of pain, of fear.

"Forgive me," he said in a lower voice; "to me it is such a familiar thought. I talk so seldom that I forget the difference between reflection and conversation."

She spent a moment in clearing her mind of the disturbing thought - it seemed strangely disturbing, and at length banished it with the laugh occasioned by a new idea.

"I wonder," she said, changing her attitude, "what you —"

"You were going to say —?"

"You spoke of having thought of commerce. Suppose you had become a man of mess, and had made your fortune, what would your views of life be?"

"Who can say? To begin with, I should only have ruined myself; no fortune would ever have come in that way. Conceiving that it had, why I should not be the same person that I am. Circumstances are the mould which give shape to such metal as we happen to be made of. The metal is the same always, but it may be cast for mean or for noble uses."

"I do not think," Isabel said with gentle reassurance, "that Fate uses the nobler metals for mean service; it has abundance of the poorer stuff at hand."

"That is very well said; if I dared apply it to myself I might yet live awhile in the old fool's paradise. But there is one gain which saves my past years from utter vanity - I have learnt to know myself."

"Have you?"

Kingcote smiled.

"You say that sadly. Yes, you are quite right. Self-knowledge, in my case, is equivalent to disillusion, loss of hope."

"I meant nothing of the kind," she rejoined, after reflecting a moment on the intention of his words, which she had not at first

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quite caught. "I doubt whether you do know yourself. If you did, you would have more confidence."

"That is the kindness natural to you. But," he added, softening the words by his tone, "you do not know me."

"No - not yet. It is not easy to know you. I cannot judge you by other people."

Kingcote rose and walked to the fireplace; Mrs. Clarendon watched him, but kept her seat.

"You know many people," he said, speaking with his peculiar abruptness, which was quite different from the tone of mere familiarity, seemed indeed rather to accentuate the distance between them.

"Many," Isabel returned, "in a way."

"It must be strange to have so many acquaintances. It gives you the sense of belonging to the world; you do not stand on the outside and look on."

"In a theatre - watching from an uncomfortable back seat? The stage is open to you."

"And the parts ? Even if I were cast, think of my poor memory. The words are so hard, so artificial. At most I could play the walking gentleman, and in truth I have no mind for that."

Isabel smiled, as if involuntarily, and, after glancing round the room, quitted her seat.

"A friend is coming in a day or two to stay with me," she said; "not a mere acquaintance, but really a friend. I should like you to meet her: you won't refuse?"

He looked at her and hesitated.

"You can't help liking Mrs. Stratton. She has been my nearest friend for years."

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"I may be gone," Kingcote said, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Gone? But you have no intention of leaving?"

"Yes, a half-intention."

"To return to London?"

"I suppose so."

She kept silence, and he added:

"My sister's husband is ill. Circumstances might compel me to return."

"But you are not summoned? You won't leave your cottage unless there is a necessity?"

"Perhaps not; yet I can't be sure. I act very much on impulse."

"That phrase reminds me of some one - a very foolish young man, whom you don't at all resemble."

"Some one you know?"

"One of the many; never mind him. But you will not be gone before next Wednesday; that we may take for granted; unless, of course, you have bad news. You will come and lunch with us on Wednesday?"

"With yourself and Mrs. Stratton?"

"And Miss Warren. I want you to know her better."

"Yes, I will come, if I am still at Wood End."

He held his hand to take leave. Isabel retained it as she spoke.

"In any case you will not go without coming to say good-bye?"

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"I could not easily do that, Mrs. Clarendon."

She went with him into the hall, and, when he had left the house, watched him from the drawing-room windows till the trees intervened.

CHAPTER XI

To Mr. Vincent Lacour, issuing from the precincts of the South Kensington Museum, and about to walk towards the railway station, came the vision of a face that he knew, borne past him in a hansom cab, which in a moment stopped. It was raining slightly. Lacour used his umbrella for self-concealment, and, at the same time, contrived to watch his acquaintance descending from the vehicle. She (it was a lady) handed up her fare and passed into the Museum.

The young man invoked aloud the divinity of Jingo.

"A minute later," he continued to himself, "and we should have come face to face with her. A chance meeting, of course; why shouldn't people have met by chance? But I'm glad she didn't see us together."

A miserable, drizzly day; the sky and earth a uniform mud colour. Lacour watched his boots degenerating. He consulted his watch; it was half an hour past noon. An engagement to lunch with a friend at one stood before him; he disregarded it, and went in pursuit of the lady

"Come to see Hecuba's kitchen-pots, no doubt," he mused. "Yes, there she is! She has a good figure, seen from behind, and she always dresses well. I wonder what countenance she will show me; there's no foreseeing."

Ada Warren happened to raise her eyes, and beheld Lacour approaching, a smile of frank surprise on his handsome face. She was startled, and could not help showing it. Lacour, on the other hand, was very much at his ease, talked in a lightly facetious way of the antiquities in the case before them, now and then putting in a personal question.

"You are in town?" he asked by parenthesis.

"I am, for one day."

"I hope Mrs. Clarendon is well? Turning her thoughts, no doubt, to fox-hunting. You don't hunt, I believe? No more do I. Fortunate I haven't the taste, isn't it?"

Ada made no reply, continuing her inspection of the contents of the case, or appearing to do so. He moved a little away, as if to examine other cases, but was presently at her side again. Her curiosity seemed to be satisfied, and she let her eyes wander rather vaguely.

"Do you often come here?" she asked, as they passed from a little group of people to an uninvaded spot a few yards away. She spoke as though against her will, merely to escape from embarrassment.

"No, indeed; I am here by the merest chance, but a most happy one. I haven't much time as a rule. The weather drove me out to-day. Are you sensitive to the weather? A sky like this weighs upon me; I haven't a thought; I can't follow an argument through three successive lines. You know I'm reading law?"

"I rather thought you had left England."

He looked at her, raised his eyebrows slightly, and shook his head.

"You don't mean that you wish I had?"

"Why should I wish it?"

"I am used to that feeling in my acquaintances; they exhaust their powers of indirect emphasis in conveying to me the fact that I am *de trop*. It is refreshing to find one exception, and the one I should have desired."

Whilst speaking he took out a pocket-book, which contained loose papers; one of these he removed; but only to return it to his pocket together with the book.

"Do I bore you?" he asked, bending his head down to her with graceful expectation of her reply; "or will you let me walk on with you?"

"Is there anything you wish particularly to see?" Ada returned, still in the same mechanical way.

"Yes; I should like you to come upstairs to the pictures. You really understand art; you can help me to appreciate the right things."

She walked on without hesitation, and they spent nearly an hour in the galleries. It was as though, in consenting to accompany him, Ada had overcome an inward restraint, and was now expanding in a sense of freedom. Her face cleared, her eyes grew bright, her tongue was loosened; she talked of the pictures in a natural, easy, and sensible way, quite without self consciousness. Lacour was, as always, frankly egoistic; everything became to him a text for effusive utterance on his subjective experiences. As on a previous occasion, he spoke of the artistic instincts which made the basis of his nature, and went on to sketch a plan of æsthetic education, such as he hoped some day to carry into effect. The unctiousness of his self-flattery was irresistible; to listen was to become insensibly as interested in him as he was in himself. The mere quality of his voice was insinuating, seductive and delicately sensual, and the necessity of speaking low when strangers were at hand gave him the advantage of intimate notes and cadences. His faculty for making himself and his circumstances a source of pathetic suggestion did in fact almost amount to artistic genius; there was at times a fall in his voice which caressed the ear like certain happiest phrases in sad, simple music, and his eyes would fix themselves on a beautiful picture with an apprehension of melancholy so remote, so subtle, that to perceive its reflection was to feel a thrill on the finest chords of sympathy. Then a lighter mood would succeed, comment would take a humorous turn, not without hints of interpretation generally reserved for masculine colloquy, ambiguities which might or might not be intentional, a glancing in directions whence it is usual to avert the mental eye. At the end of the hour Ada was laughing and talking in a way quite new to her, doing her best to say clever things which yet had no point of sarcasm, even speaking a little of herself, though this was a subject upon which Lacour could not get her to dwell.

"It's a quarter to two," he exclaimed at length. "Are you not hungry?"

"I meant to lunch here; perhaps it is time."

"In that case we'll lunch together - if you permit it?"

They did so in complete good-fellowship, the only difficulty arising when Lacour desired to pay for both. Ada opposed this, and in a manner which proved her in earnest.

"You return to-night?" he asked, leaning towards her on the table when the waiter's demands had been severally met.

"To-morrow morning. I stay with friends."

"At the Meres'?" he asked quickly.

"Yes."

He fingered a bottle in the cruet-stand, his lips slightly drawn together.

"You do not know them intimately?" Ada asked, observing him.

He shook his head.

"No; they would not be interested in hearing that it was I who spoilt your purposes of study."

Ada did not reply to this, save by a slight change of countenance. Before he spoke again she saw him take an envelope from the inner pocket of his coat.

"I have something here which belongs to you," he said, "though it is not addressed. It was written a week ago, but for one or two reasons I delayed putting it in the post. Will you let me be my own postman?"

Ada had just drawn on her second glove, and was preparing to rise. She set her face in hard outlines and remained motionless, her hands on her lap.

"Won't you save me a penny?" Lacour pleaded with gravity. "Economy is essential with me: I have not concealed the fact."

Ada's lips quivered to a smile; she took the letter from where it lay on the table, and moved away without facing him. There was colour on her cheeks.

"Are you going straight to your friends?" Lacour inquired, with some difficulty coming up to her side.

"No; I have some purchases to make. I shall take a cab."

"I will get you one."

With every politeness of manner he led her from the door to the vehicle, saw her comfortably seated, gave the driver his orders, and took a silent leave. The envelope was crushed in her hand as she drove away.

Not many days later Mrs. Stratton arrived at Knightswell, bringing her youngest boy, a ten-year-old, whose absence from school was explained by recent measles. This lady was the wife of an officer at present with his regiment in Africa; her regret at the colonel's remoteness, and her anxiety on his behalf in a time of savage warfare, were tempered by that spirit of pride in things military which so strongly infuses a certain type of the British matron, destined to bring forth barbarians and heroes. At the age of forty Mrs. Stratton had four children, all boys; the two eldest were already at Woolwich and Sandhurst respectively, the third at Harrow, extracting such strategic science as Thucydides could supply, boastful of a name traceable in army lists three generations back. These four lads were offspring whereof no British matron could feel ashamed: perfect in physical development, striking straight from the shoulder, with skulls to resist a tomahawk, red-checked and hammer-fisted. In the nursery they had fought each other to the tapping of noses; at school they fought all and sundry up through every grade of pugilistic championship. From infancy they handled the fowling-piece, arid killed with the coolness of hereditary talent. Side by side they walked in quick step, as to the beating of a drum; eyes direct, as looking along a barrel, ears pricked for the millionth echo of an offensive remark. At cricket they drove cannon-balls; milder games were the target of their scorn. Admirable British youths!

"How *can* they make such a milk-sop of that child!" Mrs. Stratton exclaimed when she had renewed her acquaintance with Percy Vissian, summoned to "play with" Master Edgar Strangeways Stratton, and showing no great appreciation of the privilege.

"Percy's tastes are very quiet," Mrs. Clarendon explained. "He likes reading more than anything else."

"What does he read? I'll examine him.. Come here, Percy?" she called; the two ladies were on the lawn, and the boys at a little distance.

Percy looked round and prepared to walk towards Mrs. Stratton, but the other boy suddenly caught his two arms, pinned them behind his back, and ran him violently over the grass.

"Gently, Edgar, gently," said his mother, smiling reproof. Little Percy stood red and flustered, ashamed at a personal indignity, as children with brains are wont to be.

"Percy," interrogated Mrs. Stratton, "when was the battle of Inkerman fought?"

The lad shook his head, regarding Mrs. Clarendon appealingly.

"Don't be ashamed, Percy," said the latter, holding to him her hand. "I'm sure *I* couldn't say."

"You couldn't? Ah-yah!" shrieked Edgar Stratton, flinging up his cap and leaping to catch it. He was a fat, bullet-headed boy, generally red as a boiled lobster, supple as an eel.

"Well, you tell us," ventured Percy, emboldened by the grasp of Isabel's hand.

"Think I can't, you silly? - Fifth of November, 1854; began at seven o'clock in the morning. For three hours eight thousand British infantry supported the attack of forty thousand muffs of Russians. Wish I'd been there, don't I just! Four English generals were killed and four wounded."

"He knows all the battles like that," remarked his mother with pride.

She was a short, dark woman, growing rather stout, and with no very graceful walk; her face was attractive, and constantly wore a smile; she dressed with extreme elegance. In converse she displayed a heartiness and independence which were a little too masculine; her hand-clasp was a direct invitation to free companionship, and her manner suggested a rejection of soft treatment on the score of her sex. The military gentlemen with whom she associated spoke of her "pluck"; she was capable, they said, of leading a charge of cavalry; and indeed to see her in the hunting-field was to realise in a measure the possibility. Fearlessness is generally equivalent to lack of imagination, and in Mrs. Stratton's case the connection was clearly established, but on this very account she was admirable in the discharge of many distinctly feminine duties. In an accident, a sudden calamity, her steadiness of nerve was only matched by the gentleness and efficiency of her ministering zeal. In her nature the maternal element was all-absorbing; to produce and rear fine animals of her species, to defend them if need be with the courage of a tigress, to extend her motherly protection and pride to those she deemed worthy, these were her offices. No man approached her with thoughts of gallantry for all her comeliness, and certainly she thought of no man more warmly than as a jolly good fellow and a boon companion, her husband being at the head of such. The latter's absence was no harder to bear than that of any valued friend had she not her boys? These youngsters she would treat with the demonstrative affectionateness which is a proof of incapacity for deeper emotions. She was all instinct, and as intolerant of alien forms of thought and feeling as even an Englishwoman can attain to be. Fortunately the sphere of her indifference was immense; with wider knowledge her lack of charity would have been far more unpleasantly obvious. As it was, she never made a statement which fell short of finality; argued with, pressed to reconsider, she would put the matter aside with a smile and pass on to a new subject - the maternal does not reason.

Between her and Isabel undoubtedly existed a strong mutual attachment. Whereon this was based could not at first sight be determined; the two appeared different in most things. Possibly it was one of those cases which occur, of attraction to and by qualities, which, owing to circumstances, remain potential. Had Isabel's marriage resulted in offspring, she might have developed maternal passion in no less a degree than her friend; the sweet and lovable

nature, which now exercised such a universal charm in virtue of its wide activity, might very well have concentrated itself on those few objects, with an intensity detrimental to the broader influences of her womanhood. The story of her relations with Ada Warren, viewed aright, perhaps tells in favour of this idea. She could not herself have explained to you her affection for Mrs. Stratton, and he who is giving these chapters of her history may not pretend to do much more than exhibit facts and draw at times a justifiable inference. He is not a creator of human beings, with eyes to behold the very heart of the machine he has himself pieced together; merely one who takes trouble to trace certain lines of human experience, and, working here on grounds of knowledge, there by aid of analogy, here again in the way of bolder speculation, spins his tale with what skill he may till the threads are used up.

Ada, as one would have anticipated, thoroughly disliked Mrs. Stratton, and avoided intercourse with her as much as possible. When the lady was at Knightswell, Ada would frequently keep apart for a whole day; even in the visitor's presence she could not feign friendliness. Mrs. Stratton's manner to her was one of genial indifference, with no suggestion that she felt herself slighted.

"I see no change," said Isabel's friend, the day after her arrival, knowing, of course, of the enlightenment which had come to the girl. "She seems to me exactly the same."

"She is not," returned Isabel. "Her life is twice as intense and varied. She is happy, or nearly so, and conceals it to spare me."

"H'm; you think her capable of that?"

"Quite."

"By-the-bye, does she correspond with young Lacour, do you think?"

"I fancy not. I believe she would tell me."

"You have astonishing faith in her uprightness."

"She is a strange girl, but she is honourable," affirmed Mrs. Clarendon.

Isabel was not wrong as to the change in Ada. Outwardly there was not much evidence of the processes at work in the hidden places of her being, yet sufficient to prove to just observation whither they tended. Formerly Ada had kept to herself to hide her misery, had striven in solitude with passions which left their mark upon her face when she reappeared, had been worn with listlessness, when not overtaxing her strength to escape the torments which assailed her leisure. Now, she was seldom actively employed, yet solitude was precious to her; Isabel saw her pacing up and down the garden paths, no longer with dark and troubled face, but with the light of earnest preoccupation in her eyes, and a clear brow, which was often raised as if at the impulse of intense feeling. There was more of healthful girlishness in her motions, her smile; she would spring and catch a bough swaying above her, would run a space with the big house-dog bounding beside her. Once she came in at the front door with her breath gone, her cheeks in high colour, her hat in her hand; Isabel met her in the hall, and in surprise asked her what was the matter.

"A race with the rain!" Ada panted, sinking on a chair. "I could see it coming, nearer every second; I got in as the first drop fell!"

She showed a childish delight in her achievement; perhaps she enjoyed the sense of her health and strength, scarcely ever tried in active exercise. After this, running with the big dog became a daily pastime. Young Stratton caught a glimpse of her at it in the park one day, and rushed to join the sport.

"After a rabbit, eh?" he shouted, coming up with them.

Ada at once dropped to a walk, and spoke to the dog, instead of answering the boy's question.

"I say, you look here!" Edgar suddenly exclaimed in a whisper.

She turned, and saw him aiming with a catapult at a bird perched on a bush hard by. Before the aim was perfect, Ada had snatched the tool from his hands.

"Well, I call that —!" cried the youngster, at a loss for words. "What do you want to spoil my shot for?"

"Can't you amuse yourself without murdering!" returned the girl, hot in anger. "Shoot at that tree-trunk if you must shoot."

"Murdering!" echoed the youth, in blank astonishment. "Come now, Miss Warren Murdering a bird - I call that good!"

"What else is it? What right have you to rob the bird of its life? What is it that drives you to kill every creature that you safely may?"

"It's fair sport!" urged the young Briton, in amaze at this outlandish mode of regarding things.

"Sport?"

She stood regarding him, the catapult stilt in her hand.

"What are you going to be when you grow up?"

"What am I going to be? A soldier, of course."

"I thought so; then you can murder on a large scale."

"You call killing the enemy in battle, murder?"

"What do you call it? Fair sport?"

"I say, Miss Warren, you're a rum 'un, you are!" observed Edgar, shaking his round head in wonder. "Are you joking? - though you don't look like it."

Ada held the catapult out to him.

"Here, take it and run off," she said, shortly.

He obeyed, and brought down a blackbird not fifty yards away, then ran to Mrs. Clarendon and his mother, who laughed at the story. The ladies' ideas of sport did not greatly differ; were not the fowls of the air, the fishes of the deep and the foxes of the field created for the British sportsman? Surely no piece of teleology was clearer.

Ada had no one whom she could take into her confidence, no soul to which she could speak out the sincerity of her own. With Rhoda Meres she exchanged letters at long intervals, but the thoughts they expressed to each other were only from the surface of their lives; the girls were friends only in the slightest sense of the word. It was true that she had in her possession just now a letter from another correspondent, awaiting an answer; that reply she could not bring herself to write; and, when she did so, the words would not be those it was in her to say. Her isolation was absolute. Whatsoever force of waters beat against the flood-gates of her heart, she could not give them free passage. She was driven to commune with herself in set speech; by degrees, to take her pen and write the words she would have uttered had any ear been bent to her. She resumed her habit of spending the mornings in the library, but no longer with books; either she sat in reverie, or, at her desk, filled sheet after sheet with small, nervous handwriting, her features fixed in eager interest, her whole body knit as if in exertion, in sympathy with the effort of her mind. When she came forth to meet the other inmates of the house, she did not speak, but looked quietly cheerful.

She had been thus occupied through the morning of the day on which Kingcote was expected to appear at luncheon. Entering the drawing-room shortly after the first bell rang, she found no one there; a moment later a servant opened the door and announced the visitor.

As they exchanged such phrases as the situation gave rise to, Kingcote found himself reflecting on the familiar fact that our first impression of a face is greatly modified by acquaintance. The girl's features no longer appeared to him irredeemably plain, though their variance from types of smooth comeliness was obvious enough. In profile it was a very harsh visage, the nose irregular, the chin too prominent, the cheek-bone high, the ear seemingly too far back on the head; viewed in full, details were lost in the general expression of force and passionate life. The jaw was heavy, the lips large, yet these not ill-shaped, the contrary rather; but all the upper part bore the stamp of character and intelligence. The deep eyes had no unkindly light, and readily answered to a humorous suggestion. Perhaps it was the hint of hard endurance which struck an observer first of all, and left him with the idea of a sullen, resentful face; for her brows had a way of nervously wrinkling up between the eyes, and her lips of making themselves yet fuller by compression at the corners. Her gaze was not one of open friendliness, but Kingcote was beginning

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to discover something in its reserve quite different from mere irresponsible egoism. Her forehead, taken apart with its weight of dark hair, might have been modelled for Pallas.

But whilst justice was thus being done, Mrs. Clarendon entered, sweet, smiling, irresistible from the first glance, and was followed by Mrs. Stratton. When all proceeded to the dining-room, Master Edgar was found already in possession, seated at table, waiting with impatience. Meals were with him a matter of supreme importance; he ate his way stolidly and steadily through all courses, scorning the idleness of conversation.

There was much talk between the two elder ladies of a meet on the following day; both proposed joining the field, Mrs. Stratton having brought horses of her own with that view. Edgar had his pony, and would follow the hunt in his own fashion.

"Where is the meet?" Kingcote inquired.

"At Salcot," replied Isabel. "Do let us drive you over. Don't look so scornful, Ada; I'm sure Mr. Kingcote would enjoy it."

"I think it very likely," the girl remarked quietly.

"Your judgment on us, one and all," laughed Mrs. Stratton.

"Miss Warren calls it murder," cried Edgar derisively, with his mouth full.

Kingcote gave his assent to the proposal that he should drive with the ladies and witness the meet. They promised to take him up at the junction of the old and the new roads.

He talked with Mrs. Stratton in the drawing room after luncheon. Edgar came and reclined on the carpet, resting his head against his mother.

"Get up, sir!" Mrs. Stratton addressed him. "I won't have this laziness after meals. Look at him, Mr. Kingcote; don't you think it high time he was packed off to school again?"

"Well, I shan't be sorry," observed the youth, reluctantly rising to his feet.

"I suppose you are eager to get back to cricket?" said Kingcote.

"Cricket! Why, you don't play cricket this time of year!" cried Edgar, with scornful laughter.

"Indeed? What is the game, then? Football?"

"I should think so."

"You must mend your manners, Edgar," observed his mother. "Now run out into the garden, and don't trouble us. His body is getting rather too much for him," she continued playfully to Kingcote. "He must get back to his fagging. I wouldn't for the world send a boy of mine to a school where there was no fagging."

"Capital thing, no doubt," said Kingcote. "He's a fine boy."

"A little too noisy just at present."

"Oh, it's a sign of his perfect health. Surely you wouldn't see him mooning about, or shutting himself up with books?"

"Like that poor little fellow of the rector's," said Mrs. Stratton. "That child ought to be sent off to school."

"Certainly. They'd soon knock him into shape, take the dreaminess out of him. Robust health before everything. Are your other boys as hearty as this one?"

"Oh, every bit! My eldest lad has broken almost every bone in his body, and seems all the better for it."

"Why, that's magnificent. Their lives will be a joy to them. Constitution, of course, is much; but I'm sure they have to thank you for an admirable bringing-up."

Ada, who sat close by, was regarding Kingcote curiously, just suppressing a smile as she caught a glimpse of Mrs. Stratton's gratified face.

"This is your ideal of education?" she put in gravely.

"Assuredly it is," was Kingcote's answer. "Surely that education is best which leads to happiness. That boy will never be afflicted with nervous disorders; he will never be melancholy, hypochondriacal, despairing; he will never see the world in any but the rosiest light, never be troubled by abstract speculation, never doubt for a moment about his place and his work. The plan of education which has such a result as that is beneficence itself. Don't you think so, Miss Warren?"

"To be sure I wouldn't have the minds altogether neglected," said Mrs. Stratton. "Come and listen, Isabel; Mr. Kingcote is saying the most interesting things."

"Let the mind take care of itself," continued Kingcote, smiling slightly as he looked at Mrs. Clarendon. "If a boy has a bent for acquiring knowledge, he will manage that later. I wouldn't encourage it. Make him a sound creature, that's the first thing. Occupy him with vigorous bodily pursuits; keep his mind from turning inwards; save him from reflection. If every boy in England could be so brought up, they would be a blissful generation."

"How about the girls?" questioned Isabel. "Would you educate them in the same way?"

"Precisely, with yet more wholesome effect. Nay, I would go further; they should never open a book till they were one-and-twenty, and their previous training should be that of Amazons."

"That is a merciful provision," said Ada, meaning possibly more than her hearers understood.

When Kingcote took his leave the ladies separated. Mrs. Clarendon had before her a dinner party at Dunsey Priors, and it was necessary to give certain orders. Mrs. Stratton took up *The Times* till tea should appear. Ada, after pacing about the library for a quarter of an hour, took her hat and went into the open air. Her mind was disturbed in

some way; the darkness of trouble was back again in her eyes. She walked among the evergreens of the shrubbery, then strayed to a seat which stood against the wall of the circular portion of the conservatory. The landscape before her was wild with the hues of a sky in which the declining sun fought against flying strips of ragged cloud. The wind was kept off from this part of the lawn, but in the distance it made a moaning over the fields. She watched a cohort of dead leaves sweeping in great curves along the side of the house.

A voice spoke very near to her. It came from within the rotunda; the stained-glass window just above her head was partly open.

"It would be infinitely better," Mrs. Clarendon was saying, "than that a man like Vincent Lacour should make a prize of her."

"But she cannot be so infatuated," returned Mrs. Stratton. "She has sense enough to understand her own position and to take care of herself. My idea is that she won't marry for some time, perhaps not at all."

There was silence, then the last speaker resumed.

"She certainly has no interest in Mr. Kingcote."

"You can't judge so speedily. I don't say that I desire it," Isabel added with an uncertain voice. "But I am sure it would be a happy thing."

"Then why not desire it?"

"I don't know, I can't quite explain. And I half think she *has* an interest in him; but then - poor Ada!"

"She isn't so ugly as she was," remarked Mrs. Stratton's matter-of-fact voice. "I notice that distinctly."

Ada rose and walked away with quick steps. At the corner of the house, as she passed it to reach the front door, a great gust of wind met her, and a troop of dry crackling leaves swarmed about her feet and dress; she bent her head and hastened on, not staying till she had reached her bedroom. There she stood, just within the door, motionless and purposeless. Her face was pale, her lips set at their

hardest and cruelest. When at length she stirred, it was to go to the glass and view herself. She turned away with a laugh, no pleasant one. . . .

As Isabel came downstairs a few minutes before the time for which the carriage had been ordered, she saw Ada standing in the doorway of the library.

"Don't, of course, sit up for me, Ada," she said.

"I will not. But I should be glad to speak to you now, if you could spare me a moment."

Isabel gazed, surprised at her tone.

"Certainly," she acceded, and passed into the library. Ada closed the door behind her. Isabel was resplendent in her evening costume; her pure, shapely neck and shoulders gleamed above the dark richness of her robe, the gold and jewels made worthy adornment of her beauty. Her colour a trifle heightened, her eyes lustrous with foresight of homage, her white, womanly brows crowned with the natural tiara of her hair - fine and rich still as in her girlhood - the proud poise of her small and perfect head, these things were lovelier to-night than on the day when her picture had been painted as a young bride. Maturity had rewarded her with its dower, which so few dare count upon. To-night she was a woman whom men of ripe experience, men of the world, would take for herself, asking no wealth but that of her matchless charm, a woman for whom younger and more passionate hearts would break with longing.

"What is it, Ada?" she asked in a voice of concern.

"This, Mrs. Clarendon. You rightly required of me that I should keep secret no step that affected us both. I wish to tell you that I have accepted an offer from Mr. Lacour - that I am going to be married to him."

She spoke neither hurriedly nor vehemently. The only measure of her feeling was in the words she used, the plainest and directest which came into her mind.

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Isabel regarded her steadily for a moment. The look was grave, not hostile. Her eyes were dulled a little, her cheeks less warm, the jewels on her breast rose and fell; but she mastered the emotions which such an announcement could not but cause, forced back that cold, heavy flood which just touched her heart, held her own against the onset of fears.

"You have well considered this, Ada?"

Her hand sought the nearest chair, but she resisted the need of seating herself, merely rested her gloved fingers on the back.

"Yes, I have given it all the consideration that is necessary," was Ada's reply, less self-controlled than her last speech.

"But why do you tell me in this way?" Isabel inquired, when she had again regarded the girl's pale anguish. "What has happened? What has offended you?"

"I have said all that I wished to say, Mrs. Clarendon," continued the other, regardless, seeming not to hear what was asked of her. "Please to tell me whether I am free to act, whether, as I am still under your authority, you will use it or not to oppose my marriage?"

"I cannot understand you, Ada. Why do you speak to me so harshly? What unkindness have I been guilty of, and so recently?"

She stopped, her eyes fell, a thought seemed to strike her.

"Have I *said* anything to hurt you?"

Ada made a nervous movement, then spoke more calmly.

"I should not allow anything you say to influence my actions. Will you please tell me what I wish to know?"

"I shall offer no opposition of that kind," Isabel said. "You are old enough to think and act for yourself. If you had come and told me of this in a friendly way I should no doubt have used the privilege of my age and experience —"

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"To tell me what you have already on several occasions said indirectly," broke in the girl, again passionate. "Thank you; I can make all such reflections for myself."

"I think you are unjust to me, Ada," said Mrs. Clarendon, in a lowered voice. Her fingers were now grasping the chair, instead of resting upon it. "When you have had time to reflect I am sure you will speak to me differently."

Ada stood silent.

"You propose to be married shortly?" Isabel asked, joining her hands together before her.

"As soon as will suit your convenience, Mrs. Clarendon."

"Pray do not consult that."

She could not hold back this little note of resentment, and, having uttered it, she turned and left the room. As she drew the door to, a servant approached to say that the carriage waited.

"I shall not want it," Isabel replied shortly; "let it go back."

She moved to the foot of the stairs, and in doing so, had to pass the drawing-room door, which stood open. Mrs. Stratton was within. Hearing the rustle of Isabel's dress she came forward.

"Ready?" she said; and added with a smile, "pray remember me to Lord Winterset; he is sure to be there."

Isabel was pale now. She stood with one foot on the stairs and a hand pressed against her side. For a moment she looked strangely into her friend's face, then turned and called to the footman, who was in the doorway of the house.

"Ward, stop the carriage!"

"What's this?" inquired Mrs. Stratton, looking puzzled. Only an extreme occasion would have called alarm to that heroic lady's face.

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"I sent the carriage away," Isabel explained. "I had a faintness - thought I wouldn't go. It has gone! I shall be late."

"You certainly don't look very well. A glass of sherry, dear —?"

"No, no; it has gone. Don't sit up for me, Rose. Good-bye, dear."

They kissed each other, and Mrs. Clarendon rustled to her carriage.

CHAPTER XII

Mr. Saltash of Dunsey Priors was, by profession, a master of fox-hounds; in his leisure, Member of Parliament. He had won the county, in the Conservative interest, on the death of Mr. Clarendon, and proved an extremely useful man. His specialty consisted in "pairing" with Members of the opposite party. In his graver pursuit he held a high place, his knowledge and zeal being brought into brilliant evidence by the wealth which enabled him to entertain sumptuously those leaders of society whose appreciation grows keen on a satisfied palate. Essentially a country gentleman, he lived almost entirely at the Priors, a fine old dwelling of considerable archæological interest; known, among other things, for its piece of Roman pavement, discovered by Mr. Saltash himself, in the building of new stables. During the hunting season, he gathered at his table a succession of English and foreign notabilities. Half the Cabinet had been known to meet in festivity at Dunsey Priors, and men from other lands, desirous of studying British social life, were directed thither as to one of the most fruitful fields of observation. The misfortune of the house was, that it contained no son and heir; Miss Irene Saltash was her parent's only child, and she, as we have seen, had degenerated from the type whereby her father leisured to be represented. She did not even hunt, and was given over to ecclesiastical interests, which Mr. Saltash, utterly at a loss to account for, qualified with no reticence as condemned tomfoolery. Whether it was she who had infected Lady Florence Cootes with this singular frenzy, or who was the sufferer by contagion from Lord Winterset's daughter, could not clearly be determined. At all events, she had it not from her mother. Mrs. Saltash possessed that solidity of physique and sterling commonplaceness of character which are, perhaps, the best qualifications of a country hostess. With every endowment of an admirable cook and housekeeper, the addition of aristocratic descent made her dulness respectable. She exacted nothing from her guests but the enjoyment of the fare she had provided; satisfied repose was the note of her conversation.

It was rather a large party to-night at the Priors; Mrs. Clarendon, arriving a few minutes after the dinner-hour, entered a great room murmurous with conversation, and striking in effects of costume; the men were in pink. The announcement of her name turned all faces to the door; male eyes glimmered with passive and polite satisfaction,

those of the opposite sex wandered a little about the company. There were very few present who had not the pleasure of acquaintance with the Lady of Knightswell; greetings were abundant and cordial. It was a singular thing that the looks of most, after observing her, were bent, as if involuntarily, on a tall, baldish, handsome gentleman, who stood in conversation with Miss Saltash, stooping a little from his inconvenient height, and swinging an eyeglass round and round his fore-finger. This gentleman had precedence in rank, and very possibly in intellect, of all the assembled guests; the Earl of Winterset needed no introduction to any one familiar with the photograph-shops and illustrated papers of the day. Strong in politics and social enterprise, he was no less prominent on the turf and in the hunting field; the public had it on his own assertion that a good speech and a good horse were the prime joys of his life. Consequently he was popular. Had he said a good book and a good horse - but he was too wise for that, though the measure of truth in the phrase would have been larger. He was, in fact, a singular combination of a critical intellect with a conservative temperament. He knew himself, could joke on the vulgarity of his ruling instincts, could despise those who, resembling him fundamentally, lacked the refinement of his superstructure.

Whilst conversing affably with Irene Saltash on the subject of a recent Ritualist trial, Lord Winterset's eyes strayed to the group amid which stood Mrs. Clarendon. He pursed his lips held his head on one side, in seeming reflection upon an argument Miss Saltash had just advanced, then nodded gravely three times. But Irene had to ask twice for an answer to a question she was putting. Before she received it, dinner was announced.

The happy man to whose lot it fell to conduct Isabel was a certain Mr. Ladbroke Ruff, foxy from the summit of his cranium to the sole of his feet; there were titled dames present, otherwise Mr. Ruff would scarcely have been so honoured. The musicians' gallery in the old feasting hall was occupied by a band which discoursed old English strains; Mr. Ruff discoursed foxes. His "place" was in Leicestershire; a week's visit to his old friend Saltash was detaining him in this less interesting county. His talk was of "oxers," of "bullfinches," and of "raspers"; he overflowed with genial reminiscences of the Quorn, the Pytchley, and the Cottesmore. A certain "hog-maned chestnut" of his came in for a vast amount of praise.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "one of *the* very finest things in the way of a run that I remember! Forty-eight minutes, Mrs. Clarendon - on my word of honour, forty-eight minutes without a check, and a kill in the open. That was the day when poor Lewin Copstake broke both his legs. Ah! you know Copstake? Delighted, delighted! A mare he would ride - not up to the country; kneed the rails just in front of me, and came down a cracker."

Mrs. Clarendon related a similar incident from her own experience, giving Mr. Ruff an opportunity to get through an *entrée*.

"You don't say so, you don't say so! Extraordinary recklessness! By-the-bye, you know Mrs. Scarlett Slapton? Know *of* her, to be sure. Who doesn't? - ha, ha! Which season was it? Oh, she had a clever flyer - Meg Merrilies, bought from Lord Wakefield, I believe. I shall never forget one day in December, '72 - yes, '72 - with the Quorn."

Then followed excited particulars. "The fox broke for —," "a burning scent," "never dwelt between — and —," "had our work cut out to live the pace," - and so on.

Isabel talked eagerly; the flush had come back to her cheeks, her gaiety was inexhaustible. She ate little, however, and only touched with her lips a glass of champagne. Her answers now and then were a trifle wide of the mark, but she never failed in outward attentiveness. Mr. Ruff probably did not catch the sigh of relief with which she at length obeyed the signal to rise.

Mrs. Bruce Page got to her side in the drawing-room, and chattered with accustomed energy. Isabel encouraged her, heedless of subjects; the advantage was that a word or two put in edgewise every few minutes sufficed to this lady's colloquial demands, and at present Isabel did not feel capable of taking a more active part in conversation.

"You know," said the gossip, after exhausting all other topics, "that the boy Vincent has settled down at length in the most orderly way"

"Mr. Lacour?" Isabel asked, watching the speaker's face.

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"Yes. He is becoming exemplary; reads law all day, like the good boy he ought to be. I'm *so* glad, for - to tell you the truth —"

She stopped in hesitation, a most unusual thing. Isabel looked inquiringly, but with preoccupied countenance.

"To tell you the truth," Mrs. Bruce Page resumed, ruffling her fan, "I have been a little anxious about my eldest girl. I dare say you have noticed my eagerness to get Vincent settled in some way? There is no reason in the world why it shouldn't come to something, some day, you know; but for the *present* —"

"Does it amount to an engagement?" Isabel asked, rather bluntly, but still without much show of interest.

"Oh, my dear, nothing so premature as that. In fact, I ought not to have breathed a syllable, but to *you*!"

Mrs. Bruce Page put her head on one side, and looked fascinatingly. Isabel reflected, seemed about to put another question, altered her mind and said to herself:

"Now what is the woman's precise object in telling me that - that fib?"

They gossiped a little on sundry other topics, then, another lady coming up, Isabel withdrew to a more retired part of the room. The windows were deep recesses, comfortably cushioned, with a heavy, shadowing curtain on each side; in one of these retreats she established herself, watching those who moved about before her. Soon she ceased consciously to watch, her gaze grew fixed, her features made of themselves a mask woefully unlike Isabel Clarendon.

"You are not looking yourself to-night, dear Mrs. Clarendon," said the voice of Lady Florence Cootes, as that playful young religionist crouched on a stool by Isabel's side. "Have you a headache?"

"Yes, a little. No matter, I shall hunt to-morrow, Flo, and that always sets me up."

"Oh, I'm sure I hope so. Have you seen father yet?"

"Seen him, but not spoken," Isabel returned, seeming to regard a lady who stood near. "I rather thought this troublesome news from Egypt would have taken him up to town."

"Oh, he's like you, he won't miss his hunting to-morrow!"

The gentlemen entered the room, and Lady Florence went off to the warmer regions. In her recess Isabel was conscious of some one moving gradually towards her, stopping here and there to exchange a few words, often glancing about him, slowly but surely moving her way. A dreadful nervousness took hold of her; she wished to quit her place, to stir, to breathe freely away from the shadowing curtain, but she could not rise. She was in terror lest some flagrant weakness should entirely overcome her, an hysterical burst of tears, or a fit of faintness. Indeed, the latter seemed imminent; she could not fan herself. Just then Lord Winterset perceived her, and at his recognising smile her agitation suddenly calmed.

"Well, my fair enemy!" he exclaimed, sinking on the cushion by her side. "How long it seems since we had an opportunity of quarrelling! You have been at Knightswell through the autumn, I understand."

"With the exception of a week or two. You have been travelling."

"Nothing to speak of; Spain, and a peep at Algiers."

Isabel put some questions which led to talk of the countries he had visited. He talked well, with a pleasantly graphic manner, and in a tone of good-humoured criticism, the tone of a man who had no illusions, and who made every allowance for the defective construction of the world. Dropping gradually upon one elbow, that nearest to his companion, he played with the seals on his watch-guard, and let the current of his descriptive eloquence glide into any pleasant channel which offered itself. One or two stories of adventures he had met with were recounted very gracefully - one, at least, was just saved by its manner from being the kind of thing better suited to the club than the drawing-room. Isabel laughed freely.

"How is it," he asked pleasantly, "that no one I know has your secret of laughter? You laugh with such complete naturalness and enjoyment, and yet it is only a delightful smile accompanied by

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music. I should not like to say that any lady's laughter is unmusical, but the smile is shockingly spoilt. Poor Flo, for instance, laughs most deplorably. Many ladies know the difficulty, and never venture on a laugh at all; alas, they grin!"

Isabel laughed again, though not quite as before.

"What have you to report of the Spanish ladies?" she asked.

"Beautiful; some I saw beautiful exceedingly; but their complexion too hot. I seemed to feel the need of fresh air. The northern type is my ideal; faces which remain through a lifetime fresh as a flower, which exhale the coolness of an early summer morning. They are graceful, but I often thought of a certain English lady, who has more natural grace of bearing than any one of them."

He has fixed his look upon her; Isabel tried to make some light response, but her voice failed.

"By-the-bye," he asked, "Flo gave you that message of mine - a message I sent from Seville?"

"About the winner of the Two Thousand? Oh yes; I was duly humiliated. How *could* I have erred, in a matter of such moment!"

"You remember - there was a wager."

"Was there?"

"Certainly. You have not forgotten the terms?"

Isabel held her fan by its two ends, and, as if to recollect, pressed it across her forehead. There was a terrible throbbing there; the cool ivory was very pleasant.

"I must claim payment," Lord Winterset pursued playfully, whilst he glanced about him to see that neighbours were minding their business. "You remember it was to be anything I chose to ask for."

"Lord Winterset! How foolish! There was really no wager at all; that was a mere joke, a piece of nonsense."

"Indeed, I did not regard it as anything of the kind," he continued imperturbably, still fingering his seals. "I knew perfectly well that I should win, and I knew just as well what payment I should beg for."

Her beautifully gloved hand rested on its open palm by her side; there was pressure on it, the nerves were strung. She gazed straight before her and saw nothing.

Lord Winterset looked at the hand, and touched it with two fingers.

"That is what I ask," he said, just audibly.

Isabel drew the hand back to her lap, then faced him, with a great effort of self-control.

"I cannot answer you at once, Lord Winterset," she said, almost calmly, though in very truth the words were a mere buzzing in her own ears. "Not to-night. Grant me a day or two."

"Is that necessary?"

"It is - indeed it is! I can say nothing whatever to-night. You must not interpret my behaviour at all."

"We hunt together to-morrow. May I see you in the evening?"

"Yes, after the hunt. I will answer you then. May I, please, be left to myself now?"

"Till to-morrow evening."

Lord Winterset smiled, bowed to her with informal grace, and passed to the nearest group. In a few moments, Isabel too moved away. She had but to appear in the centre of the room to attract half-a-dozen loiterers. Never had her social instincts triumphed as they did now; never had she governed herself with such perfection of skill. For five minutes she was an enchantress. Then she drew aside, and presently had disappeared.

At the appointed time and place, Kingcote saw the carriage pulling up for him, Edgar Stratton having ridden his pony on before. It was

a dull morning, but perfect for hunting purposes, as Mr. Vissian declared when Kingcote chatted with him for a moment in front of the rectory. The two ladies seemed in excellent spirits; they wore their habits, ready to mount the horses which would have reached Salcot before them. Mrs. Clarendon pressed Kingcote's hand warmly when he had taken his seat opposite her, held it a moment longer than was necessary, indeed, and looked with earnestness into his face. The night had been sleepless for her, but whatever traces her watching might have left had at once been carried away by the air which breathed past the light-speeding vehicle. She talked and laughed without ceasing; the prospect of a delightful day appeared entirely to occupy her. On Mrs. Stratton's making some reference to an engagement for the morrow,

"Oh, I can't look so far forward!" Isabel exclaimed. "To-day is only beginning; what is the good of remembering that it will ever come to an end?"

"That reminds me," said Kingcote, "of those stories of impious huntsmen, who wished to ride on for ever, and had the wish terribly granted."

"I am not sure that I shouldn't follow their example, whoever offered me the choice," Isabel said. "Ah, it is good to get rid of the world! To forget everything but the delight of your headlong speed!"

"At all events," said Kingcote, "it is a form of dissipation which brings no headache on the morrow."

"Now, you too talk of the morrow! Perish the word! I live in to-day. Who knows what may happen before nightfall? I may be killed."

Kingcote's ear was struck with something singular in the note of these last words. When he looked at Isabel she did not avert her eyes, but smiled with a touching familiarity.

"Have you news from London?" she asked of him unexpectedly.

"Yes; things are still bad."

"I am very sorry."

He had never heard conventional politeness so sweetly expressed; there was a real sorrow in her voice.

Arrived at the scene of the meet, at the end of the main street of Salcot, the ladies at once mounted their hunters and mixed with pink-coated men, who were present in considerable numbers. Kingcote drew to a little distance from the crowd of villagers, and, when a move was made to covert, he just kept the motley troupe in sight. The ladies from Knightswell were the only representatives of their sex. When at length there was a find, and strange utterances of man and beast proclaimed the start, he saw Isabel turn round in her saddle, and, to the last moment, wave her hand to him. Then he went back to find the carriage.

A heaviness weighed upon him during the drive home, and for some hours afterwards. It was not the ordinary depression which he had to struggle with day after day, but a feeling which would not yield itself to analysis, which vanished when he questioned himself, yet was back again as soon as he relapsed into vague musing. The white face and waved hand of Isabel Clarendon, that last glimpse he had had of her, would not go from before his mind's eye; her speech and her manner assailed his memory with indefinable suggestions. It was as if he had lacked discernment at the time, as if he ought to have gathered something which escaped him. He was impatient for another opportunity of observing her, and when would that come? For the first time he felt that it would be impossible to let day after day go by without approaching her. Why had he not used more liberally her invitation to give her his confidence? He had been too reticent, had failed to say a hundred things which now rang in his head. He could not put off the irrational fear that there might be no other chance of speaking freely with her, that something would interpose between her and himself, the something which already cast this shadow upon his imagination.

It was nonsense! Had she not waved her hand to him as she could only do to a friend whom she regarded very kindly? Was it not an assurance of meeting again, and with strengthened friendship? Yet it haunted him with good-bye.

About four o'clock he could bear his solitude no longer, and set out to walk towards the rectory. He was near the door, when he saw the figure of Mr. Vissian running towards him from the village street.

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His surprise at the sight increased when the rector drew near enough to show a face stricken with alarm.

"Have you heard anything, Kingcote?" the clergyman gasped forth. "Are you coming to tell me something?"

"No; what should I tell you? What is the matter?"

"Great God! They say in the village that Mrs. Clarendon has been brought home dead-killed in a fall!"

They stared at each other.

"I daren't go in and tell my wife," went on Mr. Vissian, in a hoarse whisper. "I must go up to the house at once."

"I must come with you."

"Do, that's a good fellow. Let me - let me lean on your arm. Pooh! I must have more self-control than this. It came like a stunning blow on the head; I all - all but dropped!"

Tears were streaming down his cheeks; his voice choked. Kingcote felt his arm quiver.

"I can't believe it! I *won't* believe it!" the rector pursued, crying like a child at last. "An accident, but not killed - great Heaven, no! I never had such a ghastly shock in my life. One moment, Kingcote; I am ashamed to pass the lodge like this. I never thought I should be so weak. But if it were my own wife I scarcely could feel it more. I pray to Almighty God that it may be a mistake!"

The lodge was vacant.

"They're up at the house," said Mr. Vissian, under his breath. "Oh, that looks bad! That dear, dear lady - it cannot be, Kingcote!"

Kingcote walked on in perfect silence, his looks on the ground, no muscle of his face moving. He did not seem to hear his companion's talk. It was just beginning to rain; drops pattered on the dead leaves which lay about the grass. Kingcote heard the sound; he could never

afterwards hear it without the return of this hour in terrible vividness. The air seemed stifling; perspiration came out on him as he walked. At length the rector had ceased to speak. The drive grew moist, and rain splashed upon it; on the dead leaves the rain still pattered.

As they were entering the garden they met the porter on his way back to the lodge.

"What has happened?" Mr. Vissian asked, catching his arm and waiting with dread for an answer. "An accident; a bad accident?"

"Yes, sir; a bad fall," the man replied.

"She is alive?"

"Thank God, sir, it's not so bad as that."

He went on to explain that the horse had breasted a fence and rolled over, inflicting grave injuries upon its rider. The accident had occurred not three miles away. Mrs. Clarendon had first been removed to a cottage, then brought home by carriage as soon as she recovered consciousness. Mrs. Stratton was with her. The doctor had just arrived, and another from London had been telegraphed for.

"I think I'll go in and hear the doctor's report," Mr. Vissian said.

"May I wait for you at the rectory?" asked Kingcote.

"Yes; but I beg of you, not a word to my wife; unless, of course, some one has spread the news; not a word else, Kingcote. You don't know the effect it will have upon her. I beg you to be cautious."

Kingcote retraced his steps through the rain. Overtaking the porter, he got such further details as the man could furnish. Then he went on to the rectory. Mrs. Vissian had heard nothing. He entered the study and awaited the rector's arrival.

The three sat together through the evening. Even in its modified form, the news was bad enough. Mr. Vissian softened it a little in telling his wife. She, good-hearted creature, shed many tears. Percy,

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when he heard what had happened, said nothing; but his imagination evidently became very busy: he sat on the hearth-rug before the fire, till at length a question shaped itself.

"Has Mrs. Clarendon hurt her face?" he asked.

"I think not," replied his father.

"It won't be altered? It'll be the same as it was before?"

"I hope so, my boy."

Percy sighed, and returned quietly: "I'm glad of that."

At ten o'clock Mr. Vissian walked over to the lodge to make inquiries. The doctor, he heard, had just gone away, but would return during the night. Mrs. Clarendon lay unconscious.

Shortly after hearing this, Kingcote took leave of his friends. He found it raining hard, not a glimpse of light in heaven. Instead of turning homewards, he went across to the gates of Knightswell. Just as he reached them they were being thrown open, and he heard the sound of a vehicle coming down the drive. It was a trap, with two men; they drove away in the direction of Salcot.

"Who was that?" Kingcote asked of the porter, as the gates closed again.

"Lord Winterset, sir," was the reply.

CHAPTER XIII

The spreading of the news in private channels and by newspaper paragraphs brought numbers of people on missions of inquiry to Knightswell. For several days the life of little Winstoke had its central point of interest at the lodge, where the humbler of Mrs. Clarendon's friends, the village people and the peasantry, who knew so much of her kindness, incessantly sought information as to her progress. For nearly a week it was all evil rumour, the sufferer could only be reported "Very much the same." During that week Lord Winterset thrice made the journey from London to see Mrs. Stratton, and receive the fullest details. The people from Dunsey Priors, the Bruce Pages, and a procession of county families were, in one way or another, represented daily. Not least anxious of those who presented themselves was Robert Asquith, who came post haste from Paris, where he was spending a few weeks in fault of anything better to do. After remaining for a day at Knightswell, he presented himself at Winstoke Rectory, and got Mr. Vissian to promise him a daily bulletin.

But the point of danger was passed, and Isabel's natural strength helped her through the suffering which preceded convalescence. The special prayer which Mr. Vissian had read forth on two Sundays, was, on the third, commenced with a phrase of thanksgiving. Robert Asquith, opening his Winstoke letter every morning with fingers which trembled in spite of all his efforts, smiled with satisfaction at length, and, though he disliked travelling, set off to make another call at Knightswell. Mrs. Stratton assured him that all was well, that Isabel had begun to sleep soundly through the night without artificial aids, and that she was capable of attending, for short periods, whilst Miss Warren read to her. At the mention of Ada's name, Robert turned a sharp look on the lady.

"Ah, Miss Warren reads to her, does she?"

"Yes. She has been admirable all the time."

These two had made acquaintance for the first time on the occasion of Asquith's former visit, but already they met with an air of mutual understanding.

"I suppose you have heard my name from Mrs. Clarendon?" Robert had asked in the course of their first conversation; and the lady had given an affirmative, with a smile which might or might not have meaning.

"If Miss Warren has been admirable," Robert remarked, "you, Mrs. Stratton, have been indispensable. What on earth should we have done without you?"

"Oh, I have done nothing, except keep guard. But I shall carry her off as soon as I can."

"Whither?"

"First of all to my own home. I live at present at Chislehurst, and have a house much too big for me. Colonel Stratton will probably be home before Christmas, and we shall make a party. I wish you could make it convenient to join us for a few days."

"It's very good of you," Robert replied with deliberate gratitude. "If all goes according to your expectation, I will come with pleasure."

They parted the best of friends, looking mutual compliments.

"Now, why couldn't Isabel be open with me?" mused Mrs. Stratton, after he had gone. "Several things begin to be a little clearer, I fancy."

"A capital little woman," meditated Robert, on his way to the station. "I shouldn't wonder if her friendship prove valuable."

And all three weeks it rained, rained with scarcely a day's intermission. If the new road to Salcot was a mere mud-track, the state of the old road can be conjectured; its deep ruts had become watercourses, its erewhile grassy prominences were mere alluvial wastes. The piece of sward before the cottage gradually turned to swamp; the oak torso stood black with drenching moisture, its clinging parasite stems hung limp, every one of its million bark grainings was a channel for rain-drops. Behind, the copse was represented by the shivering nakedness of lithe twigs, set in a dark, oozy bed of decaying leaves and moss and fungi. Sometimes the rain fell straight from a gray sky without a rack feature from end to end, till all Nature seemed to grow of one colour, and the space between

morning and evening was but a wan twilight of indistinguishable hours. Sometimes there glimmered at midday a faint yellowness, a glimpse of free heaven athwart thinning vapour, a smile too pale to hold forth promise. Sometimes there came towards nightfall a calling from the south-west, the sky thickened with rolling battalions overflashed at instants with an angry gleam, and blasts of fury drove the rain level with the reeking earth. Then there would be battle till dawn, followed, alas! by no glorious victory of the sun-god, but with more weeping of the heavens and sighing of the worn-out winds.

In spite of the fearful weather, Kingcote walked incessantly. The solitude of his cottage was hideous. Every little familiar sound - the rattling of a window or a door, the endless drip of rain, the wind moaning in the chimney - became to him the voice of a tormenting demon. He loathed the sight of every object around him; the damp odour which hung about the place and greeted him whenever he entered from the open air brought a feeling of sickness; he dreaded the hour of going upstairs to the bare bed-chamber, where the cold seized him as in a grip, and the darkness about his candle was full of floating ghosts. The sound of the rain, as he lay longing for the sleep that would not come, weighed upon his spirit to the point of tears; he wept in his gulf of wretchedness. He could not read; the hours of the day would have been interminable but for the regular walk, which killed a portion of time. And occasionally he could spend an evening at the rectory.

Only a man capable of settling at Wood End as Kingcote had done would have been capable of living thus through these late weeks of the year. It needed a peculiar nature to go through with such self-torment - a nature strangely devoid of energy, and morbidly contemplative. He would not admit to the Vissians that he suffered in any way; he even visited them less often than he otherwise would have done, that he might not appear to seek refuge in their house. Bodily ill-health had much to do with his singular state - ill-health induced by long mental suffering and the unwholesome conditions of his life; it aggravated his moral disorder and made him physically incapable of the step he would otherwise have been driven to. To quit the cottage and return, if only for a time, to London, he had persuaded himself was impossible; whilst Isabel Clarendon lay on her sick-bed he could not go away. During the first two weeks, he himself had fallen little short of grave illness; his nights were feverish: once he found himself standing at the gates of Knightswell, without being able to summon consciousness of his walk from home,

the hour being just before dawn. Upon this had followed lassitude; he heard almost with indifference of Isabel's improved condition, and for a few days did not care to move from his fireside. The fever left him, however, and mental disquietude took its place. A source of misery and exasperation was the number of people he knew to be calling at Knightswell; the multitude of her friends excited his jealousy; he himself was of no account among them, the very least of these people, who made their conventional visits and left their respectable cards, was more to her than he. Even if a voice assured him that it was not so, he refused to listen; the fascination of self-torture will not brook a moment's consoling. He called twice, at long intervals, partly because it was not decent to neglect the duty, partly because a longing to draw near to her anguished him; but each time he came away maddened with jealous suspicions. The servant had stood across the door, as if to bar his possible entrance, and had replied to his question with supercilious negligence; the very windows of the house had looked upon him with the contemptuousness of a vacant stare. Of such nothings it was his fate to make hours of suffering. The most absurd thoughts possessed him. She would return to the world a changed woman; even if she cared ever to receive him again, it would be with the cold politeness of a slight acquaintance. She would associate him always with that day's meet, and the thought of him would be always something to dismiss from her mind as painful. A thousand such fantastic webs did he spin in his brain, each an hour's distress. Yet nothing could have taken him from the neighbourhood. To go now would be to have seen her for the last time, to make her henceforth only a name in his memory, and he felt that death would be preferable to that.

Time lost its reality. Sunday he knew, because of the church bells; of other days he kept no count, one was even as another. But it befel at length that the rain ceased, and the first sunlight which awoke him at his bedroom windows was like the touch of a soft, kind hand. It brought to his mind all pleasant and beautiful things: the sound of her voice, the clear vision of her countenance, the white waving of her hand as she rode away, the promise that was in one and all of these. Upon sunlight followed frost; at night-time a dark blue heaven with burnished stars, and the gleaming rime of early hours. The spirit of the healthful air breathed upon him, and gave his blood fresh impulse. He heard that she had left her bed, was all but able to sit up through the day. Might he not before long hope to see her?

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One Sunday morning as he sat at breakfast - it was a strange-looking meal, laid out upon a bare deal table, much the kind of breakfast that the labouring men in other cottages sat down to - a shadow passed before the window, and there followed two sharp blows with a stick at his door. It was the postman's knock; Kingcote started up eagerly to answer. There were only two probable correspondents, his sister and Gabriel, and it was some time since he had heard from either. But the letter which the man put into his hand had travelled a shorter distance; it bore only the Winstoke mark. The handwriting he did not know, but it was a woman's, and, it seemed to him, written under some infirmity. In his agitation, he made scant reply to the postman's remark about the weather; yet he noticed that it had just begun to snow, and that the light flakes were silver in sunlight. It was not a letter - a mere note of one side, but it ended with the name of Isabel Clarendon.

"DEAR MR. KINGCOTE,

"Why have you not been to see me? Several people who brought me nothing but their dulness have found their way here the last few days. Will you come to-morrow at eleven - if you can miss Mr. Vissian's sermon for once?"

The snow fell, but from a rift of glory up above streamed one broad beam, which made the earth shimmer. Presently began the Winstoke bells; their music was carried off to the south by a shrewd wind, whose task it was to bake the ground that the snow might lie. Wind and snow had their way; the sun drew back and veiled itself; the white downfall thickened, chased and whirled into frenzy by the shrilling north. The turmoil made Kingcote laugh with pleasure. When he quitted the cottage, he had to leap over a high ridge of driven snow. The oak-stump had a white cloak on its back; the road was a smooth white surface, not a little treacherous whilst still unhardened. But there was life in the keen air, and the delight of change in the new face of each familiar thing.

It cost some stamping of the feet and shaking of upper garments before he could pass from the threshold of Knightswell into the hall. The footman seemed prepared for his arrival, and bade him follow him up the stairs. The chief rooms of the house were all on the ground floor; Kingcote had never yet ascended. The room into which he was ushered was Isabel's boudoir, small, with only one window,

daintily furnished. It caught his senses with a faint pervading perfume, a soft harmony of clear colours, a witchery of light broken by curtains and tinged with hues from gleaming surfaces; his foot was flattered by the yielding carpet. He did not at first see where she sat, for her chair was in a dim corner; besides, the fireplace intervened with its great blaze.

"I never thought you would face this terrible weather!"

"The weather? What of that? Was I not to see you at eleven?"

She might not stand yet, but both her hands were held out to him. There was a low chair not far from her; he drew it nearer and sat looking into her face. It was of an exquisite pallor, just touched on either cheek with present emotion; thinner, but only - at all events to his eyes - the more beautiful. There was an indescribable freshness in her appearance - her white neck caressed by soft lace, the lines which her hair made on the purity of her brow, her bright, just-moistened eye, the graceful repose of her still feeble frame.

"You find me changed?" she asked, in a voice which trembled in trying to be merely mirthful.

"I see no change. You are pale, but your face is what it always was."

"You are growing stronger?" he asked, when she kept silence. "Danger is past?"

"Oh, long past!"

He hesitated for the next words.

"Wasn't it strange?" Isabel went on, regarding him with wide-eyed intimacy, which thrilled his nerves. "You remember the things I said that morning? What did you think when you heard of the accident?"

"They told me you were dead - that was the first news."

Her eyes fell before his steady look.

"I half wished it," she said. "In the moment when I knew what was coming, I had a strange hope that my words might have brought it in reality; I closed my eyes, and tried to think it would be like sleep."

"Why should *you* have such thoughts? What has life ever brought you but joy?"

"A few things not quite joyful, and which most women would find rather hard to bear. You know nothing of my story? No? Not by chance in talking about me of late? I suppose there has been much talk about me?"

"Will you not tell me what it is you speak of? Remember that I talk to no one."

"To be sure. You are so unlike all other men. You are apart in my thoughts - you seem to be in a wholly different world from that I know. Your judgment of me will be sterner than that of mere men of the world, who take self-seeking and dishonour for granted. Yes, it will, it will!"

Her breath was caught, and nervous agitation so gained upon her weakness as almost to make her hysterical. Kingcote bent forward and imprisoned one of her hands.

"Speak calmly," he urged, in a voice just above a whisper. "Why do you agitate yourself so? Why should you tell me anything that it is painful to speak of?"

His own emotion all but overcame his power of utterance. She did not try to draw away her hand; holding it in one of his, with the other he caressed it soothingly. Isabel smiled at him.

"You are deceived in me," she pursued, becoming quieter by self-yielding. "You see only appearances. This house and all it represents is not mine; I am only allowed to use it and to make a show till the owner claims it: everything belongs to Miss Warren."

A minor emotion like surprise could not affect Kingcote in his present mood.

Isabel Clarendon

"And I am to judge you sternly for not having told me that?" he asked, his veins on fire from the touch of the hand he held.

"Listen to me. When she marries I lose everything, all but an annuity of three hundred pounds. And that will be in a few weeks, as soon as I am strong enough to go in search of a new home."

"Yes? Does *that* call for my judgment?"

She trembled.

"I want to show you something, but I cannot rise to get it. Will you go for me? You see the small writing-desk on the further table?"

Kingcote rose, but with her hand still in his. He could not release it. She, with eyes turned upwards to regard him, her face flushed, her throat quivering, was as loth to be severed from his grasp. Instead of moving away, he bent and put his lips to her forehead. Then the rose-hue clothed her with maidenhood, her head fell, and he felt the pulse at her wrist leap like flame.

"Will you fetch me the desk?" she asked, without meeting his look.

He fetched it, and with a key from her pocket Isabel opened it. Below other papers she found an envelope, and from this took a photograph.

"Will you look at that?" she said, holding it to him.

Kingcote's face expressed recognition.

"This," he said, "is, I suppose, Miss Warren's father? The resemblance is very strong."

"It is a portrait of Mr. Clarendon," was her answer, given in a tone of such cold self-command that Kingcote turned to look at her with a movement of surprise.

"Mr. Clarendon?"

"I will put it away again, if you please."

He let her do so, and removed the case. When he drew near her, Isabel regarded him with a passionless face, and pointed to the chair he had risen from.

"He knew me well," she said, with a bitterness which made all her words clear-cut and her voice unshaken. "He calculated my weakness, and devised my punishment skilfully. That I should take the child and rear it to inherit his property, or else lose everything at once. With a woman of self-respect, such a scheme would have been empty; she would have turned away in scorn. But he knew me well; he knew I had not the courage to go back to poverty; that I would rather suffer through years, be the talk and pity and contempt of every one, face at last the confession to her, - all that rather than be poor again!"

Kingcote once more held her hand, and, when she paused, he kissed it passionately.

"You were poor once?" he asked gently, tenderly.

"That is my only excuse. We were wretchedly poor, my mother, my brother, and myself. I have been hungry often and often. We had to keep up a respectable appearance; we starved ourselves to buy clothing and to avoid being indebted to people. I have often gone to bed - when I was a strong, growing girl - and cried because I was so hungry; though I had just before been pretending I could eat no more, as we all of us did, poor mother as well. I was to be a governess; but then a lady took me to London, was wonderfully kind to me, treated me as her daughter. She said" - Isabel half laughed, half cried - "she said I was too good-looking to be a governess."

"Wasn't it true? Are you not now so beautiful that my heart faints when I look at you?"

"If I were not so contemptible - if I deserved any recompense for what I have suffered - it would be a priceless one to hear you say so."

"Tell me more."

"I married at the end of my first season; made what was called a wonderful marriage. I hadn't a farthing, and became all at once

wealthy. I caught at the best that offered; the best in the world's sense. I was old enough; I understood what I was doing. No one was to blame but myself. You saw that hard strong, coarse face? He often looked at me as if he were coldly calculating the risks of murder; but as he got to know me better, he found better punishments. I did not disobey him. I never gave him cause for anger by word or deed; could I help it that I - that I hated him?"

The excitement was again overpowering her strength. She sobbed tearlessly.

"You shall speak no more of that," Kingcote said; "leave it all in the past; forget it, dearest."

"Am I dearest to you?" she asked, looking into his eyes with yearning tenderness. "Oh, I have never felt till now what it would be to lose wealth and the power of bestowing it! May I tell you, only to justify myself - to make myself better in your sight? I might so often have married, and freed myself, men to whom wealth was nothing, who would have taken me for myself: but I could not, not even to gain an honourable position. I had always the hope that I might know what love meant. I have gone through the world and enjoyed it. I have had, I suppose, something of what is called success; it left me cold. Only when you came into my life then it began to be all different. I felt that you were come to save me; you were so unlike others, you interested and attracted me as no one else ever did. You remember our first meeting in Mr. Vissian's study? I went away and could think of nothing but you; wondered what your story was, tried to understand what it was in you that affected me so strangely."

"My sovereign lady!"

"If you knew the foolish tricks I played myself! I would not face the truth; I invented all sorts of explanations and excuses when I longed to see you. It occurred to me that you might perhaps come to care for Ada. I persuaded myself that it would make me happy if you married her and became rich. And I can give you nothing!"

"You give me nothing, Isabel? Yesterday I was the poorest creature in this world, without strength, without hope, sunk in misery; now every pulse of my heart is happiness."

She sighed with pleasure.

"Turn your face to me, Isabel; let me try to read it there, to believe it, to make it part of my life. Let me hear you say those three words - I do not know their sound - those three words I hunger for!"

"Three? Have I not said them? Was it only in my thought? I love you, dearest."

"Four! And from *your* lips, whose music came to me from another sphere, so far you seemed! You, the throned lady, the queen with the crown of loveliness; so gracious, so good, so noble —"

"Hush! you may not praise me. Dear, you know those words do not describe me, you know how unworthy I am."

"I will praise you whilst I have breath for speech! What are our paltry conventional judgments? In that I love you, you are to me a peerless woman. Have you not stooped to me from the circle of your glory? Are you not to me embodied goodness, purity, truth? What am I that you should love me, my soul's worship? Yet your eyes say it, your smile says it, your lips make golden music of the words."

She sighed again, drinking in his rapturous adoration with closed eyes.

"And you?" she asked. "When did you first love me? Did I not seem to you a very silly, empty, frivolous woman?"

"I loved your name long before I saw you. They talked to me at the rectory, and called you the Lady of Knightswell. I pictured you, and indeed not far unlike yourself; just so gracious, so bright, so gloriously a woman. I looked over to Knightswell from my window, and wondered if ever we should meet. What kindness of fate that brought me that day past the cottage!"

She was still musing over the growth of this flower in her heart.

"I knew it when the pain was over, and I could lie and think. It was all so clear to me then. I had escaped a terrible danger; but for the fall" - her voice sank - "I might never have known this happiness. I was in ceaseless fear lest you should have gone. I asked often if you

had called; if you had known how I longed for your name among those who called! There was no need of occupation for me. It was quite enough to lie and think of our talks together, to call back your voice and your look. Oh, I *longed* to send a word to you; you were so lonely, so unhappy. All that is over now, dearest? You will never again be comfortless?"

"Dare I think that, Isabel?"

"When I love you?"

"That again!" He covered his face with his hands. "Once more!"

"With my soul I love you!"

"If I could but hear that for ever! Shall I hear it when this hour has become part of our memory, in days after this? Dare I think of it as music that I may hear at will?"

"It shall never fail you, if your ear does not weary."

"If my eyes weary of the light of heaven?"

There was silence before Isabel spoke.

"Ada's marriage has been postponed on account of my illness; it would have taken place before this. When it is over, and I have discharged my duty to the end, then —"

She paused, not avoiding his gaze, but meeting it with simplest truth, her lips trembling a little.

"I shall have my three hundred a year," she added, almost pleadingly. "Can we not make it enough? Do you know that the Vissians live on less than that?"

Kingcote dropped his eyes, and spoke with embarrassment.

"To me it is wealth. For you, even alone, it would be miserable poverty. How can I accept such a sacrifice?"

"A sacrifice? Is that your measure of my love?"

He kissed her hand, then asked laughingly:

"What do you think my own income is? You dare not guess. I am richer than Goldsmith's country parson; I have full sixty pounds."

"Why, then, are we not wealthy? That is the rent of a delightful house, somewhere far away. Might we not go abroad? Would you," she added anxiously, "go abroad with me?"

"Dear, can you so change your life?"

"It is changed. There is no effort asked of me. I live only for you."

"Your friends?"

"My friends? One, two, three at most; those I need not lose. My acquaintances, three hundred at least; ah! let them go! It shall be a new world. What need have I of friends? *You* are my friend, my one, sole friend! I will have no other. Oh, you will not weary of me? I bring you so little - my ignorance, my foolish habits of thought. You will be patient with me, and help me to become more the kind of woman suitable for - for your wife?"

The flush in her cheeks had become steadfast; her eyes gleamed unnaturally. Each word she spoke heightened the fever which was gaining upon her. He noticed this.

"I have been wrong to let you talk so much," he said gravely. "You are tired; you will suffer."

"No, I shall sleep, and with such peace in my heart as I have never known."

She closed her eyes for a moment, and murmured words that he did not hear.

"Is Mrs. Stratton still with you?" he asked.

"At church; it must be nearly time for her to return."

"And Miss Warren?"

"She is reading, I suppose; she always prefers to be alone."

"Dear, you are suffering."

"No, indeed no. Is my face worn? Do I look - old?"

"What was that word? You are as beautiful as day."

"You will come very soon again? I will write and tell you when."

"I dare not let you speak more."

"I am still weak," she said with a smile. Her voice was failing.

He knelt by her side, and she, bending forward with modest grace, gave him the sweetness of her lips.

The storm still raged; nothing was to be seen beyond a few yards through the white whirl. As Kingcote struggled against it with bent head, a carriage passed him, moving silently over the snow; it was bringing Mrs. Stratton from church. This made him fear lest he should meet the Vissians near the rectory; he could speak with no one now; there was a voice in his ears which for his life he would not have silenced. He turned off into the trackless park, and walked in a direction which would bring him out at a lonely part of the new road. With a boy's delight he leapt through the deep snow, and fought his way against the whirlwind. He lost his bearing; the white outlines of the country were irrecongnisable; there was nothing for it but to push on, and come out where he might. It was two hours at least before he at length got into a track that he knew, and which led him homewards. He reached the cottage in complete exhaustion, chilled, feeble with hunger. Unable even to cast off his wet clothing before he had rested, he threw himself into a chair. He laughed; it would be something to tell her when they met again.

VOLUME II

CHAPTER I

Vincent Lacour rose at eleven these dark mornings; by half-past twelve he had breakfasted and was at leisure. To begin the day with an elastic interval of leisure seemed to him a primary condition of tolerable existence. From his bedroom windows he had a glimpse of a very busy street, along which, as he hummed at his toilet, he could see heavily-laden omnibuses hastening Citywards; he thought with contemptuous pity of the poor wretches who had to present themselves at bank, or office, or shop by a certain hour. "Under no circumstances whatever," he often said to himself with conviction, "would I support life in that way. If it comes to the worst, there are always the backwoods. Hard enough, no doubt, but that would be in the order of things. If I stick in the midst of civilisation, I live the life of a civilised man." A mode of looking at things wherein Vincent was probably rational enough.

On the present morning, about the middle of January, no sight of dolorous traffic had disturbed his soul. When he raised his blind, the gas had merely reflected itself against the window-panes; outside was Stygian darkness, vaguely lurid in one or two directions; the day was blinded with foul vapour. He shrugged his shoulders, and went through the operation of dressing in a dispirited way. In his sitting-room things were a trifle better; with a blazing fire and drawn curtains, it was just possible to counterfeit the cheerful end of day. The odour of coffee and cutlets aided him in forgetfulness of external miseries.

"I suppose," Vincent mused, as he propped the newspaper against the coffee-pot, "they go to business even such mornings as this. Great heavens!"

When the woman who waited upon him in his chambers had cleared the table and betaken herself to other quarters where her services were in request, Lacour placed himself in a deep chair, extended his limbs, and lit a cigarette from the box which stood on a little round

table at his elbow. He was still in his dressing gown; and, as he let his head fall back and puffed up thin streams of smoke, the picture of civilised leisure was complete. His fine hair, suffered to grow rather long, and at present brushed carelessly into place till it should have dried in the warmth of the room, relieved the delicate tints of his complexion; his throat was charmingly white against the dark velvet collar of the gown. The only detail not in harmony with his attitude and surroundings was the pronounced melancholy of his expression, the habitual phase of his countenance whenever, as now, he lost self-consciousness in reverie. The look one bears at such times is wont to be a truthful representation of the inner man, not merely of the moment's mood but of personality itself.

When he had reposed thus for half-an-hour, he went to his writing-table, took from a drawer an unfinished letter, and, with the help of a blotting-pad, resumed the writing of it in his chair by the fireside.

"... I am still waiting for an answer from Mrs. Clarendon to my last letter; no doubt she merely delays till she can tell me on what day she will be in London. I have told her with all emphasis that we would neither of us think of taking any steps until her health is completely restored and all her arrangements made; but she has assured me several times that it is her wish for our marriage to take place as soon as possible.

"There is a point, my dear Ada, which I have not hitherto ventured to mention to you; if I do so now, I feel sure I shall find that your ideas are precisely the same as my own. You know, of course, what Mrs. Clarendon's circumstances will be when her guardianship comes to an end, and you feel, as I do, that such a state of things is not practically possible. There can be no doubt of the truth of what I hear from several people, that she has refused an offer of marriage from Lord Winterset; it is astonishing, but the source of the statement is, I am told, the Earl himself. Well, you will see what I hint at; I know you have from the first had the same wish. Personally I shall have nothing to do with money matters; they are hateful to me, and, besides, are not your desires supreme? Whatever proposal you make will, doubt not, meet with my approval. Write to me in your own charming way of these matters; my words are blunt and rude.

"I am glad you share my dislike to settling down at once either at Knightswell or in London. My idea is that we should spend at least a

year in travelling. We will go to the East. I believe Oriental modes of life will exactly suit my temperament. I dislike activity; to dream away days in some delightful spot within view of the Bosphorus, with a hookah near at hand, and you reading poetry to me - I think I could make that last a long time. You will educate me. I have all sorts of rudimentary capacities, which will never develop by my own efforts, but with you to learn from as we chat at our ease among orange-groves, I may hope to get some of the culture which I do indeed desire. I —“

The flow of first personal pronouns was checked by a knock at the outer door, the knock of a visitor. With some surprise Lacour rose and went to open. With yet more surprise he admitted a young lady, whose face, though it was half-hidden with a shawl, he knew well enough.

“Are you alone?” she asked in a muffled voice. “Can I speak to you?”

“Yes, I am alone. Pray come in.”

When the shawl was thrown aside, Rhoda Meres stood looking nervously about the room. She was visibly in great agitation, and her appearance seemed to show that she had dressed hurriedly to come out. Lacour offered a chair by the fire, but she held at a distance, and at length sat on the couch which was near her as she entered. Clearly it was powerlessness to stand that made her seek the support. She held the shawl lightly across her lap; shame and misery goaded her, and she could neither raise her eyes nor speak.

“If you will allow me,” said Vincent, whose lips had been moving curiously as he regarded her, “I will just make a little change in my costume. Do come nearer to the fire. I won’t be a minute.”

Left alone she began to cry quietly, and this gave her a measure of relief. Before Lacour returned, she had time to dry her eyes and survey the room again. Her prettiness was of the kind which suffers rather from the signs of distress; she knew it, and it was a fresh source of trouble. She still did not look up when Lacour, conventionally attired, took his stand before the fire-place.

"It's a hideous morning," he began, with as much ease of manner as he could command. "Whatever can have brought you out in such weather?"

"Is it true what father has just told me?" broke from her lips; "is it true that you are going to marry Ada Warren?"

"Yes," replied Lacour with gravity, "it is true. I supposed you knew long since."

"Oh, it is cruel of you!" cried the girl passionately. "How can you speak to me in that way?"

She hid her face upon the head of the sofa and wept unrestrainedly. Lacour was uncomfortable. He took up a paper-knife and played with it, then seated himself by the table, rested his elbow on it and watched her, his own features a good deal troubled.

"Miss Meres—," he began, but her smothered voice interrupted him.

"You did not call me that the last time we were together," she sobbed. "Why do you try to put a distance between us in that way? It is not three months since that day when I met you - you asked me to - at South Kensington, and you speak as if it was years ago. You must have gone straight from me to - to her!"

Lacour had an eye for the quiet irony of circumstances; it almost amused him to reflect how literally true her words were. None the less he was troubled by her distress.

"Rhoda," he said, leaning forward and speaking with calm reproof, "this is altogether unworthy of you. I thought you so perfectly understood; I thought it had all been made clear between us. Now do give up crying, there's a good girl, and come to the fire. You look wretchedly cold. Take your hat off - won't you?"

"No, no; how can you expect me to make myself at ease in that way! I ought not to be here at all; it is foolish and wrong to have come to you. But I couldn't believe it; I was driven to come and ask you to contradict it. And you only tell me it is true; that you thought I knew it! I don't understand how you can be so cruel."

"Now let us talk," said Lacour, tapping his knee with the paper knife. "Why should you be so surprised at what you hear? You know all about my position; we talked it over in full that day at the Museum, didn't we? I was absolutely frank with you; I concealed nothing, and I pretended nothing. We liked each other; that we had both of us found out, and there was no need to put it into words. We found, too, that there was a danger of our growing indispensable to each other, a state of things which had to be met rationally, and - well, put an end to. Had we been at liberty to marry, I should certainly have asked you to be my wife; as there was no possibility of that, we adopted the wisest alternative, and agreed not to meet again. I cannot tell you how I admired your behaviour; so few girls are capable of talking in a calm and reasonable spirit of difficulties such as these. Any one watching us would have thought we were discussing some affair of the most every-day kind. As I say, you were simply admirable. It grieves me to see you breaking down so after all; it is not of a piece with the rest of your behaviour; it makes a flaw in what dramatists call the situation. Don't you agree with me? Have I said anything but the truth?"

Rhoda listened, with her eyes fixed despairingly on the ground; her hands holding the edge of the sofa gave her the appearance of one shrinking back from a precipice. When he had finished his statement, she faced him for the first time.

"What would you have thought if I had gone at once and married somebody else?"

"I should have heartily wished you every happiness."

"Should you have thought I did right?" she asked with persistence, clinging still to the edge of the sofa.

"On the whole, perhaps not."

"You mean," she said, not without bitterness, a fresh tear stealing to her cheek, "that you believe in my feeling for you, and wish me to understand that yours for me hadn't the same seriousness?"

"No, I didn't mean that. You must remember that I am not defending this step of mine, only showing you that I have not violated any compact between us. We were both left free, that's all."

"Then you don't care for her!" the girl exclaimed, with mingled satisfaction and re proof.

Lacour threw one leg over the other, and bent the paper-knife on his knee.

"You must remember," he said, "that marriages spring from many other motives besides personal inclination. I have told you that I don't defend myself. I'm afraid I mustn't say more than that."

Rhoda let her eyes wander; agitation was again getting hold upon her.

"You mean that I have no right to question you. I know I haven't, but - it all seems so impossible," she burst forth. "How can you tell me in such a voice that you are doing what you know isn't right? When father told me this morning I didn't know about that will; he only explained, because there was no use in keeping it secret any longer, and of course he knew nothing of - of the way it would come upon me."

"Ah, you know about the will? I am very glad of that; it makes our explanation easier."

She fixed her eyes upon him; they were only sad at first, but expanded into a despairing amazement.

"How *can* you speak so to me?" she asked in a low and shaken voice.

Lacour threw away the paper-cutter, and once more stood up.

"How am I to speak, Rhoda? Should you prefer to have me tell you lies? Why couldn't you accept the fact, and, knowing all the details, draw your own conclusion? You were at liberty to hold me in contempt, or to pity me, as you thought fit; you were even at liberty to interfere to spoil my marriage if you liked —"

"You think me capable of that? No wonder you part from me so easily. I thought you knew me better."

She put her hands over her face and let her tears have way.

"Rhoda," he exclaimed nervously, "there are two things I can't bear - a woman angry and a woman crying; but of the two I'd rather have the anger. You are upsetting me dreadfully. I had ever so much rather you told me in plain, knock-down words just what you think of me. If you distress yourself in that way I shall do something absurd, something we shall both of us be sorry for. Really, it was a horrible mistake to come here; why should we have to go through a scene of this kind? You are giving me - and yourself - the most needless pain."

She rose and sought the door with blinded eyes, as if to go from him at once. Lacour took a step or two towards her, and only with difficulty checked himself.

"Rhoda!" he exclaimed, "you cannot go out in that way. Sit down; do as I tell you!"

She turned, and, seeing his face, threw herself on her knees before him.

"Vincent, have pity on me! You can't, you won't, do this! I will kneel at your feet till you promise me to break it off. I can't bear it! Vincent, I can't bear it! It will drive me mad if you are married. I can't live; I shall kill myself! You don't know what my life has been since we ceased to meet; I couldn't have lived if I hadn't had a sort of hope that - oh, I know it's all my own fault; I said and did things I never should have done; you are blameless. But you *cannot* marry another woman when you - I mean, not at once, not so soon! It isn't three months, not three months, since you said you liked me better than any one else you had ever met. Can't you be sorry for me a little? Look at me - I haven't even the pride a woman ought to have; I am on my knees to you. Put it off a little while; let me see if I can get to bear it!"

She had caught and held the hand with which he had endeavoured to raise her. The man was in desperate straits; his face was a picture of passionate torment, the veins at his temple blue and swollen, his lips dry and quivering. With an effort of all his strength he raised her bodily, and almost flung her upon the sofa, where she lay with half-closed eyes, pallid, semi-conscious.

"Lie there till you are quiet," he said with a brutality which was the result of his inner struggle, and not at all an utterance of his real self, "and then go home. I am going out."

He went into an inner room, and reappeared in a moment equipped for walking. Rhoda had risen, and was before him at the door, standing with her face turned from him.

"Wait till I have been gone a minute," she said. "Forgive me; I will never come again."

"Where are you going?" he inquired abruptly.

"Home."

A sudden, violent double-knock at the door made them both start.

"It's only the postman," Lacour explained. The interruption had been of good effect, relieving the overcharged atmosphere.

"Listen to me for one moment before you go" he continued. "You must see perfectly well that you ask what is impossible. Mistake or not, right or wrong, I cannot undo what I have done; we must consider other people as well as ourselves. For all that, we are not going to part in an unfriendly way. I am sensitive; I could not be at my ease; I think you owe it to me to restore our relations to their former reasonable state."

"I will try," came from the girl in a whisper.

"But I must have your promise. You will go home to your father and sister, and will live as you have been doing."

"Do you know how that has been?" she murmured.

"In future it must be different," he urged vehemently. "Cannot you see that by being unhappy you reproach me?"

"I do not reproach you, but I cannot help my unhappiness."

"But you *must* help it," he cried half-angrily. "I will not have that laid to my account. You must overcome all such weakness. The feeling you profess for me is unreal if you are not capable of so small an effort on my behalf. Surely you see that?"

"I will try."

"Good. And now how are you going home? By train? No, I shall not let you go by train; you are not fit. Come to the foot of the stairs, and I will get you a cab. Nonsense, you need not drive as far as the house. Why will you irritate me by such resistance? The fog? It is as good as gone; it was quite light in the other room. Please go before me down stairs, and stop at the bottom. Now that is a good girl."

She held her hand to say good-bye, saying: "It is for the last time."

"No, but for a long time. You are a brave girl, and I shall think very kindly of you."

He found a cab, prepaid the fare, and waved his hand to her as she was carried off. The fog had become much thinner, but there was nothing to be seen still save slush underfoot and dim lights in the black front of the opposite house. Lacour hastened up to his rooms again, suddenly mindful of the letter which the postman had left and which was very possibly from Mrs. Clarendon.

No; the envelope showed an unknown hand. He opened it with disappointment, and found a folded sheet of letter-paper, on which was written something which had neither the formal commencement nor the conclusion of an ordinary letter; it was dated but not signed, and the matter of it this:

"The writer of this is personally acquainted with you, and desires to save you from the disagreeable consequences of an important step which you are contemplating. This step you are about to take in reliance upon the testamentary document which has hitherto been accepted as the late Mr. Clarendon's valid will. My friendly object is to warn you that the document in question will prove inoperative, seeing that Mr. Clarendon left a will of more recent date, which disposes of his property in a wholly different manner. This will is being kept back in accordance with express private injunctions of the testator; its very existence is unknown to any save the writer of this.

It will be produced either immediately after Miss Warren's marriage or upon her coming of age, should the latter event precede the former.

"The writer of this cannot of course make any bargain of secrecy with you, but he trusts that you will manifest your gratitude by heeding his desire and keeping silence in a matter which henceforth cannot affect you."

This astonishing communication, awakening memories of old-fashioned melodrama, was penned in firm, masculine handwriting, not unlike that of a legal copying clerk. Lacour read it again and again, his amazement at first rendering him incapable of scrutinising each particular. He stood for a quarter of an hour with the paper in his hand, oblivious of everything in life save those written words. Recovering himself somewhat, he picked up the envelope from the floor and examined its postmarks; they were metropolitan. At last he seated himself to think.

Anonymous letters are, to all save Cabinet Ministers and police officials, agitating things, if only as examples of a rare phenomenon. The tendency is to attach importance to them, however strong the arguments making for a less grave consideration. An anonymous letter concerning some matter of vital importance to the recipient will rarely leave him at ease until events have adduced their final evidence on one side or the other; mystery wholly impenetrable will often exert a moral influence which no lucidity of argument, no open appeal, could ever have attained. The present missive had everything in its favour; it could not have come at a more opportune moment, it could not have found a mind better prepared to receive and be affected by it. Lacour must have been singularly free from those instincts of superstition which linger in the soundest minds not to be struck with something like awe at the fact of the postman's knock which signalled such an arrival having come just when it did, at the moment when he had, after a hard struggle, crushed down a generous impulse, and was congratulating himself upon his success. He did not care to handle the paper, but let it lie before his eyes on the table. He was nervously excited. This message from the unknown was at once a reproach and a command; as a mere warning on behalf of his material interests he was not yet able to regard it.

The rest of the day was none too long to be wholly given up to brooding on the one subject. With calmness naturally came a consideration of the possibility that the letter was a mere hoax; yet he could not earnestly entertain that view. Who should send it? His intended marriage was known, he felt sure, to very few people; certainly to none of those frisky spirits who were his associates in London, and who alone would relish such a form of amusement. Mrs. Clarendon? Her name haunted him suggestively from the first. But in that case it would be no mere joke, but a trick seriously meant to succeed. Was Mrs. Clarendon capable of such a trick to maintain her position yet a little longer? That was not to be easily credited; yet Lacour had sufficient insight into his own being to understand how very possible it is for a character of pure instincts to reconcile itself with the meanest motives in special circumstances. Of men and women most justly deemed noble there is not one of whom it is safe to predict a noble course of conduct; the wise content themselves with smiling approval after the event. He knew how terribly hard it must be for her to come down from her position of comfort and dignity, how strong the temptation must be to postpone her fall by any means. But in that case - why had she refused marry Lord Winterset, and thus not only make herself independent of Ada's actions, but rise at once to a social standing compared with which her present one was insignificant? This was final, one would think, against the supposition of her being guilty of such a stratagem. On the other hand, if it were no mere fiction, if this will did in truth exist, could Mrs. Clarendon be the person who was keeping it back? It seemed ridiculous to suppose such a thing, though of course the nature of the will might reveal unimaginable reasons. What was the law on the subject? Could any one with impunity act thus? Lacour half rose to get at his tomes of legal lore, but a reflection checked him: wills have often come to light long after the testator's death, and it would be the easiest thing in the world to create an appearance of chance discovery.

When evening came, he went to his restaurant and dined poorly, then walked for a long time about the streets, grievously perplexed. Some action he must take, and at once, but the conflicting reasons which swarmed in his mind were as far as ever from subordinating themselves to the leadership of a satisfactory argument. Probabilities were exasperatingly balanced. At one moment he had all but resolved to go down at once to Chislehurst and put the letter before Mrs. Clarendon. But what was the use? If she already knew of it, she would only profess ignorance of the whole matter; if she knew

nothing, she could afford no help. Equally useless to seek the counsel of indifferent people; they could do no more than run through the conjectures with which he was already too familiar, and would naturally derive high amusement from his dilemma. The joke would spread. With a sense of relief he arrived at one conclusion: he must decide for himself and keep the anonymous letter a secret.

This meant, of course, that his marriage must be postponed. It was all very well to smile at the extreme improbability of the danger revealed to him, but the recollection of how improbable it had seemed would not go far in the way of consolation if he found himself married to Ada Warren and divorced from her possessions. There was, from one point of view, some comfort in the thought that his predicament would be just as grave if he had been about to marry Ada from pure affection; in no case could they live on his bachelor allowance. Lacour persuaded himself that this reflection would help him in the disagreeable task which he had to face. The marriage must be postponed; not, of course, in a sudden, crude, business-like way, but with ingenuity and tact, by the exertion of that personal influence which he believed to be supreme with Ada. All sorts of occasions for delay would present themselves. Mrs. Clarendon seemed anxious to have it over (a suspicious circumstance, by-the-bye), but Ada herself could not of course take any initiative in the matter, and would be the ready dupe of plausible representations. That she was deeply in love with him he took for granted; the pleasant flattery of a supposition which agreed so well with our friend's view of his own advantages was not to be resisted. In a year and a half she would be of age; it was a long time to wait, with a prospect of mere frustration in the end, but there was no choice. If the danger proved illusory, after all he would not have lost much; nay, it was to be remembered that Ada's inheritance increased in value from accumulation, and would be yet more desirable after another eighteen months. Truly, there was a much-needed point of support; he must keep that well in mind. Of course, if any considerable heiress, with a more agreeable person, fell at his feet in the meantime, he held himself free to review his position; another advantage of delaying, if it came to that.

You will naturally understand that these reflections are not to be taken baldly as representing the state of Lacour's mind. He thought all these things, but he felt many other things simultaneously. I will just barely hint that when excitement had allayed itself, there might have been some dim motive, of which Lacour was himself

unconscious, operating towards acquiescence in the unexpected turn things had taken. This, at all events, is one of the suggestions helping me to account for the fact that Lacour put away the anonymous letter that same night and adhered to his purpose of revealing its existence to no one. He would scarcely have done so if that day's mental perturbation had not brought into activity certain forces of his nature previously without influence on his decisions.

Mrs. Clarendon being with the Strattons at Chislehurst, Ada was living by herself at Knightswell. Instead of finishing the letter to her upon which he was engaged when interrupted by Rhoda Meres, Lacour, having let a day or two pass in nervous awaiting of each post, rose one morning with the determination to take train to Winstoke. On his breakfast-table he found a letter from Mrs. Clarendon - a brief matter-of-fact communication - telling him that she hoped to be in London that day week, and requesting him to previously pay a visit to her solicitor, who would discuss with him the business matters which it was needful to arrange. He pondered the words of this note, but only with the result of strengthening his resolve. After very little hesitation he penned a reply, begging that there might be no needless haste, and intimating, with skilful avoidance of direct falsehood, that he consulted Ada's wish in suppressing his own anxiety for a speedy marriage. "There are circumstances, as you know," wrote Vincent, "which make it my duty to exercise the utmost delicacy and discretion in all that concerns my marriage. I esteem you my true friend; I have often given you my perfect confidence, and in return I have asked for your forbearance when I showed myself weak or inconsistent. You will believe that I am not incapable of generosity, that I would not selfishly exact the fulfilment of any pledge which a hint should prove to have been rashly given. I am but too well aware of my own shortcomings, but after all there is a certain pride in me which will preserve me from the errors of vulgar self-confidence. I beg of you, dear Mrs. Clarendon, not to see in this more than I would imply. I only desire that there should be no unbecoming haste. Ada and myself are both, thank goodness! young enough, and, I believe, are sincerely devoted to each other. Let everything be done with careful preconsideration."

He read this through with an air of satisfaction, and posted it on his way to Waterloo Station. The train by which he travelled reached Winstoke at two o'clock. As it was a clear day he walked from the station to the village, which was nearly a mile, then took luncheon at

the inn, and reached Knightswell about half-past three. On asking for Miss Warren he was led to the drawing-room.

Ada entered almost immediately. They had not seen each other since the day at South Kensington, and he was astonished at the girl's appearance. Her face had every mark of illness; there were dark rings about her eyes, her cheeks were colourless, her lips dry and nervous; she had a worn, anxious, feverish look, and the hand she gave him was hot. They exchanged no more than an ordinary friends' greeting, and Ada seated herself without having met his eyes.

Lacour drew his chair within reach of her, and leaned forward to take one of her hands, which she surrendered passively.

"What has made you look so ill?" he asked, with surprise. "Is it the result of your anxiety for Mrs. Clarendon? Why didn't you tell me that you were not well?"

"There was nothing necessary to speak of," she answered, in a voice which seemed to come from a parched throat. "I think I am not quite well, but it's nothing more than I am used to; I have headaches."

"You haven't written to me for a fortnight. Why didn't you ask me to come and see you?"

"I supposed you would come before long."

"You don't seem very glad to see me, now I have come," said Lacour musingly.

"Yes, I am glad."

The words had not much life, and the smile with which she accompanied them was as pain-stricken as a smile could be. Lacour, still holding her hand, looked down, his brows contracting.

"You haven't had any bad news?" he asked all at once, facing her.

"Bad news?"

Isabel Clarendon

"It is not anything you have heard that has made you ill?"

"Certainly not. What should I have heard?"

Her tone had sincerity in it, and relieved him from the suspicion that she too might have received an anonymous letter. He leaned back in his chair smiling.

"What should I have heard?" Ada repeated impatiently, examining his face.

"Oh, I don't know. We are always getting news, and there is so much more of bad than good. Mrs. Clarendon seems to be much better," he added, slapping his leg with his gloves.

"Yes. You have heard from her?"

"Several times. I had a letter this morning."

"What did she say?"

"She spoke of the necessary preparations for our marriage."

Ada was silent. She had several times moved nervously on her chair, and now she seemed compelled by restlessness to change her position. A small ornament on a bracket had got out of position; she went and put it right.

"What preparations?" she asked, walking to the window.

"I don't exactly know. She wishes me to see her lawyer. Unfortunately," he added in a joking tone, "you are not one of those girls whose marriage is a simple matter of the ceremony."

She turned and came towards him, her hands hanging clasped before her.

"That is something I have to speak of. I cannot mention it to Mrs. Clarendon, and if I tell you now it will be done with. I desire, there shall be no kind of settlement. Nothing of the kind is enacted by the

will, and I do not wish it. Will you please to see that my wish is respected?"

"Why is it your wish?"

"I can give no reason. I wish it."

"I imagine there will be very strong opposition, and not only from Mrs. Clarendon. I expect the trustees will have something to say."

Ada's eyes flashed; her whole face showed agitation, passionate impatience.

"What does it matter what they say?" exclaimed. "What are they to me? What is my future to them? If you refuse to give me an assurance that my one desire shall be respected I must turn to Mrs. Clarendon, and that will be hateful to me! I have asked nothing else; but this I wish."

"You put as much persistence into it as another would in pleading for exactly the opposite," remarked Lacour, his coolness contrasting strangely with her agitated vehemence. "You know that a wish of yours is a law to me, and I promise you to agree to nothing you would dislike; remember that they cannot do without my assent. But you see," he added, "that it is not a very easy thing for me to urge. I have already been made to feel quite sufficiently —"

He interrupted himself. Ada waited for him to resume, still standing before him, but he kept silence.

"What have you been made to feel?" she asked, more quietly, her eyes searchingly fixed on him.

"Well, we won't speak of that. Why do you stand? Come and let us talk of other things. You do indeed, Ada, look wretchedly ill."

She averted her face impatiently. Though he had risen and was placing a chair for her, she moved to the window again.

"For my own part," said Vincent, watching her, "I am grieved that you have set your mind on that. My own resolve was that everything

Isabel Clarendon

should be settled on you. I hadn't given the matter a thought till just lately, but well that is what I had determined."

Ada turned in his direction.

"You have been corresponding with Mrs. Clarendon?" she said, only half interruptedly. "Yes, you told me. I understand."

What she understood was clear enough to Lacour, and his silence was filled with a rather vigorous inward debate. A protest of conscience-strengthened by prudential reasons - urged his next words.

"You mustn't let me convey a false impression. Mrs. Clarendon is delicacy itself; I am quite sure she would not mean —"

He checked himself, naturally confirming the false impression. Conscience had still a voice, but the resolve with which he had come into Ada's presence grew stronger as he talked with her.

Then she did a curious thing. Coming from the window, she seemed about to walk past him, but, instead of passing, paused just when her dress almost brushed his feet, and stood with her eyes fixed on the ground.

"Do sit down," Lacour forced himself to say, rising again and laying his hand on the other chair.

He saw that she trembled; then, with a quick movement, she went to a chair at a greater distance.

"These things are horribly awkward to talk about," he said, leaning forward at his ease. "Let's put them aside, shall we? We shall have plenty of time to consider all that."

Ada raised her face and looked at him.

"Plenty of time?"

"Surely. I have begged Mrs. Clarendon to remember how anxious we both are to do nothing hastily, to leave her ample time for the

arrangements she will find necessary, - her own, I mean. I am sure I represented your wish?"

"Certainly," was the scarcely audible reply.

"It will of course be some time before she is perfectly strong," Vincent pursued, noting with much satisfaction what he deemed a proof of the strength of her passion for him; she was so clearly disappointed. "Such an illness must have pulled her down seriously. I should think by the summer she will be herself again. It is wretched that we are so utterly dependent on others, and are bound to act with such cautious regard."

"You have fixed the summer, in your correspondence with her?"

"Oh no! I leave it quite open. But we cannot, of course, wait for ever."

Ada sat motionless, her hands in her lap. Her features were fixed in hard, blank misery. No wonder the girl looked ill. Ever since the day on which she wrote to Lacour her acceptance of his offer, life had been to her a mere battle of passions. When time and the events which so rapidly succeeded had dulled the memory of that frenzy which drove her to the step, of set purpose she nursed all the dark and resentful instincts of her nature, that they might support her to the end. Pride was an ally if it cost her her life she would betray by no sign the suffering she had brought upon herself. She blinded her feelings, strove to crush her heart when it revolted against her self imposed deception that she loved this man who would become her husband. Had she not found a pleasure in his society? Did not his attentions flatter and even move her? And ever she heard a voice saying that he cared nothing for her, that she had a face which could attract no man, that her money alone drew him to her, and that voice was always Mrs. Clarendon's. Hatred of Isabel was in moments almost madness. It seemed in some horribly unnatural way to be increased by the sight of the pale and suffering face; a wretched perversion poisoned the sympathy which showed itself in many an act of kindness. The struggle with her better nature brought her at times near to delirium. When Isabel's convalescence began, Ada counted the days. She knew that Lacour would not postpone their marriage an hour later than necessity demanded; her strength would surely hold out a few more weeks. That he did not come to see her

was at once a relief and a source of bitterness; his letters she read with a mixture of eagerness and cold criticism. She stirred herself to factitious passion, excited all the glowing instincts, all the dormant ardours, of her being - and shivered before the flame. Every motive that could render marriage desirable she dwelt upon till it should become part of her hourly consciousness. The life she would lead when marriage had given her freedom was her constant forethought. She was made for enjoyment, and would enjoy. For her should exist no petty social rules, no conventional hypocrisies. In London her house should be a gathering-place of Bohemians. She herself did not lack brains, and her wealth would bring people about her. She would be a patroness of art and letters, would make friends of actresses who needed helping to opportunities of success, of artists who were struggling against unmerited neglect. Reading had filled her mind with images of such a world; was it not better than that dull sphere which styled itself exclusive? . . . When at length Mrs. Clarendon left Knightswell to go to the Strattons, Ada promised herself that any morning might bring a definite proposal of a day for her wedding. With difficulty she restrained herself from asking when it was to be. She had put aside every doubt, every fear, every regret; her life burned towards that day which would complete her purpose. And now. . . .

"But we must see each other oftener," Lacour was saying. "If Mrs. Clarendon will welcome me —"

She interrupted him harshly.

"Is Mrs. Clarendon the only person you consult henceforth?"

"My dear Ada, you mustn't misunderstand a mere form of politeness."

"Such forms have always been disagreeable to me."

She rose and moved to the fire-place. Lacour watched her from under his eyebrows. It grew more and more evident how strong was his hold upon her; he asked himself whether a little innocent quarrel might not best serve his ends.

"I am wearying you," he said, rising.

She could not let him go without plain question and answer; it seemed to her that she had reached the limit of endurance, that her strength would fail under the trial of another hour. Yet her lips would form no word.

"In what have I displeased you, Ada?" Vincent inquired, with an air of much surprise. "Clearly I have done so. Pray tell me what I have said or done."

She turned from the fire and faced him.

"When is it your intention for our marriage to take place?"

Lacour was suspicious again. This astounding eagerness must be the result of some information she had received; she dreaded to lose him. Did not her desire about the settlement somehow depend upon the same cause?

"Surely I have no interest in putting it off," he said, his head a little on one side, his most delicate smile in full play.

"But you think it had better not be before the summer?"

"Is not that best? I have no will but yours, Ada."

"I think," she replied slowly, "that it shall be, not this summer, but the summer of next year."

"A year and a half still? For whatever reason?" he cried.

"I shall come of age then," she continued, looking past him with vague eyes. "I need consult no one then about my wishes."

"My dear Ada, you surely do not think I hesitated —"

"No," she said firmly, "but it will be better. Have I your consent to this?"

He walked away a few steps, desperately puzzled, exasperated, by the necessity of answering yes or no, when more than he could imagine might depend upon the choice.

Isabel Clarendon

"This is a joke, Ada!" he said, coming back with disturbed countenance.

"Nothing less. I ask you to postpone our marriage till I am twenty-one."

Her eyes did not move from his face. If he had said, "We will be married next week," she would have given him her hand in assent. Surely at that moment the air must have been full of invisible mocking spirits, waiting, waiting in delicious anticipation of human folly.

"If that is your wish," Lacour said, "I cannot oppose it." He had assumed dignity. "My constancy, Ada, can bear a test of eighteen months."

"I will let Mrs. Clarendon know," Ada observed quietly. "It will relieve her mind."

Should he leave her thus? He hesitated for a moment. Pooh! As if he could not whistle her back whenever it suited him to do so; women appreciate a display of dignity and firmness. He held his hand in silence, and, when she gave him hers, he just touched it with his lips. As he moved to the door he expected momentarily to hear his name uttered, to find himself recalled. No; she allowed him to disappear. He left the house rather hurriedly, and not in an entirely sweet temper, in spite of the fact that he had gained the very end he had in view, and which he had feared would be so difficult of attainment, would necessitate such a succession of hypocrisies and small conflicts.

How the imps in the air exploded as soon as he was gone!

CHAPTER II

Mrs. Stratton was summoned home by her husband's arrival just before Christmas. Isabel preferred to delay yet a little, and reached Chislehurst a fortnight later, accomplishing the journey with the assistance of her maid only. It proved rather too much for her strength, and for a day or two she had to keep her room. Then she joined the family, very pale still, and not able to do much more than hold a kind of court throned by the fireside, but with the light of happiness on her face, listening with a bright smile to every one's conversation, equally interested in Master Edgar's latest exploit by flood or field, and in his mother's rather trenchant comments on neighbouring families.

All the Strattons were at home. The four British youths had been keeping what may best be described by Coleridge's phrase, "Devil's Yule." Colonel Stratton was by good luck a man of substance, and could maintain an establishment corresponding to the needs of such a household. Though Mrs. Stratton had spoken of her house as being too large, it would scarcely be deemed so by the guests of mature age who shared it with the two young Strattons already at Woolwich and Sandhurst, and the other two who were still mewing their mighty youth at scholastic institutions. There was a certain upper chamber in which were to be found appliances for the various kinds of recreation sought after by robust young Britons; here they put on "gloves," and pummelled each other to their hearts' satisfaction - thud - thud! Here they vied with one another at single-stick - thwack - thwack! Here they swung dumb-bells, and tumbled on improvised trapezes. And hence, when their noble minds yearned for variety, they rushed headlong, pell-mell into the lower regions of the house, to the delights of the billiard-room. They had the use of a couple of horses, and the frenzy of their over-full veins drove them in turns, like demon huntsmen, over the frozen or muddy country. They returned at the hour of dinner, and ate - ate in stolid silence, till they had appeased the gnawing of hunger, then flung themselves here and there about the drawing-room till their thoughts, released from the brief employment of digestion, could formulate remarks on such subjects as interest youth of their species.

Mrs. Stratton enjoyed it all. Her offspring were perfect in her eyes. Had they been less riotous she would have conceived anxiety about

their health. When her third boy, Reginald, aged thirteen years, fell to fisticuffs with a youthful tramp in a lane hard by, and came home irrecongnisable from blood and dirt, she viewed him with amused astonishment, and, after setting him to rights with sponge and sticking-plaster, laughingly recommended that in future he should fight only with his social equals. With the two eldest she was a sort of sister; they walked with her about the garden with their arms over her shoulders; the confidence between her and them was perfect, and certainly they were very fond of her. They were stalwart young ruffians, these two, with immaculate complexions and the smooth roundness of feature which entitles men to be called handsome by ladies who are addicted to the use of that word. Mrs. Stratton would rather have been their mother than have borne Shakespeare and Michael Angelo as twins.

Their father - one may be excused for almost forgetting him - was a man of not more than medium height, but very solidly built, and like all his boys, bullet-headed. His round chubby face was much bronzed, his auburn hair and bushy beard of the same colour preserved to him a youthful appearance, which was aided by the remarkably innocent and soft-tempered look of his eyes. He was a man of weak will and great bodily strength; his sons had a string of stories to illustrate the latter - the former would perhaps have been best discoursed upon by Mrs. Stratton. A man of extreme simplicity in his habits, and abnormally shy; with men he was by no means at his ease till they became very old acquaintances, and with women ease never came to him at all. The defect was the more painful owing to his very limited *moyens* in the matter of conversation; had it not been for the existence of weather, the colonel would, under ordinary circumstances, have preserved the silence for which nature intended him. Of Mrs. Clarendon in particular he had a kind of fear, though at the same time he was attracted to her by her unfailing charm; he knew she sought opportunities of teasing him, and, though it cost him much perspiration, he did not dislike the torment. With her he would have been brought to talk if with any one; a fearful fascination often drew him to her side, only to find, when he valorously opened his lips, that a roguish smile had robbed him of every conception of what he was going to say.

"Well, colonel?" she began, on a typical occasion, one morning when they were alone together for a few minutes.

Isabel Clarendon

The colonel turned his eyes to the windows, coughed, and, looking uneasily round, observed that it was astonishingly warm for the season.

"It is," assented Isabel gravely. Whereupon, as if struck by the similarity of their sentiments, he looked into her face, and repeated his assertion with more emphasis.

"Astonishingly warm for January. You find it so? So do I. Yes, you really notice it?"

"I have been thinking over it since I got up," said Isabel. "I wonder how many degrees we have in this room?"

With the delight of a shy man who has found something definite to speak of, Colonel Stratton at once started up to go to the thermometer which hung in the window; a half-suppressed laugh made him stop and turn round.

"You don't really care to know," he said, flushing up to the eyes. "That's one of your jokes, Mrs. Clarendon. Ha, ha! Good!"

He stood before her, desperately nibbling both ends of his moustache - he had acquired much skill in the habit of getting them both into his mouth at the same time.

"Well, colonel?"

"You are in a - a frisky mood this morning, Mrs. Clarendon," he burst forth, laughing painfully.

"A what kind of mood?"

"I beg your pardon. I should have chosen a better word," he exclaimed, in much confusion. "It really is wonderfully warm for the season - you notice it?"

"Colonel, I assure you I notice it."

Fear at length overcame fascination.

Isabel Clarendon

"I must go and have a look at that new bay," he murmured. "You - you'll excuse me, Mrs. Clarendon? Ah, here's Rose! Don't you notice how very warm it is, my dear?"

"Rose," said Mrs. Clarendon, when the colonel had made his escape at quick time, "come here and answer me a rude question. Don't be shocked; it's something I do so want to know. How did the colonel" - she lowered her voice, her eyes were gleaming with fun - "how did the colonel propose to you?"

"My dear," was the reply, given in a humorous whisper, "I did it myself."

On another occasion, Colonel Stratton came into the room when Isabel was reading. She just noticed his presence, but did not seem inclined to talk, had, in fact, a shadow on her brow. The colonel observed this, by side glances. He moved about a little, and somehow managed to get behind her chair. Then, tapping her on the shoulder - it was his habit with male acquaintances, and he was probably unconscious of the act - he said, in a low voice. but with much energy:

"It's a damned shame! A damned shame!"

He had disappeared when Isabel turned to look at him.

She was not quite well that day, or something troubled her. After lunch she went to her own room, and, when she had sat for some time unoccupied, took from her writing-case a letter which she had written the day before. It was to Ada. As she glanced over it, some painful emotion possessed her.

"I can't send it! I am ashamed!" Her lips uttered the words which she had spoken only to herself.

She crumpled the sheet, and threw it into the fire.

She dined alone, and, a little later, Mrs. Stratton came to sit with her. After various talk, Mrs. Stratton said:

"A couple of friends are coming from town to-morrow - one of them a friend of yours."

"Who?"

"Rather more than a friend; a relative, I suppose."

"Robert Asquith?" said Isabel, surprised.

"Yes; I invited him some time ago, at Knightswell."

"Why, I had a letter from him just before I left, and he didn't say anything about it. How came you to make such friends with him?"

"Oh, he took my fancy! And I thought it might be pleasant for you to meet here."

"Certainly; I am delighted."

"I'm so glad you like him," she added, after a pause. "I had no idea you got on such good terms when he came down."

"Why do you never speak of him?" Mrs. Stratton asked, smiling slightly.

"Don't I? I really can't say. I suppose I take Robert for granted. I dare say he speaks as little of me as I of him."

"Perhaps so," said the other, in an unusually absent way. Then she asked:

"He has never been married?"

"Oh no! Robert is a confirmed old bachelor."

"Rather strange that, don't you think? He is in easy circumstances, I think you told me?"

"Decidedly easy."

"And good-looking."

"You think so? Yes, I suppose he is," mused Isabel.

"Suppose? You know very well he is, my dear. And what is he doing, pray?"

"I really can't say. He has rooms, and lives, I suppose, a very idle life. I shouldn't wonder if he goes back to the East some day."

"Very much better for him to stay in England, it seems to me," remarked Mrs. Stratton drily. Isabel changed the subject.

She went to her bedroom early, and, when her attendant had helped her into the easy costume of a dressing-gown, sat by the fire and let her eyes dream on the shapes of glowing coal. Presently she shook loose her hair, which was done up for the night, and spread it over her shoulders. She took a tress between the fingers of her left hand and stroked its smoothness, a smile growing upon her lips. Then she paced the length of the room several times, standing a moment before the mirror when she reached it. The dressing-gown became well the soft outlines of her form; the long, dark hair, rippling in its sweep from brow to shoulder, changed somewhat the ordinary appearance of her face, gave its sweetness a graver meaning, a more earnest cast of thought.

"If he saw me now he would tell me I was beautiful."

She smiled at herself; sighed a little, and, before resuming her seat, took from a drawer three letters which she had received during her stay here. Each was of many pages, closely written; he who wrote them had much to say. Isabel had read them many, many times. No such letters had ever before come to her; her pride and joy in them was that of a young girl, touched, however, with the sadness and regret never absent from joy which comes late. She thought how different her life would have been if she had listened to words like these when the years spread out before her a limitless field of hope. It seemed too much as if these letters were addressed to some one else, and had only been given her to read. She had to bring herself with conscious effort to an understanding of all they implied, all they demanded. Yet they moved her to deepest tenderness.

And that was the most marked quality of the letters themselves. In them was sounded by turns every note of love. There was the grace of pure worship, the lyric rapture of passion and desire, the soft rhythm of resigned longing, the sweet sadness of apprehension; but

the note of an exquisite tenderness was ever recurrent, with it the music began and ended. They were the love letters of a poet, one in whom melancholy mingled with every emotion, whose brightest visions of joy were shadowed by brooding mortality. There was nothing masterful, no exaction, no distinctly masculine fervour. If a dread fell upon him lest the happiness promised was too great, it found voice in passionate entreaty. He told her much of his past life, its inner secrets, its yearnings, its despair. Of her infinite pity she had chosen him; she would not let him fall again into utter darkness? Love did not stir in him vulgar ambitions; to dwell in the paradise of her presence was all that his soul desired; let the world go its idle way. Too soft, too tender; another would have read his outpourings with compassionate fear, dreading the future of such a love. He visioned a happiness which has no existence. Men win happiness, but not thus. To woo and win as pastime in the pauses of the world's battle, to make hearth and home a retreat in ill-hap, a place of rest between the combats of day and day, to kindly regard a wife for her usefulness, and children for the pride they satisfy, thus, and not otherwise, do men come to content. Content that is not worth much, perhaps; but what is the price current of misery?

Isabel wrote in reply to each letter; Kingcote would have liked to pay in gold the village postman who brought her writing to his door. She, too, spoke with love's poetry, and her passion rang true. How strange to pen such words! She had always thought of such forms of expression with raillery, perhaps with a little contempt. Boys and girls of course wrote to each other in this way; it was excusable as long as one did not know the world. For all her knowledge of the world she would not now have surrendered the high privilege of language born of the heart. And in all that she wrote - in her thoughts too - it was her effort to place *him* in that station of mastery which he would not claim for himself. Was there already self-distrust, and was it only woman's instinct of subjection? She would have had him more assured of his lordship, would have desired that he should worship with less humility. If a man have not strength, love alone will not suffice to bind a woman to him; she will pardon brutality, but weakness inspires her with fear. Isabel had no such thoughts as these, but perchance had his letters contained one sentence of hard practical planning at the end of all their tenderness she would have found that something which unconsciously she lacked. She had bridged the gulf between him and herself; she was ready to make good words by deed, and, in spite of every obstacle, become his wife; it must be his to bear her manfully from one

threshold to the other. Once done, she felt in her soul that she should regret nothing; she loved him with the first love of her life. But his hand must uphold her, guide her, for she would close her eyes when the moment came. . . .

She was alone in Mrs. Stratton's boudoir next morning, when the door was pushed open; turning, she saw her cousin.

"I was told that I might come here in search of you," said Robert, with his genial smile. "How are you?"

"Very well, thank you. How do you do? - as the children answer. But I needn't ask that; you have a wonderful faculty for looking healthy."

"I don't think there's often much amiss with me. Setting aside the chance of breaking my neck over a fence, I think I may promise myself a few more years."

"And the risk of fences you are wise enough to avoid."

"Nothing of the kind. I was hunting in Leicestershire only yesterday."

"Impossible, Robert!"

"Indisputable fact —" He had it on his lips to call her "Isabel," but for some reason checked himself. "A friend of mine took me down and mounted me. I enjoyed it thoroughly."

"But you are becoming an Englishman."

"Was I ever anything else?"

"I believe I generally think of you in an Oriental light. At all events, you smoke a hookah, and very much prefer lying on a rug to sitting on a chair."

"The hookah I have abandoned; the rug comes of your imagination."

"Oh dear no; it was one of the first things you said to me when you came to see me last spring in town. It stamped you in my mind for ever."

They laughed.

"But I want to know how you are?" Robert resumed, leaning to her, with his hands on his knees. "Mrs. Stratton's account is too vaguely ladylike. How, in truth, are you?"

A ripple of laughter replied to him.

"You show me that you can be mirthful; that is much, no doubt. But you must have a change."

"Am I not having one?"

"Oh, I don't call this a change. You must get fresh air."

Asquith's way of speaking with her was not quite what it had formerly been. He assumed more of - was it cousin ship? - than he had done. Possibly the man himself had undergone certain changes during the last few months. Oriental he had been to a certain extent; something of over-leisureliness had marked his bearing; there had been an aloofness in his way of remarking upon things and people, a kind of mild fatalism in his modes of speech. An English autumn with its moor-sport and the life of country houses; an English winter with growth of acquaintances at hospitable firesides had doubtless not been without their modifying influence; but other reasons were also discoverable for the change in his manner towards Isabel. For one thing, he had heard of her refusal of Lord Winterset; for another, he knew of Ada's approaching marriage.

She made no reply to his advice, and he continued.

"You know Henry Calder?"

"Well."

"You know that he has been absolutely ruined by a bank failure?"

"You don't say so?"

"Indeed. The poor fellow is in a wretched state - utterly broken down; they feared a few weeks ago that he was going crazy. You know that he was great at yachting; of course he has had to sell his yacht, and I have bought it."

"What will you tell me next?"

"Why, this. It is essential that poor Calder should get away to the South, and nothing would do him half as much good as a sail among the islands. Now I propose to ask him to accompany me on such a cruise, say at the beginning of next month. He and I have been on the best of terms since we were lads, and there's no kind of awkwardness in the arrangement; he goes to put me up to the art of seamanship. Of course his wife accompanies him, and probably their eldest girl."

"That's the kindest thing I have heard for a long time, Robert," said Isabel, giving him a look of admiration.

"Oh dear no; nothing could be simpler. And now - I want you to come with them."

Isabel shook her head.

"But what is your objection?"

"I cannot leave England at present."

"I don't ask you to. We are at the middle of January; it will be time enough in three weeks."

"Out of the question."

She still shook her head, smiling. Robert reflected for a moment.

"When does this marriage take place?" he asked abruptly.

"Very shortly, I suppose. I have written to Mr. Lacour to request him to make arrangements as soon as he likes. I shall meet him in London on Monday."

"Good. Then you are absolutely free."

"I am not free."

He glanced at her inquiringly.

"I am not free," Isabel repeated, looking straight before her.

"I suppose I shall be grossly impertinent if I ask what it is that holds you?"

"I cannot now tell you, Robert, but - I must remain in England."

Her voice had a tremor in it, which she did her best to subdue. She was smiling still, but in a forced, self-conscious way.

Asquith leaned back; he had lost his look of cheerful confidence.

"But it isn't such a grave matter, after all," said Isabel, restoring the former tone. "It was a very kind thought of yours, very kind - but you won't quarrel with me because I can't come? It will make no difference in your plan for the Calders, surely?"

"I can't say, I'm sure," Asquith replied, in an almost petulant manner, strangely at variance with his ordinary tone. He had thrust his hands into his pockets, and was tapping the carpet with his foot.

"What nonsense!" Isabel exclaimed, with growing good humour. "As if you would allow such a scheme to be overthrown just because one of the party failed you! I can suggest half a dozen delightful people who will be happy to go with you."

"No doubt; but I wanted you."

"Robert, you are undeniably Oriental; the despotic habit still clings to you. If one swallow doesn't make a summer, neither does one day's hunting make an Englishman."

His countenance cleared.

"Well," he said, "this is certainly not final. Let us wait till that wedding is over."

"It is final," she returned, very positively. "The wedding will not in the least alter things."

"What then are you going to do?" he asked, with deliberation, gazing at her steadily.

Her eyes fell, and she seemed half to resent his persistence, as she answered:

"I am going to live on three hundred a year."

"H'm! Do you think of living in London?"

"No; I do not think of living in London. Proceed, sir, with the cross-examination."

"I think I have been rude enough for one day," he returned, with a quiet smile as he rose from his chair.

She held her hand to him with the friendly grace which could repay even when it disappointed.

"Thank you, with all my heart," she said. "Only - remember how dear independence must be to me."

"Are you acquainted with Mr. Lyster?" Robert asked, with a transition to easier topics.

"I don't think I know any one of that name."

"Some one who arrived here a few minutes after I did. It seems we came in the same train."

"To be sure; a friend, the Strattons were expecting. Shall we go to the drawing-room?"

There they found the gentleman in question conversing with Mrs. Stratton, a man of smooth appearance and fluent speech. His forte seemed to be politics, on which subject he discoursed continuously during luncheon. There happened to be diplomatic difficulties with Russia, and Mr. Lyster - much concerned, by-the-bye, with Indian commerce - was emphatic in denunciation of Slavonic craft and treachery, himself taking the stand-point of disinterested honesty, of principle in politics.

"We shall have to give those fellows a licking yet," remarked Colonel Stratton, with confidence inspired by professional feeling.

"I should think so, indeed!" put in Frank Stratton, "the eldest son. The two schoolboys had by this time returned to their football, and only the representatives of Woolwich and Sandhurst remained to grace the family table. "And the sooner the better."

"What I want to know," exclaimed Mr. Lyster, "is whether England is a civilising power or not. If so, it is our duty to go to war; if not, of course we may prepare to go to the —"

"Don't hesitate, Mr. Lyster," said Mrs. Stratton good-naturedly, "I'm sure we all agree with you."

"Civilisation!" proceeded the politician, when the laugh had subsided; "that is what England represents, and civilisation rests upon a military basis, if it has any basis at all. It's all very well to talk about the humanity of arbitration and fudge of that kind; it only postpones the evil day. Our position is the result of good, hard fighting, and mere talking won't keep it up; we must fight again. Too long a peace means loss of prestige, and loss of prestige means the encroachment of barbarians, who are only to be kept in order by repeated thrashings. They forget that we are a civilising power; unfortunately we are too much disposed to forget it ourselves."

"The mistake is," remarked Frank Stratton, "to treat with those fellows at all. Why don't we take a map of Asia and draw a line just where it seems good to us, and bid the dogs keep on their own side of it? Of course they wouldn't do so - and then we lick 'em!"

His mother looked at him with pride.

"I respect our constitution," pursued Mr. Lyster, who was too much absorbed in his own rhetoric to pay much attention to the frivolous remarks of others; "but I've often thought it wouldn't be amiss if we could have a British Bizmarck" - so he pronounced the name. "A Bizmarck would make short work with Radical humbug. He would keep up patriotism; he would remind us of our duties as a civilising power."

"And he'd establish conscription," remarked Frank. "That's what we want."

"Eh? Conscription? Well, I won't go quite so far as that. It is one of our English glories that there are always men ready to volunteer for active service; men who are prepared to fight and, if need be, to die for their country. I shouldn't like to see that altered. I think the voluntary system a good one. We are Englishmen; we don't need to be driven to battle."

Robert Asquith glanced at Isabel and smiled.

The weather was so bad in the afternoon that it was impossible to leave the house. The two young Strattons went to try and break each other's heads at single-stick; the colonel, with his guests, repaired to the billiard-room, where they smoked, talked, and handled the cues. Asquith was not quite in the mood for billiards. When he had played with the colonel for half an hour, Mr. Lyster took his place, and he strolled round the room, examining the guns, cricket-bats, horse-whips, and pictures, which invited observation. Going to one of the seats to repose himself, he found a book lying close by on the floor, open leaves downwards, just as it had fallen. It was one of Captain Marryat's novels. Robert threw up his legs on to the couch, and began to read.

Our friend was anything but a man of literary tastes; with the exception of purchases at railway stations, it is doubtful whether he had ever bought a book in his life. He read newspapers assiduously; they satisfied his need of mental pabulum. For the rest, he made the world his book, and had the faculty of extracting amusement from it in sufficient quantities to occupy his leisure time. He was anything but an ignorant man; conversation, and the haphazard experiences of life, had supplied him in a living way with knowledge which ordinarily has to be sought from the printed page; but intellectual

tendencies, properly speaking, he had none. Art he only cared for in the elementary way; for music, he plainly confessed he had no ear. On men and manners, he habitually reflected, and had fair natural power of insight; problems of life were non-existent for him.

The story which he had picked up absorbed him; he read on and on with a boy's simple enjoyment. His body rested in a corner of the seat, his legs were stretched at full length, one over the other, he held the book up in both hands; often he laughed aloud, and at other times his face wore an expression of the gravest interest. The billiard players had passed out of his world.

When at length he put down the book, he found himself alone in the room. He jumped up, flung the book on to the green table, yawned, stretched his arms, slapped his legs to restore circulation, and walked to the window. It was growing dark. In the leafless garden the rain fell steadily; occasionally drops made their way down the chimney, and hissed upon the fire. Robert had the feeling of one who awakes after dissipation, a debauched and untidy sensation. He felt the necessity of plunging his face in water.

Having done so, he made his way to the drawing-room. Visitors were not to be expected such an afternoon as this, and at first he thought the room was empty. But Mrs. Stratton was sitting with her back to him; the ruffling of a newspaper she held apprised him of her presence.

"So some one has appeared at last," said the lady, "not for my company, of course, but for a cup of tea. Would you be so good as to ring the bell?"

"The tea will be grateful, I admit," returned Robert, doing her bidding, "but your society no less. In fact, I want to speak to you."

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Clarendon refuses my invitation - that I mentioned in my letter, you remember."

"Refuses? What is her objection?"

"Nothing definite. She says she cannot leave England, that's all. Has she - I don't think there's any harm in asking you, is there? - has she spoken with you at all of what she is going to do?"

"Well, no, In fact, it's a subject she won't approach. I don't think she has formed any plans whatever yet."

Asquith reflected, and at the same time tea was brought in and lamps lit.

"I half supposed," said Mrs. Stratton, glancing aside at him, as she held up the teapot, "that you were the most likely person to know of her plans."

"I assure you, Mrs. Stratton, that was a mistake, an entire mistake."

The lady raised her eyebrows a little and carefully removed a tea-leaf from her cup.

"You take it for granted," she asked, after a moment, "that she will really quit Knightswell?"

"How otherwise? I am perfectly sure that nothing would induce her to continue living there under the new *régime*. If the persons concerned had been - had been other than they are, of course the affair might have been very simple. But not as it is."

"By-the-bye," he added, "she gave me one piece of information. She does not intend to live in London."

"Where then, I wonder?"

"I can't conjecture."

"I would repeat the invitation, I think," said Mrs. Stratton, looking at him.

"I shall do so, though not just yet."

The colonel and Mr. Lyster came in talking loudly.

"Ah, we left you asleep," said the former to Robert. "Didn't like to disturb you. We've had a walk."

"A walk, in this weather!" exclaimed his wife.

"Oh yes; a little rain does one no harm. Not a bad afternoon; there's a pleasant warmth in the air. Don't you notice a warmth in the air, Asquith?"

"Yes, here in the drawing-room. I can't answer for outside."

"Oh, it's distinctly warm. Eh, Lyster?"

Mrs. Clarendon appeared in the room. The colonel lost his ease, and began to walk about. The conversation became general.

There were several other people at dinner. It fell to Asquith to take down a certain Miss Pye, a tall young lady with a long thin nose, simply dressed in white, with much exposure of bust. This *décolleté* costume was a thing Robert found it impossible to get used to; he felt that if he went on dining with ladies for another five-and-twenty years there would still arise in him the same sensation of amazement as often as he turned to speak and had his eyes regaled with a vision of the female form divine, with its most significant developments insisted upon. Singular questions of social economy invariably suggested themselves. How far was this fashion a consequence of severe competition in the marriage market? He always found it a little difficult to look his fair neighbour in the face, and, when he at length did so, experienced surprise at her placid equanimity. Miss Pye's equanimity it would have taken much to disturb. As in duty bound, Robert made his endeavour to interest her in various kinds of conversation. The affirmative and negative particles alone replied to him. She ate with steady application; she smiled feebly when he attempted a very evident joke; she appeared to have no concern in any of the things about which men and women use or abuse the gift of speech. Yet he succeeded at last.

"Did you ever read a book called —?" he asked, naming the novel of Marryat's which had absorbed him through the afternoon.

"I should think so!" exclaimed Miss Pye, her eyes gleaming with appreciation. "Isn't it awfully jolly? And —"

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She proceeded to name half a dozen other works by the same refined and penetrating author.

"That's the kind of book I like," she said. "I believe I ought to have been a boy by rights. My brothers have all Marryat, and Mayne Reid, and Cooper; and I know them all by heart. 'Valentine Vox,' too; do you know that? Oh, you just get it, as soon as you can. And 'Tom Burke of Ours'; that's Lever. And 'Handy Andy.' You *haven't* read 'Handy Andy'? But what a great deal you have to read yet."

Robert admitted that such was the case. Miss Pye had got upon her subject, and Asquith drew her out. She was something of a new female type to him; but only so because he had long been unused to the society of English girls. Had he mentioned a book by George Eliot she would have told him that her mother didn't approve of that writer, who was an atheist and immoral.

Later he found himself by Isabel. Her proximity was pleasant to him. He would have preferred just now to sit by her in silence, an glance at her face occasionally, but that was scarcely possible.

"You will let me hear from you when that business is over?" he said.

"I will. Remember it is not my function to send invitations for the wedding."

"I suppose not."

Somebody else drew near.

As they passed from the dining-room after breakfast next morning, Isabel said to Mrs. Stratton:

"Come to the boudoir; I have a letter I want to show you."

The letter was this:

"DEAR MRS. CLARENDON,

"I want to tell you in as few words as possible that my marriage is indefinitely postponed. It will not, in any event, take place before I

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complete my twenty-first year. My second purpose in writing to you is to ask your permission to go at once to London and live in Mr. Meres' house. This is for purposes of study. I am unable to procure at Knightswell the materials I need. Will you oblige me with a reply as soon as you can?

"Faithfully yours,
"ADA WARREN."

"It does not in the very least surprise me," observed Mrs. Stratton, smiling urbanely.

"I don't think I could say that. I *am* surprised. I believed Ada would stick to a purpose through thick and thin."

"My dear, she accepted that man in a moment of pique, and she has very wisely repented whilst there is time."

Isabel was silent.

"And her wanting to go to London," pursued the other. "It's all perfectly clear. She's ashamed of herself; she can't face you."

Isabel seated herself and mused, the letter on her lap. Her cheek had a flush of excitement, and her eyes were very bright.

"Look at this, too," she said, with a laugh, taking from its envelope another letter she was holding. "From Mrs. Bruce Page. I wonder *she* is not ashamed of herself, I really do!"

"My dearest Mrs. Clarendon," ran this epistle, "it would be a mercy if you would let me know what your latest news is about that boy. Do you hear from or of him? Has he done anything surprising yet? I shouldn't a bit wonder if he does - I mean in this affair. He is capable of anything. Do let me know at once if you have any curious news either from him or Ada."

"It looks as if she anticipated it," said Mrs. Stratton.

"It does. It would be no great wonder if she proved to be at the bottom of it."

"Of the postponement, or rupture, or whatever it is?"

Isabel nodded.

"But what shall you do immediately?"

"Nothing. What is there to do? Merely write and give her the permission she asks for."

"I am really delighted at this!" Mrs. Stratton exclaimed.

"Why should you be delighted? I assure you it is nothing to me."

"My dear, it is everything - you will tell Mr. Asquith?"

"I suppose so. It will annoy him."

She reddened, and corrected herself.

"Nonsense, I didn't mean to say that. I dare say he will take it very much as you do. But you will both be wrong, both be wrong."

"Isabel, you are mysterious."

"Am I?" she asked with a laugh, not a very joyous one.

"Yes, more mysterious than I like."

"Then indeed it won't be mysterious at all. It's only in your imagination, Rose. Oh dear, oh dear!" she sighed, "this world is a hard one!"

"I wonder whether you will hear from Mr. Lacour?" Mrs. Stratton asked, after trying to read her friend's face.

"I wonder," said Isabel absently.

Their conversation soon came to an end. There was to be driving before lunch as the sky had cleared, and it was not till afternoon that Isabel had an opportunity of informing her cousin of the news she had received.

Robert heard it calmly.

"I really do not know whether to congratulate you or not," he said, with meaning.

"At all events, you may congratulate Ada."

"Probably. Do you stay here much longer?"

"I go at the end of the week, the day after to-morrow."

"So soon?"

"Yes, Knightswell must not be left empty."

They gazed at each other without definite expression.

CHAPTER III

"I shall be home on Saturday," wrote Isabel, at the close of a letter addressed to Wood End. "I am writing to Mr. Vissian, to ask him to come and see me before his afternoon service on Sunday, as I want to speak with him of several things. Will *you* come at three? He will leave shortly after, and you - perhaps will not care to stay?"

She said nothing of the event which had hurried her return, neither did she mention it in her letter to the rector. Mr. Vissian called at the cottage on Friday.

"I have a message for you from Mrs. Clarendon," he said. "She is returning, and will be glad to see you any time after three on Sunday. I shall be at the house between two and three myself - have to go specially - your audience will succeed mine."

Kingcote smiled as he promised to obey the summons.

"We shall see you to-morrow as usual," said Mr. Vissian, in going. "I *believe* I have got hold of something that will startle you. Nothing, nothing; merely the solution of a crux which has defied every Shakespearean critic hitherto. Don't be too excited about it; it may prove a mare's nest; *but* -," the rector half closed his eyes and nodded twice - "we shall see."

He went off in his usual high spirits. Sundry Christmas bills had just reduced him to penury, but that was a care he did not allow to weigh upon him, for all that his black suit of daily wear cried shame upon him at the elbows - yet weaker points were happily concealed by pendent cloth. Had he not on his shelves the last year's publications of the Early English Text Society, bound in half-calf extra?

To his infinite annoyance, he waited in vain for Kingcote on Saturday evening. The discovery at which he had hinted, had become overnight a certainty; he was convinced that he had explained "the Lady of the Strachy!" (See, *loc. cit.*, the critical edition of *Twelfth Night*, which Mr. Vissian subsequently put forth - a work deserving more attention at the hands of Shakespearean scholars than it has received.)

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"*What* can ail the man?" he exclaimed impatiently, as he kept coming forth from his study to Mrs. Vissian. "He never failed us before. If he only knew what I've got for him!"

But Kingcote did not appear, and Mr. Vissian only saw him on the morrow in Mrs. Clarendon's drawing-room. Kingcote came in with a grave look, and shook hands with Isabel in silence.

"I hope you have come back quite restored," he said, rather awkwardly, when it became incumbent upon him to speak. He was not good at acting.

"Why did you fail me last night?" inquired Mr. Vissian.

"I am very sorry. I was not well," was the brief reply.

He seated himself and was mute. Isabel kept up a lively conversation with the rector, till the latter declared he would be late for church, and hurriedly made off. When he had closed the door behind him, Isabel rose softly, her face all joy; Kingcote moved to meet her, and she fell upon his neck.

"You are not well, dear?"

"That was only an excuse. How well *you* look, my beautiful!"

"You are glad to see me again?"

"Glad and sorry, for I have bad news to tell you."

"You too have bad news?" she said anxiously.

"I, too?"

"Come and sit by me."

They sat side by side.

"Oh, let it wait!" he whispered. "Forget both yours and mine for these few moments. Look at me; let me drink at your eyes. Speak, and call me by my name. I have only lived on the echoes of that

voice. Where did you learn that music, Isabel? My pure-browed lady! Your head is like those which come before us in old songs, dark against gold tapestry, or looking from high castle-windows. You should have lived when queens paced in moon-lit galleries, and heard below the poet softly singing to their beauty. Isabel! Is not that a sweet and queenly name? - and I may speak it."

She listened, trembling with pleasure. Was not the world well lost for such worship? She all but forgot his mention of ill-hap, till the mute pain of his lips brought it back to her mind.

"What has happened, Bernard?"

"What I scarcely dare tell you. Let me kiss your lips once, and then move away and try to realise what it will be to leave you."

"Leave me?"

"It has come at last. I have known that it must come, and yet I have closed my eyes against the certainty. I could not go to the Vissians' last night because I was overcome with misery. In the morning I had heard from my sister that her husband is dead. She is helpless, without means of any kind, and her two children dependent upon her. I must go at once to London and - provide for them."

"Provide for them? Has her husband left her nothing?"

"Not a coin. He was a man of business, and did badly; he has been ill for months, and they could not have lived but for money from me. It is good that he is dead. I had no more to give, unless I surrendered my independence. That of course I must do now, but for Mary and her children I can do it more easily. Her husband I disliked; association with him was impossible. He was without education, good of his kind perhaps, but - commercial. We only met once, and it was once too often."

"But how could a sister of yours marry so?"

"Poor girl! I never understood it; but she was very young, and had known him some time. That was in Norwich, of course. She went off with him secretly, and they were married in London. Her mother would have nothing to do with them; at her death, what she would

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have left to Mary, came to me. It was trivial; I have more than repaid it."

"Can his relations do nothing for her?"

"No. A brother of his, Mary tells me, has come, and will attend the funeral. But he has distinctly told her that he can give no help."

Kingcote had drawn away a little; Isabel took and held his hand.

"Bernard, how can you support them?"

"Oh, for a time it doesn't matter; I shall use my capital. Then I shall - work like others do, I suppose. I have had an easy life so long; it was sure to come to an end some day."

"Why do you keep away from me? What does all this matter? Nothing has come between us, dear."

His brows were heavy, and he could only look at her sadly. Isabel turned her head away, and dashed tears from her eyes.

"But you too have your ill news, you said?"

For answer she rose and fetched Ada's letter. Bernard read it.

"Why ill news?" he asked, when he had brooded for a moment.

Isabel had not resumed her seat. She moved about in much agitation, and at length threw herself on her knees by him.

"It is something that I ought to have told you before," she said. "It seemed, though, such an easy difficulty to overcome; I was so happy, and I would not think of anything in the way. I -" she hid her face against him - "I have lived beyond my income, and have had to borrow money - a large sum of money. I could not have done it, I think, unless it had seemed certain that I should marry some rich man, - though I had to insure my life, and there was my annuity. You know I have had only two thousand a year; it was so little for the way in which I lived. I have always been so thoughtless about money. I could not foresee this great happiness that has come to me.

Do not think - Bernard, you won't think that I should have ever married only because the man who asked me was rich, - I mean if I had never known you. You won't think that? I have told you that I could never have brought myself to that. Listen, the day before my accident, before I knew that you loved me, before my own love for you had become certain in my heart, Lord Winterset asked me to be his wife, and I - I refused."

She had looked up pleadingly, but at the end hid her face again. Oh, it is so hard to a woman - nay, that is unjust, to a man also - to speak out the whole truth in self-accusation. Who ever yet did it? What penitent at the confessional? What votary in silent prayer? Maybe it is regard for the dignity of human nature which chains the tongue, that dignity which it costs so much to support, which we so often feel to be a name only, or the shadow of a name.

Kingcote could say nothing.

"Still, listen to me, my dearest! I could not let that stand between us. The debt would have to be paid some day, and when I *knew* who my husband was to be, there was only one way of meeting it. I should have asked Ada," her voice sank, "to give me the money. She will be rich, very rich; she could easily give me that. She is good-hearted, I know, though we have never been able to love each other. Before her marriage I would have asked her to give it me, and she would not have refused; it would have been her first act when the property became hers."

He laid his hand upon her bowed head, and stroked it tenderly; then he raised her to sit by him again.

"I am so glad you have told me that," he said, smiling very kindly. "Let it be the end of your trouble. Ada will still give you the money when she is of age."

She kept a long silence before her next words, then looked up at him with wide eyes.

"Are we to be parted so long?"

"But our marriage as yet was in any case impossible. It was bad enough to ask you to share poverty with me; you could not support my sister and her children."

"Would not your own income have been sufficient for them? We should have had my money."

"Even if it were enough - barely enough - at present, it could not possibly be so as the boys grow up. It is very hard to think of her living in such a poor and joyless way in those hateful surroundings. I dread to imagine her state now. She will have grown used to a mean, sordid life; her refinement will all be gone; the poisonous air of working London will have infected her. I shall feel shame that she is my sister."

"That will soon be altered," Isabel said comfortingly. "You will take her into new scenes. Your society will help her. Who would not grow gentle and refined in your presence? Oh, my love, my love!"

Passionate distress overcame her; she clung to him and wept silently. Kingcote was pale and woe-stricken; the future loomed hideous before him; he found it hard to feign to himself the gleaming of one far-off star of hope.

"Bernard!"

She raised her head, and looked into his eyes with a passion-glow of purpose.

"If I can obtain that money at once - borrow it, perhaps, from some one who will take my mere word to be repaid when Ada is of age - yes, yes, I could - will you marry me and let us trust to the future? You are clever - you know so much - you will find some position, sooner or later. Who knows? Your sister may marry again. Will you take my hand, and let us face everything together?"

He was shaken from head to foot with the struggle her words excited. With her arms clinging thus around him, in a moment he would yield - and there was a voice within which whispered hoarsely that to yield would be to tempt a fearful fate. What might he not be led to do next? What impossible sacrifice of self-respect might not become inevitable? He had no jot of faith in his own

power to make a future. Imagine this woman some day cooling in her love, and speaking with her pale face unutterable things. She would have a right to reproach him, and a reproach divined would drive him to frenzy. She was weak - he would not shape that into words, but the knowledge was in his heart. After all the features of her life that she had revealed to him, how could he dare the step she tempted him to? His love for her was so sincere that to place her in a position which might touch him with shame on her behalf was in thought a horror. Of whom would she borrow a large sum of money on her bare word? That, to begin with, was impossible; think what it would cost her. Before, all was different. Her income and his put together did not in truth seem to him sad poverty; for her love's sake she would have contented herself. But the new responsibilities - and then this latest revelation -

Not in linked thoughts, but in swiftly successive flashes of feeling, did these things pass through his mind. He suffered terribly in the moments while the struggle lasted. But at length he found that - he knew not how - he had put away her clinging arms.

"Isabel, we cannot do that." The words seemed to come unbidden; he heard them as if another spoke. "I love you too well, my own soul! I feel you must not think of that."

She hung her head, passion-worn, and he heard her ask:

"Do you love me?"

He knelt at her feet and pressed her joined hands against his heart.

"Do I love you? Do you know what it has cost me to refuse to take your life and make it part of mine?"

"You do seem to love me, Bernard." She stroked the hair upon his forehead, and put it back with soft woman's touch. Her voice was low and caressing; moisture made her eyes large. "You will not fail me? You will still love me, till I can make myself free?"

"And you?"

"Do I speak and act as if my love were a thing that will easily pass?"

"That is well and wisely spoken," he returned, smiling up at her. "That is better in my eyes than if you had vowed to love me for ever. We cannot vow love; we can only say that we love with all the strength of our being, and silently feel that it is not a thing of brief life. I shall never ask you to promise to love me, only to say that you do."

"But that is almost as if you feared."

"For you, or for myself?"

"You have no fear that your love for me will fail? Dear, I am not the wife you should have sought."

"You are the wife I was fated to seek; that is enough. You are throned above all women when my soul worships."

They rested in the after-thought of each other's words; he pressed her hands against his lips.

"I have few ambitions, Isabel," he continued. "Of things which men mostly seek, few are of any account to me; I could not stir myself to pursue what awakens others to frantic zeal. One ambition there is that has ruled my life; a high one. I have wished to win a woman's love. To me that has always been the one, the only thing in the end worth living for. I thought my life would pass and I should never know that supreme blessing. Whatever comes after this, I have had your love, bright one!"

"And always will have."

He raised his hand in playful warning.

"Life is full of tragedies. The tragedy, I have always thought, is not where two who love each other die for the sake of their love. That is glorious triumph. But where love itself dies, blown upon by the cold breath of the world, and those who loved live on with hearts made sepulchres - that is tragedy."

"I shall always love you." She repeated it under her breath, convincing herself.

"On Tuesday I go to London," Kingcote said, seating himself by her. "So good-bye to my cottage. We shall not forget that poor little house? I hope sometimes to come and look at it, and see my dead self. Some family of working people will live there next. It will be well if they are not haunted."

"Why haunted?"

"One feels that misery must cling to walls that have seen so much of it."

"But brighter spirits have since then swept and garnished it, have they not?"

Kingcote was always thrilled with pleasure when her thoughts made for themselves a more imaginative kind of speech. It brought her out of the prose-talking world, and nearer to him.

"They have, dear. You must write to me often, it will be long before we see each other again."

"But you do not go to-morrow; you will see me again before you go?"

"If you wish it; but won't it only make the parting harder?"

"Come to me on Tuesday morning, if only for a few minutes. You will go by the 1.30 train? Oh, how shall I ever let you leave me?"

Kingcote rose. He had still words to say, but they would not easily be uttered.

"Isabel, will your life in future be quite the same as it has been? - no, not inwardly, but your outward, daily life?"

"No, it shall not be the same," she replied earnestly. "How can it be the same? Have I not so much that is new and dear to fill my days?"

"If you had married me now," he continued, "it would have been to leave the world with which you are familiar; you were ready to make that sacrifice for me. Can you promise me to draw a little apart

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- to try yourself - to see if you could really give it up, and live for yourself and for me?"

"I will - indeed I will, Bernard! - you shall know all I do every day; you shall see if I cannot live as you wish. You shall tell me of books to read; I will come into *your* world."

"That will make my life full of joy, instead of an intolerable burden," he exclaimed, glowing with delight. "I *could* not bear it otherwise! The distance between us would be too great. And - is it not better to confess it? - I am easily jealous. I feel that to go on my way there in London, whilst you were shining among people of wealth and leisure, all doing you homage, that would drive me mad."

Isabel smiled as she reassured him. These words pleased her, but not in the nobler way. He had said what should never be said to a woman by one who will hold her love pure of meaner mixture.

"I shall come to London in the spring," she said presently. "You know I always do so but this time it will only be to be near you. I can't afford a house; I shall take rooms, and you will often come to see me."

He looked at her, but did not answer.

"But who knows what may happen before then?" she exclaimed, with sudden joyousness. "We can make no plans. Fate has brought us together, and fate will help us - have no fear!"

"Fate is not often benevolent," said Kingcote, smiling cheerlessly.

"But are not we the exceptions? I feel - I know - that there is happiness for us; I won't listen to a single down-hearted word! You came to Winstoke because my love was waiting for you; you are going now to London because something is prepared which we cannot foresee. Look brighter, dear; it is all well."

"Isabel, I will not see you again before I go."

She hesitated.

"Then write me your good-bye, and you shall have one from me on Tuesday morning. Send me your London address in the letter. Shall you live where your sister is?"

"For the present, I believe."

"And you will see your artist friend again. Shall you tell him? Have you told him?"

"I have not, and shall not. It is our secret."

She gave a laugh of joy. Why did the laugh jar on him? He was so easily affected by subtleties of feeling which another man would not conceive.

They took leave of each other.

Kingcote walked about the lanes till some time after dark, then made his way to the rectory. Mr. Vissian himself opened the door - there was no evening service at the church in winter.

"Good! I expected you," he exclaimed. "Better late than never. Have you had tea?"

"No; I should be glad of a cup."

They went into the sitting-room, where Mrs. Vissian and Percy still sat at table. It was a rule with the rector to put all mundane literature aside on Sunday, but to-day he had yielded to temptation. At the place where he had been sitting, a Shakespeare lay open, with a note-book beside it. Mr. Vissian stood with his back to the fire, fidgeting. Presently he could hold no longer; whilst Kingcote was still eating and drinking, he laid a hand on his shoulder, and put before him a page of the note-book.

"My friend," he said gravely, "read that; - carefully now; with no indecent haste. Read - perpend!"

It was the explanatory note on "The Lady of the Strachy."

"That's very interesting," said Kingcote quietly.

"Interesting! By the Turk! It is epoch-making, as the Germans say. I have not a doubt remaining."

Mrs. Vissian listened to the conversation with just a little evident uneasiness. It was troublesome to be more orthodox than the rector, but she could not forget that it was Sunday. Affectionate little women are quite capable of these weaknesses.

When Mr. Vissian's excitement was somewhat allayed, Kingcote began in a matter-of-fact way, and told them of his approaching departure, explaining the circumstances which occasioned it. His hearers were genuinely distressed.

"This is evil following upon good with a vengeance," said the rector. His wife looked sorrowfully at him, and half wondered in her foolish little mind whether this might be a reproof of his Sabbath-breaking - a mild one, suited to a first backsliding.

"I owe you more than I can thank you for," said Kingcote, looking from husband to wife. "I shall think of the rectory as if it had been my home."

"I hope," said Mrs. Vissian, touched, "that you will make it a home as often as you possibly can. We shall always be very, very glad to see you here."

"My dear Kingcote," murmured the rector, in an uncertain voice, "this - this upsets me. It is so wholly unexpected. And we were to have gone through every play with scrutiny of metrical development. Your ear is so much more to be depended upon than mine in such matters. Dear me, dear me! This is excessively disturbing!"

"But, by-the-bye," he added, when he could better trust his vocal organs, "I shall now have some one whom I can rely upon in immediate vicinity of the book-stalls. If you should ever come across anything in my line - you know the kind of thing I want --"

"Mr. Kingcote," said his wife, raising her finger, "I'm sure you won't put discord between me and my husband. You know that I dread the mention of book-stalls."

Isabel Clarendon

There was of course to be a later leave taking; in view of his domestic disturbances Kingcote consented to breakfast and dine at the rectory on Tuesday. His sticks of furniture he would sell to a dealer in Winstoke on the morrow, and his packing would only be an affair of a couple of hours, books and all. Percy ardently desired to help in this process, and was permitted to come.

Kingcote woke in the middle of the night, with so distinct a voice in his ears that he sat and gazed nervously about him in the darkness. It was as though Isabel had spoken in his very presence, and after he had gained full consciousness; she said, "It is fate, dear," and uttered the words with pain. Our dreams play these tricks with us. He rose and went to the window; there was a setting moon, and the old oak-trunk before the cottage threw a long, black shadow. The night-wind made its wonted sobbing sound. The sky was very dark in the direction of Knightswell.

He had his letter on Tuesday morning. Feeling the envelope, he anticipated what he should find on opening it. There was Isabel's portrait, a beautiful vignette photograph; it had been taken when she was last in London. Referring to it, she said:

"Look at it, and let it look at you, daily. And, if ever you *wish* to tell me that all is at an end between us, only send me the portrait back again."

CHAPTER IV

Kingcote reached Waterloo Station as dusk was gathering. He had not occupied himself on the journey, yet it had seemed short; from when he waved his hand at Winstoke to Mr. Vissian and Percy, who saw him depart, to his first glimpse of the grimy south-west end of London - including twenty minutes' pacing of a platform when he had to change - a dull absentmindedness had possessed him, a sense of unreality in his progress, an indifference to the objects about him. At Waterloo he let the other occupants of the carriage all descend before he moved; when at last obliged to stir, it cost him an effort to overcome his inertia. He had not altered his position since seating himself; there was a printed notice opposite him, and he had been reading this mechanically for nearly an hour.

His luggage necessitated the hire of a cab; he found himself crossing the river, then struggling amid dense traffic in the Strand. More than half a year of life at Wood End had put a strange distance between him and the streets of London; he looked at objects with an eye of unfamiliarity, with unconcern, or with shrinking. In vain he tried to remind himself that he had come to do battle amid this roaring crowd; his consciousness refused belief. He had lived so long in a dream; the waking was so sudden, the reality so brutal, that he must needs fall back again and close his eyes for a time, letting his ears alone instruct him. The newsboys yelling the evening papers insisted most strongly on recognition; they embodied this civilisation into which he had been dragged back; with involuntary grotesqueness of fancy he saw in them the representatives of invisible editors, their cries were a translation, as it were, of editorial utterance, only more offensive because addressed to the outward sense and not to be escaped. He wished for deafness. . . .

Where was Knightswell? Where was Isabel Clarendon? His heart sank. . . .

The cab bore him on. He was in Tottenham Court Road, then in Hampstead Road, then entering that desolate region through which stagnates the Regent's Canal, the north end of Camden Town. It was growing dark; the shops were revealing their many-coloured hideousness with shameless gas illumination; the air seemed heavy

with impurity. The driver had to stop to make inquiries about his way, and sought a repetition of the address. Ultimately a gloomy street was entered, and after slow, uncertain advancing, they stopped. Kingcote had never visited his sister at this house, but the number on the door was right; he knocked.

He was standing in a short, sloping street of low two-storey dwelling-houses; they had areas, and steps ascending to the door. In the gloom he could see that the houses had the appearance of newness, and were the abodes of what one hears called "decent" working people - one would prefer some negative term. The top of the street was lost behind a sudden curve; at the lower end the flaring front of a public-house showed itself. Children were playing about in considerable numbers, for there was no regular traffic; before the public-house was an organ grinding "Ah, che la morte" in valse time. The air was bitterly cold, and the wind blew for rain.

He had leisure to observe all this, for it was a couple of minutes before any one answered his knock. Just as he was about to repeat it the door opened, and a woman with a lighted candle, which she held back to protect it against the wind, presented herself. She was fat and had a prodigious dewlap; on one side of her many-folded chin was a large hairy wart; she wore a black dress, much strained above the waist, with a dirty white apron - a most unprepossessing portress.

"Is it Mr. Kingcut?" she asked in a thin, panting voice. "Why, an' I was that moment sayin' as it was time Mr. Kingcut come. I'm sure your sister 'll be glad to see you, poor thing! How'll you get your luggidge in? She's just lyin' down a bit; I'll go an' tell her. The funeral's been a bit too much for her; but I've got a nice 'addock down for her, an expectin' your comin'. See, I'll leave the candle on the banister, an' you shall have alight in the front room in no time."

A man who loafed by assisted to move the boxes into the house, and Kingcote dismissed the cab, paying twice the due fare because a word of argument would just now have cost him agony. He left the candle guttering at the foot of the stairs, and entered a room of which the door stood open immediately on his left hand. There was a low fire in the grate; the candle outside helped him to discern a sofa which stood before the window, and on this he sank. A hissing sound came from below stairs, and the house was full of the odour of frying fish.

There was asthmatic panting outside, and, with a lamp in her hand, the fat woman reappeared; she stood pressing one hand against her side, in the other holding the light so as to enable her to examine the new-comer. She talked, struggling with breathlessness.

“Poor thing! She’s that done! It was hawful suddin, in a way, though we’d been a-expectin’ of it for weeks as you may say. It’s been a trial for poor Mrs. Jalland, that it have! She couldn’t seem to take comfort, not even when she saw him laid out. He was a good deal wasted away, poor man, but he had a pleasant look like on his face; he allus *was* a pleasant-lookin’ man. An’ there’s some o’ the funeral beer left over, if you’d like —”

Kingcote could have raved. He rose and went to the fire; then, as soon as he dared trust his voice, assured her that he wanted nothing.

“It’s only about a arf-a-pint as is left. We’ve been most careful, knowin’ as there wasn’t no money to throw away, in a manner speakin’, though of course, as both me an’ my ‘us band said, we knew as Mr. Kingcut ‘ud like everythink done in a ‘andsome way, though not bein’ able to be present pers’nally.”

“Can I see my sister?” he asked, driven to frenzy, and unable altogether to conceal it.

“She’s just puttin’ herself a bit in order,” was the rather startled reply. “She’ll be down in a minute, I dessay.”

After another scrutiny, the woman deposited the lamp on the table, and, seeing that Kingcote had turned his back upon her, withdrew, looking an evil look.

The room was very small; the couch, a round table, a cupboard with ornamental top, and four chairs, scarcely left space to walk about. On the table was a green cloth, much stained; the hair of the sofa was in places worn through, and bits of the stuffing showed themselves. Over the mantelpiece was a large water-colour portrait of a man in Volunteer uniform, the late Mr. Jalland; elsewhere on the walls hung pictures such as are published at Christmas by the illustrated papers, several fine specimens of the British baby, framed in cheap gilding. But the crowning adornment of the room was the clock over the

fireplace. The case was in the form of a very corpulent man, the dial-plate being set in the centre of his stomach.

Kingcote looked about him in despair. His nerves were so unstrung that he feared lest he should break into tears. Every sensitive chord of his frame was smitten into agony by the mingled sensations of this arrival; rage which put him beside himself still predominated, and the smell from the kitchen, the objects about him, the sound of the woman's voice which would not leave his ears, stirred him to a passion of loathing. His very senses rebelled, he felt sick, faint.

He was rescued by his sister's entrance. When he had last seen her, before leaving London, she was a rather world-worn woman of six-and-twenty, looking perhaps a few years older; now he gazed into her face and saw the haggard features of suffering middle age. Her appearance struck him with profound compassion, almost with fear. She was short in stature, and her small face had never been superficially attractive; its outlines made a strong resemblance to her brother, and lacked feminine softness; the tremulous small lips and feeble chin indicated at once a sweet and passive disposition. As she entered, she was endeavouring to command herself, to refrain from tears; she stood there in her plain black dress, holding her hands together at her breast, like one in pain and dread.

"Mary! My poor girl!"

He spoke with deep tenderness, and went towards her; then she put her arms round his neck and wept.

He reproached himself. Things might not, should not, have been so bad as this. In some way he might have helped her, if only by remaining near. Whilst he had dreamed at Wood End, this poor stricken soul had gone through the very valley of the shadow of death. He had not paid much heed to her letters; he had failed in sympathetic imagination; she had written so simply, so unemphatically. He reproached himself bitterly.

"How good of you, Bernard, to come to me!" she said, regarding him through her tears. "I do want some one to be near me; I feel so helpless. Death is so dreadful."

She said it without stress of feeling, but the words were all the more powerful. Kingcote felt that they gave him a new understanding of pathos.

She would not speak more of the dead man, knowing how her brother had regarded him. At his bidding she sat on the sofa, and by degrees overcame her weakness; he comforted her.

"What shall I do, Bernard?" she asked, appealing to him with tearful eyes. "What is to become of the children? What is before us?"

"At first, rest," was his kind answer. "Don't let a thought of the future trouble you; that is my affair. You shall never want whilst I live, Mary."

"Oh, it is hard to be a burden to you! I have burdened you for a long time. You have already done more for me than any brother could be asked to do. How can I let you?"

"We won't talk of these things yet; time enough. All I want now is to be some comfort to you."

"Oh, you are! It is so good to hold your hand. I feel you won't desert me; I am so powerless myself."

They talked a little longer, then she was reminded that he had come a journey and needed food.

"Who is that woman?" he asked, lowering his voice.

"Mrs. Bolt? She has, you know, the other half of the house. There are corresponding rooms on each side, and she lets us this half. She has been very good indeed to me through it all. I don't know what I should have done these last days without her. She has made meals and seen to the children. I was ashamed to give her so much trouble."

Kingcote did not reply to this. He merely said:

"Then it won't be necessary for her to come here?"

"Oh no." She understood his desire to be alone. "I will get the tea myself; I can do it quite well. It's all ready."

She moved about and laid the table, letting her eyes rest upon her brother very often, trustfully and rather timidly. She had always regarded him with something of awe. He belonged to a higher social sphere than that which she had accepted. She attributed to him vast knowledge and ability. It was her fear lest she might do or say anything in his eyes censurable.

"Are the children upstairs?" Kingcote inquired.

"Yes; they have had their tea."

"You will bring them down afterwards?"

"If you would like it, Bernard." She had dreaded lest he should find their presence displeasing.

He reassured her, and then they sat down to the meal. The rain had begun and was blowing against the windows. Kingcote ate little; his sister only drank a cup of tea.

"This is not the kind of food you need," he said. "I must ask you to do as I wish for a time, and have care for yourself. Have you any servant?"

She shook her head.

"But you can't possibly do house-work at present." There was something a little dictatorial in Kingcote's way of speaking; a mere habit, but one which Mary knew of old, and which half accounted for her timorous regard of him.

"Mrs. Bolt has been so kind," she said, "when I really wasn't able to do things."

"Yes; but we cannot trouble her. What, by-the-bye, are the terms on which you hold these rooms?"

"From quarter to quarter. We pay twenty-five pounds a year, and have to give a quarter's notice."

"Then it is impossible to remove till the end of June? I'm very sorry for that."

"Mrs. Bolt might take things into account, and let us —"

"No, certainly not," said her brother abruptly. "But I think I shall pay her the quarter and go as soon as I can find another place."

(Mrs. Bolt, be it observed, had her ear to the keyhole, and lost not a word of the conversation.)

"Don't you think you could find some girl to come and act as servant for a time?"

"Yes; I could. There's a girl I used to have sometimes; I think she could come."

"Then let her be summoned as soon as possible; and, by-the-bye, has Mrs. Bolt been at any expense, do you think?"

"I'm afraid she has for a few things."

"Very well. If you happen to see her, will you ask her to let me have an account of all such expense's as soon as she can?"

After the meal, Mary went upstairs and fetched the children. They were boys of eight and seven respectively, thin and ill-fed little beings, poorly dressed. Both of them cried as their mother brought them forward; this uncle was in their eyes a most formidable person. Kingcote could not be affectionate with children, but he spoke to them with as much kindness as was at his command. Whilst he was talking with the elder, the other climbed to Mary's lap and whispered something. Kingcote caught the words "bread and butter."

"What's that, Willy?" he asked. "You'd like some bread and butter?"

His mother tried to hush it over, but with no effect.

"Mary," said her brother, "if I go out, will you open the door to me yourself? I will give two raps."

He went, and succeeded in finding a shop not very far off where he could purchase a large plain cake. Returning, he cut it on a plate and let the lads eat. Shortly after they were led away to bed.

He would not let Mary remain with him very long, she was wearied out.

"I've put a fire in your room," she said; "the house is a little damp, and I thought it was better."

"In that case I will sit up there. You shall show me the way."

She took him up to a room that could scarcely be called furnished - though she had stripped her own of everything she could possibly spare - where he found his boxes placed.

"Who brought those up?" he asked.

"Mr. Bolt and his son."

He moved uneasily.

"I do hope you'll be able to sleep here!" his sister said anxiously. "I wish I could have made more comfort for you."

"Oh, it will do perfectly well. Now go and sleep, Mary."

She embraced him, and her tears came again.

"I can't thank you, Bernard," she whispered, sobbing. "I can't find any words. You're very, very good to me." . . .

He sat by the fire. A group of noisy lads had assembled in the street, and were urging two of their number to fight. They did not succeed, and their foul language passed into the distance. An organ played in front of the public-house, and there were laughing shrieks of girls. A man came along hoarsely crying baked potatoes.

Isabel Clarendon

He saw his bed-room in the cottage; he remembered the holy silence of night brooding over the woods and meadows. At this moment Isabel was sitting alone and thinking of him, sitting amid the graceful luxury of her refined home. Was *that* a dream of joy, or *this* a hideous vision?

CHAPTER V

The water-colour portrait over the mantelpiece was that of a blond young man with hair parted in the middle and a thin moustache, made the most of by curling at the ends, the expression on the face a sufficiently fatuous smile. This work of art had been the result of an acquaintance struck up between young Jalland and an impecunious teacher of drawing in the bar parlour of a Norwich hotel; the likeness was faithful, for it had simply been copied from a photograph, to save the trouble of sittings, as the artist said. In those days Jalland was just beginning his career as a commercial traveller that he should belong to a Volunteer corps was in the order of things. Also perfectly regular was his acquaintance with the Kingcote family; his father exercised a number of vocations, was auctioneer, commission agent, broker, etc., and he frequently did business for Dr. Kingcote, who had a fondness for dabbling in pecuniary speculations and but for this foible would have died a richer man. When Jalland obtained a position in a London warehouse, he at once asked Mary Kingcote to accompany him as his wife; she was then a girl of seventeen. Her parents held the match impossible; they forbade it. The result was that one day the girl disappeared, and remained undiscoverable till at length she wrote to announce the fact of her marriage.

She seemed the most unlikely girl to do such a thing. She was of a very quiet disposition, shy with strangers, submissive to a somewhat autocratic mother, feeble in health. Curiously, she only followed a family precedent in risking an elopement; her mother - though Mary did not know it - had married in the same way. Doubtless that was why Mrs. Kingcote remained unforgiving. Her father was not a man of strong character, though he possessed considerable ability in various directions; his temperament was impulsive, imaginative, affectionate; he was wholly ruled by his wife. The children of the house, Bernard and Mary, seemed to an observer to lack something of ordinary youthful happiness; they appeared to stand apart from their parents; to be thrown very much upon their own resources. Dr. Kingcote saw little of them, save on Sundays, when he was for the most part absorbed in reading; Mrs. Kingcote, though behaving to them with all motherly care, did not win their love, neither appeared to miss it. She was a woman to whom the external facts of life sufficed; details of housekeeping occupied her all but exclusively; one would have conjectured that she made her runaway marriage

solely out of a passion for having a house of her own, where she might rule and regulate. From the day when she heard that Mary had married the commercial traveller her daughter's name never passed her lips.

As a medical student in London, Bernard Kingcote held communication with his sister. At her entreaty he made Jalland's acquaintance; he had known him by sight in Norwich, but was away at his studies when the families had grown to terms of intimacy. Bernard went to his sister's lodgings one Sunday, and passed the afternoon there, but he paid no second visit. In Kingcote there existed his father's intellect and emotional qualities, together with a certain stiffness of moral attitude derived from his mother. His prejudices were intense, their character being determined by the refinement and idealism of his nature. An enemy would have called him offensively aristocratic; only malicious ignorance could have accused him of snobbishness. He went to meet Jalland with instinctive repugnance; the man's pursuit was in his eyes contemptible, and he resented bitterly the influence such a person had been able to obtain over Mary. On Jalland's side there was no particular good-will; he was prepared to stand on his rights and repel any hint of lofty patronage. Kingcote had no disposition whatever to behave patronisingly, but he found it beyond his power to make the least show of cordiality. He and the representative of the great civilising agent had not a point in common. They saw each other at the worst, and, very wisely, never saw each other again.

The evening that followed was one of suffering for Mary, the beginning of a martyrdom. She knew already that her hasty step had been a mistake; to-day the slow-gathering consciousness became a fixed centre of pain. She had looked from her brother to her husband and back again; she understood that the difference between the two men was the measure of the gulf set between herself and the world to which she rightly belonged. Her husband's amiability became vulgar self-complacency; his features, his demeanour, his interests, all bore the inefaceable stamp of vulgarity. She watched him as he moved impatiently about the room; she anticipated the words he would shortly speak. He had never yet behaved to her with deliberate unkindness, though honeymoon warmth had long since given place to working-day ease of manner; matrimonial familiarity, a snare to the most delicate of men, takes shapes one does not care to dwell upon in the uncultured. But now, when at length the words came, they were rough, rancorous, brutal. Mr. Jalland attempted

irony, excogitated sarcasms; finding these insufficient to his needs, he relieved himself in the tongue of bar-parlours. Mary put in no plea of mitigation; she bowed her head and let the torrent fall upon her, humiliated to the core. The man understood very well what he had done, and knew the change in her from that day forth. But he was having his revenge.

Our modern knights of the road are subject to one grievous temptation. Living at places of public entertainment at other people's expense, they acquire tastes and habits which are somewhat rudely interfered with when a sojourn in their homes necessitates a diet and accommodation materially differing from that of hotels. Mary had already had the recognition of this difficulty forced upon her; in future it was to constitute a more serious trouble. Mr. Jalland let no opportunity pass of finding fault with his wife's housekeeping. The meals she prepared for him he regarded with lofty scorn, and only on being pressed condescended to satisfy his hunger. He would mention what he had recently partaken of at such and such a *table-d'hôte*, adding, "No doubt you often used to have that at home, before you married me," his irony pointed with a grin. His journeys, fortunately, became more extended, and Mary had sometimes weeks of loneliness; but his return was each time a harder trial. She soon perceived that he was acquiring the habit of drinking more than was good for him; it improved neither his temper nor his manners. Presently he lost a place which he had long held, lost it in some unexplained way, and was for half a year without employment. It was then that Mary first had to appeal to her brother for aid. She did so without consulting her husband, but he of course knew whence came the money upon which he lived; he came ultimately to grumble that the supplies were so restricted. From that time onwards it was alternation of degrees of misery. Jalland's proclivity to drink grew more pronounced, and his health suffered noticeably. He never sank to sheer ruffiandom; never got beyond the point of nagging at his wife; often Mary would rather he had beaten her. She bore everything with tearful patience, but - it was a note of character - never once sought to soften him, never once appealed to memories. Her nature was not passionate it cost her nothing to refrain from recrimination, and the mistaken impulse of her inexperienced years never bore fruit in hatred of the man to whom she had sacrificed her life. She was a devoted mother; her children helped her to endure. Her husband she regarded in a spirit which the institution of marriage makes common enough; he was an item in her existence, and had to be taken account of; even as had the necessity of daily

meals. A human being became to her a piece of furniture, only differing from chairs and tables in that it exacted more attention and was apt to evince ingratitude. So it went on to the end, and, when the end came, it brought, after the perturbations of nature, a sighing of relief. . . .

Kingcote rose on the morning after his arrival with a determination to quit this present abode at whatever cost. He had scarcely slept; the atmosphere brought him bodily unrest. He knew that it was the height of imprudence to waste money in such a juncture, but life was impossible for him under this roof; and he could not suffer his sister to dwell in the proximity of the woman he had seen the evening before. His first impulse of compassion spent, the spirit of almost fierce intolerance again took possession of him. Formerly, he had felt much in the same way towards the uneducated people with whom he had had to come in contact, but never with such violence of personal antipathy as Mrs. Bolt and all her belongings excited. He understood well enough the narrowness of this spirit; he knew that his culture should have endowed him with tolerant forbearance; but it was a matter of temperament. He dreaded to leave his room and descend, lest he should meet one of the Bolt family; he felt the impossibility of behaving with decent courtesy. Aristocracy of race cannot compare in pervasive intensity with aristocracy which comes only of the influence of intellect and temperament. Kingcote would have chosen death rather than an existence elbow to elbow with people such as these he found in the house.

There was the sound of the postman coming along the street; this changed the current of his thoughts. The knock came at the door below, and he could no longer hold back. Mrs. Bolt was just taking letters from the box.

"Good mornin', Mr. Kingcut; 'ope you've slep' well," she said, pressing her hand to her side and panting as usual. "It take me just 'ere," she explained; "comin' up them stairs from the kitchen is too much for me. I'm allus hawful bad in the cold weather. Here's a letter for you. And, Mr. Kingcut, I wanted to say that if there was anythink as me or my 'usband or my son could do —"

"I thank you," Kingcote broke in. "I believe Mrs. Jalland will make all necessary arrangements. I really don't think we shall need to trouble you."

Isabel Clarendon

He was turning away, but checked himself to add:

"I hear, Mrs. Bolt, that my sister is in your debt for certain things you have supplied to her lately. Will you kindly let me have an account as soon as you are able?"

"Oh, we ain't a-goin' to talk of *that*, Mr. Kingcut! A cup o' tea, and a basin of broth. Of course I've kep' a little account, but there's no hurry about that."

"If you please, I should like to settle the account immediately, as soon as you can conveniently let me have it."

He went into the sitting-room, and closed the door. The two children were sitting before the fire, and the cloth was laid for breakfast; he nodded pleasantly to the youngsters, but did not speak. The letter he held was from Isabel; there were three sheets. He had just finished reading it when Mary came in with breakfast on a tray. He greeted her joyously.

"I suppose you young men go to school this morning?" he asked his nephews. "Come and eat a good breakfast, and prepare for your labours."

To the astonishment of the children, he helped them to some of the fried bacon; they gazed at their mother before venturing to eat. Little by little this uncle gained upon them; they looked at him as if they liked him.

When they had left the house, he held a long talk with his sister, and told her of his intention to seek immediately another dwelling.

"We'll go farther out, where you can get fresh air; I have an idea where I shall look for rooms. I'm afraid we must restrict ourselves in the matter of space, but that will be better borne where the sky is visible. You leave me free to choose?"

The same day he began his search, and was absent for several hours without hopeful result. No one would set forth gaily upon such an excursion, and to Kingcote the task was revolting; Mrs. Bolt was so often met with, and so seldom any one capable of inspiring human confidence. When he got back wearied, midway in the afternoon,

Mary was out. On the sitting-room table he found a rather dirty envelope addressed to himself; but not closed; in it was a sheet of note-paper, folded awry, whereon was written the account of moneys due, which he had asked for. It was a remarkable document, alike in conception and execution; badly written, worse spelt, frequently difficult to decipher at all. However, the sum total at the end stood in plain enough figures: one pound, sixteen shillings, and eightpence three farthings. There was nothing alarming in this demand; the point which exacted attention was the way in which the total was constructed. Beginning with a lump sum, Mrs. Bolt debited her tenant in five days' "attendance," at three shillings a day; the remainder of the charge consisted of innumerable items of petty expenditure, each assigned to its day. It would be: "One cup tee, 3*d.*; one basern broth, 5*d.*; fetchin docter, 3*d.*; bread and buter for childern, 3*d.*," and so on. Kingcote at first regarded this bill with disgust, then he was able to see the humorous side of the situation, and broke into loud laughter. Mrs. Bolt, who had her ear at the door, heard the laughter, and, attributing it to the smallness of her demand, promised to "give it" her husband for having deemed further extortion unadvisable.

Mary came in shortly, bringing several parcels; the exertion of walking a very brief distance was too much for her strength, she sank on a chair in exhaustion. Kingcote held the bill behind his back.

"You told me, I think," he said, with a natural smile, "that Mrs. Bolt had shown you great kindness the last few days, in doing little services for you, and so on?"

"She has, really; I was ashamed to ask for so much."

"To ask? Ah, then you agreed with her to give you regular service?"

"Oh, no," she professed in surprise. "It was all her kindness; she pressed it on me. She's really kind-hearted when you're in need."

"Remarkably so," said her brother, laughing again. "Pray glance your eye over that."

(Mrs. Bolt had crept to the door when she heard Mary enter; not a word escaped her.)

Mary looked down each of the pages, her amazement increasing; at the end she raised her eyes in indignation. Women always take small extortion more seriously than men, and their sense of humour is generally defective.

"Bernard! How *can* she do such a thing? Oh, I should be ashamed!"

"No doubt you would, my dear sister; you and Mrs. Bolt are of somewhat different clay."

She began to contest items.

"No, no, we won't talk about it," Kingcote said, taking the dirty paper from her hands.

"You will pay it?"

"Oh, certainly; and I beg you will not speak of it again. Only, let it be a piece of experience, and remember that people of that class are a species of dirty object, much to be avoided. Whilst we are here, we will keep the doors of our rooms shut and the windows open. Morally speaking, that is; literally, the weather is too bad."

So he ended with a laugh, and went on to speak of his ill success during the day. They talked till the children came in from school. Kingcote was studying his sister, consciously inquiring into her character, which he had never understood, had scarcely had a chance of getting to understand. Though little things in her speech and way of thought now and then jarred on him, showing the influence of sordid circumstances, he was surprised at the extent to which she had preserved the tone and manner of a lady. Mary seemed to inherit her mother's power of resistance to all that had no connection with the few and plain principles of her nature. Her mother's individuality had exerted itself to active purpose; Mary had perhaps shown even more firmness in a passive way. She had, in truth, a considerable share of obstinacy, operative, her life being what it was, only for good. In the protection of her children from every kind of ill she exercised incessant care, never failing, for instance, to take them herself to school and fetch them home again.

She held, moreover, with the utmost tenacity to the forms of religious faith and practice which she had known from childhood; they did not appear to aid her much morally, but still were of mechanical use in preserving the continuity of her life. It was only on the surface that she was weak; she was susceptible to every kind of suffering, but had a corresponding power of enduring. Few women could have lived as she had done, from seventeen to seven-and-twenty, and have preserved so much cleanliness of soul.

She could not pardon Mrs. Bolt, whose offence, in her eyes, consisted far more in the extortion practised on her brother than in a display of unabashed sordidness. To that good woman's surprise, Mary refrained from intercourse with her throughout the fortnight that she remained in the house.

For it took so long to discover a new abode and have it prepared for tenants. After several days of search, Kingcote at length found rooms of which he determined to make a trial. They were in Highgate, not far from the pleasant road which leads across the valley to Hampstead; four rooms and an underground kitchen, the rest of the house being occupied by an engraver and his family, not intolerable beings. Of his own bedroom Kingcote would also make a study; that left a common sitting-room. He bought such additional furniture as was needed (the Jallands had long ago been obliged to sell much that they once possessed), and made the appearance of a modest home. The removal was happily accomplished, and our friend thanked Heaven in once more breathing unpolluted air.

He wished to exercise all delicacy in regard to his sister's feelings, and so, after arranging the heavy furniture of her sitting-room, he said to her: "I will leave you to put up what ornaments you like." It was more than generous, bearing in mind certain objects which had graced the former parlour. Mary did not fail to understand him. The dial-bellied man was never seen again, nor mentioned (it had been Jalland's purchase), and the specimens of British infancy were hung in the boys' bedroom.

"We can't afford good pictures," Kingcote said, looking round the bare walls, "so we will have none. Perhaps I may now and then pick up a print that will do."

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For some days he took it for granted that the water-colour portrait had been hung by Mary in her own bedroom; but, when he at length found an opportunity of peeping in, behold it was not there! she had only preserved an illuminated cross. He turned away with a deep feeling of gladness in his heart. The past was done with.

CHAPTER VI

Thomas Meres and his two daughters occupied a house in Chelsea, a small house in a little square, between which and the river is a portion of Cheyne Walk. Three minutes' walk brings you to the Albert Bridge, which leads over to Battersea Park. In that part of Cheyne Walk which is close at hand stands the house where for many years Rossetti painted and wrote; not many doors away is that in which George Eliot died; and that which was Carlyle's home for half a century is scarcely more distant, in the shadow of old Chelsea Church. It is pleasant to breathe the air of this corner of London.

Literally the air is pleasant; the flowing breadth of stream and the green extent of the Opposite Park, the spacious Embankment with its patches of tree-planted garden, make a perceptible freshness. On a sunny morning the river dances and gleams with wind-stirred wavelets, and the free expanse of sky gives the spirit soaring-room. Standing on the Suspension Bridge, one lets the eye rest on a scene far from unlovely; the old houses of Cheyne Walk are abundantly picturesque, so is Battersea Bridge, the last remaining (perhaps already gone) of the wooden bridges over the Thames. The great Queen Anne dwellings on the Embankment have their charm, and just beyond them one sees the gardens of Chelsea Hospital, adjoining those which were once called Ranelagh. Heavy-laden barges go up or down stream, as the tide may be, sometimes hoisting a ruddy sail; men toil at the long barge oars. Steamers fret their way from pier to pier, rather suggestive of pleasure than business. Very little traffic is within sight or hearing; when the church clock strikes it is not drowned by the uproar of streets, but comes clearly on the wind with old-world melody. There is peace to be found here in morning hours, with pleasant haunting thought of great names and days gone by.

Ada Warren, when at Knightswell, always thought with pleasure of Chelsea, often was drawn towards it with a great yearning. There are, for all of us, places which appeal to our sympathy with an air of home, even though they have for us no personal associations; many perforce dwell away from home all their lives. Ada had the ambition to live in Chelsea. She promised herself that, when the day of her freedom came, she would take one of the houses in Cheyne Walk. The desire was akin to another ambition, of which there will shortly

be mention. At present she had to be content with a couple of rooms in Mr. Meres' house. These rooms were always held at her disposal. Mrs. Clarendon had from the first insisted upon a clear understanding that the rooms should be paid for, and that Ada should live at her own expense. Thomas Meres had written to her: "My poverty, but not my will consents." The house being so small, Rhoda and Hilda had to occupy one bedroom when Ada came.

Living here, the girl was at all times another being than at Knightswell. She allowed her animal spirits, which were not inexpansive, to have free play. In the company of Rhoda and Hilda she was a girl with girls; Isabel would have been astonished to see and hear her when the atmosphere of Chelsea had had time to exert its full influence. She could never quite give credence to Mr. Meres' reports. Her present visit, however, began under less favourable auspices than usual. She came in a very still and reticent mood, and she found illness in the house. Rhoda Meres was just recovering from an alarming attack of fever. Ada feared she would be burdensome, wished to go back to Knightswell for a little, but Mr. Meres would not allow it.

"I wish you to stay for a particular reason," he said gravely. "Pray do me this favour, Ada." It was his habit, from of old, to call her by her Christian name and to treat her as a daughter.

We must look for a moment at Thomas Meres. A man of good stature, but bent in the shoulders, and only not slovenly in appearance because of the perfect personal cleanliness which accompanied utter disregard of the quality and sitting of his clothes. He had the fine features which generally go with delicate instincts and intellectual tendencies. His face was all of one colour, yellowish, and much lined. Beneath his eyes the skin hung loose, giving him a sad look; his full beard was grizzled, but his hair still unaffected by time and very thick at the back of his head. To pass to details of his attire, he invariably wore coloured shirts, blue by preference, with a blue necktie miserably knotted; this tie being the despair of his daughter Hilda, who often insisted on arranging it skilfully with her own delicate little fingers. In the house he wore an old gray jacket, on which he wiped his pen. At leisure, he always had his hands in the side pockets, so that they had come to bulge exorbitantly. On going out, he changed this for a black frock coat. His trousers, unhappily, he did not change when business led him forth. These garments disgraced him in the eyes of Christendom. Possibly they

had been of due length when new, whenever that was; but, by dint of constant sitting, the knees had grown abnormally, with the result that the bottoms of the trousers just touched the tops of their wearer's boots. To a literary man of small means there is probably no graver question than this of his trouser knees. I have known unhappy geniuses whose ardour in composition was grievously impaired by the consciousness that, when writing their best, their legs would tuck up under them, with results most disastrous to their nether garments. Thomas Meres cared not for these things, and alas! it is so difficult for young girls to approach their father on the subject of his trousers. Hilda once procured a tailor's advertisement sheet, and, folding it so that the particulars concerning trousers were uppermost, placed it conspicuously on his study table. Mr. Meres saw it, and, with an impatient, "What's this? What's this?" crumpled it into his waste-paper basket. Poor fellow! the days had gone by when he might have considered the effect he produced on observers; it would never matter now.

Thomas Meres was a literary man, and of the romance of authorship knew as little - as do most authors. He got a living by his pen, and that was all; for any pleasure which his daily task brought him he might as well have lived by tailoring. Once he had hoped to shine by means of his talents. In those days authorship meant glory. Now it meant unrelenting toil, often of the dullest and dreariest kind, scarcely ever on subjects for which he cared. He had published books, and had the satisfaction of seeing them mildly praised by the reviewers, then forgotten; now he wrote books no longer, but - *ehue!* - himself criticised those of others, or penned the interminable "article." At times he felt that he must stop, that his hand would work no longer; but its exercise had in truth become almost automatic, and it was well for himself and his children that it had. When he received the editorship of *Roper's Miscellany*, he was at first delighted, not only on account of the most acceptable salary, but also because he felt that it was an accession of dignity. Formerly he had dreamed with trembling of the possibility that he might one day be an editor. But this, too, took on its true proportions when he had grown used to the chair. The toil of reading manuscript was all but as bad as that of producing it. One pleasure which had been wont to come from his literary work had in the course of time failed him. It had been his habit to send the best things of his writing to Mrs. Clarendon; and at first she had seemed glad to have and to read them. But he had discovered that her interest was failing, that she did not always even glance at what he sent. Then he sent no more.

Yet, by keeping up that interest, Isabel could have put joy into a life which sadly needed it, could have smoothed a road which was very rough to travel.

The difficulties of a man in Mr. Meres' position, with two girls to bring up, were naturally considerable. Mrs. Clarendon had constantly advised him to marry again; at which he always shook his head and maintained silence. The woman who may with safety be taken in marriage by a poor man given to intellectual pursuits is so extremely difficult of discovery that Thomas Meres might well shrink from beginning the search, if only on the plea of lack of leisure; and there were other reasons withholding him. When the children were young, he had the assistance of the wife of a friend, whose house he shared; only when Rhoda was sixteen, her sister being two years younger, did he take the house in Chelsea, having found a decent woman to act as housekeeper. In a year or two Rhoda had felt able to spare him this latter expense. Rhoda's talents were not exactly of a domestic order, but she was a very good-hearted and intelligent girl, and was beginning then to understand something of the hardships of her father's life. This present illness of hers had brought serious disturbance into the home; a professional nurse had been summoned, and Hilda - now a girl of sixteen - had to intermit her school to look after the house; the one servant they kept was of course an irresponsible creature.

On the evening of her arrival, Mr. Meres asked Ada to come and sit with him in his study - a very small room, book-thronged, with one or two busts of poets, and, over the fireplace, a fine photograph of the Sistine Madonna. The choice of the picture had a pathetic significance; no supersensual mystery did it embody in Meres' eyes, but it stood there as an ideal of womanhood and of maternity, the ever-present suggestion of an earthly paradise whereof the gates were closed against him - wifely love, that which he had never known, the conception of which had for long years been besmirched in his mind with foul associations; for the loss of this his children's affection could not compensate him. Nay, the children had till quite late years been to him a fear and a perpetual cause of anxious observation. Would they not grow up with their mother's character? Was there not impurity in their blood? By a kind fate it was the father that predominated in them. Yet even now his dread would often be excited, and especially had that been the case in Rhoda's illness. It was to speak of his elder girl that he took Ada apart this evening.

When he spoke on any subject which puzzled or embarrassed him, it was Mr. Meres' habit to stroke the length of his nose with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, perhaps because this relieved him of the necessity of looking at the person to whom he addressed himself. He began by doing so now.

"You find Rhoda sadly pulled down?" he said.

"Yes, she must have suffered very much."

Ada always spoke in a very direct way, with few words. Strangers attributed this partly to shyness, partly to a character lacking amenity. It was due to neither in fact, but was one of the results of her ambiguous position which made her at once reticent and heedless of conventional mannerisms.

"She has, I fear. The truth is, she hasn't been herself ever since she came back from Knightswell last summer. She has always been either depressed or unnaturally excited. It makes me very uneasy."

Ada made no comment.

"Do you find her - communicative?" he proceeded to ask.

"The opposite. She would scarcely speak to me."

"You don't say so? Now I wonder whether I may ask you to be of - of assistance to me; whether you will not accuse me of indelicacy if I tell you freely what it is that troubles me? You know that I always think of you as vastly older and maturer than my own girls - pass the words, you understand them - and that I have several times been led to speak to you of things I should not yet touch upon with them. Well, the fact is this. From the child's talk while she was delirious, I am obliged to conclude that she - in fact, that she has been so unfortunate as to fall in love with some one who has behaved rather badly to her. Who this can be, I have not a notion; she kept repeating the name Vincent, and I am acquainted with no one so called. I could only gather the vaguest impressions, but she was perpetually deploring her poverty, and speaking of marriages made for money, and so on. Now, you will see that this is very alarming; I cannot conceive what it means, or how such things can have come about.

Can you - this is my blunt question - can you, out of your knowledge of Rhoda, help me to an understanding of it?"

Ada's eyes had fallen, and her face had taken its hardest expression. Her hands were on her lap, the one clutching over the back of the other. When she answered it was in a distant tone.

"I can offer no explanation. I know nothing of Rhoda's affairs."

"Now - I have offended you," said Mr. Meres, with vexation. "Surely, Ada, you see that it was very natural in me to speak to you of this. Rhoda herself will, I am convinced, refuse to give me her confidence, even if I can bring myself to ask it. The difficulty is most serious; how can I tell —? Never mind, we'll speak no more of it. Tell me what you have been reading."

"You are far too hasty, and unjust to me," said Ada, looking up quietly. "I am not at all offended. It is only that I have nothing to say which can help you. On such a subject Rhoda is as little likely to speak with me as with you. She is a reserved girl."

"Yes, she is, though strangely frank at times; that is my view of her character. Well, I can only ask you to put the matter out of your head. Really, you troubled me; I felt so sure of you, and to see you all at once put on the unintelligent coldness of an ordinary young lady —"

"Am I not an ordinary young lady?" asked Ada, smiling.

"If you were, I should not feel the kind of interest in you that I do, and I should not advise you to read this novel of Tourguéneff, which I hereby do with great fervour. If you don't rejoice in it, your taste is not what it ought to be."

The talk went into other channels, for Thomas Meres could at all times overcome his private troubles when there was question of literature.

Having her own sitting-room, Ada was not obliged to mix with the family more than she saw good. Whilst Rhoda was recovering, Ada kept to herself, seeing her friends seldom save at meals; but when the order of the house was restored, Hilda, having once more her

hours of leisure, was bold in demands for companionship. It seemed, indeed, as though in future the younger of the two sisters would be Ada's intimate. Rhoda, who had formerly occupied that position, was much changed; she seldom talked with Ada privately, nor much at all with any one, shutting herself in her bedroom whenever her absence was not likely to be noticed. She always seemed weary, and had lost the pleasant spontaneity of manner which was generally her principal charm. There was no sulking in her diminished sociableness; she simply drooped. When she went to her room, it was to lie on the bed and cry, sometimes for an hour together. A weak and perhaps rather morbid nature, she apparently had not the vital energy to surmount this first disappointment. Her life was not favourable to a recovery of healthy tone, for she had no friends with whom to seek distractions. That was the inevitable result of the family's circumstances; no position is harder than that of educated girls brought up in London in a poor household. A bachelor is not necessarily shut out of society on account of his poverty; but a family must give and take on equal terms, or be content to hold aloof. Mr. Meres saw very few people excepting half-a-dozen professional acquaintances; he had always shunned miscellaneous companies. When Mrs. Clarendon was in London, he had frequent invitations from her, and these now and then led to others; but then that was not his world, and he was not able to devote himself to a system of social toadyism in the way that would have suggested itself to a mother with daughters for sale. If ever Rhoda and Hilda were to find husbands it must probably be by the irregular course upon which the former had already made her first essay. To be sure it was a course attended with not a few dangers, but Society intends this presumably; it is its method for keeping up the price of virtue.

Owing to her illness, Rhoda did not hear of the postponement of Ada's marriage till some weeks had gone by. Mr. Meres had it announced to him in the letter from Mrs. Clarendon which just preceded Ada's arrival, but he kept the news to himself, not caring to speak with Rhoda of these topics, and taking it for granted that it would come to be spoken of between the three girls sooner or later. Hilda was the first to elicit the fact. This young lady deserves rather more special description than we have yet had time to devote to her. She was delightful. Sixteen years old, already as tall as her sister, delicate in form, delicate in her manners and movements, in watching her you forgot that she was not exactly pretty. Her face, in fact, would not allow you to consider its features individually; together they made one bright, pure, girlish laugh. She crossed your

path like a sunbeam; you stopped to gaze after the slim, winsome figure with its airy gait, to wonder at the grace with which she combined the springing lightness of a child and the decorous motions of womanhood. To see her on her way home from school, wishing, yet afraid, to run; books held up against her side, the quick twinkle of her feet and the fairy waft of her skirts - all so fresh, so dainty, so unconscious of things in the world less clean than herself. She met your gaze with delicious frankness; the gray eyes were alive with fun and friendliness and intelligence, they knew no reason why they should not look straight into yours as long as they chose, which, however, was not the same as rendering to you a mutual privilege. If gazed at too persistently she would move her shoulders with a pretty impatience, and ask you some surprising question likely to prove a test of intellectual readiness. Yet it was hard not to take a very long look; the face was puzzling, fascinating, suggestive; there was cleverness in every line of it. Already she had advanced in her studies beyond the point at which Rhoda ceased. How much she knew! She could render you an ode of Horace, could solve a quadratic equation, could explain to you the air-pump and the laws of chemical combination, could read a page of Ælfric's "Homilies" as if it were modern English. And all the while the very essence of her charm lay in the fact that she knew nothing at all. She lived in a fantastic world, in which every occurrence was stateable in young lady's language, every person was at heart well-meaning, even if sometimes mistaken, where every joy was refined, and every grief matter for an elegy. Her innocence was primordial. When she came into the room, there entered with her a breath of higher atmosphere; her touch on your hands cooled and delighted like a mountain stream in summer; her laughter was a tradition from the golden age. She was devoted to music, and would have a fine voice; at present she sang everything. When she came back from school in the evening, she would run up to Ada's room, tap at the door, and look in like a frolicsome fairy.

"Well?" Ada would ask, good-naturedly.

"Come down and sing 'Patience,'" was the whispered entreaty. "Just half-an-hour."

The æsthetic opera was fresh then, and Hilda could not have enough of it; and she laughed, she laughed!

Thomas Meres often sat thinking gloomily of this his favourite child. It was well that she was so clever, for she would have to teach, or so he supposed. What else was there for a girl to do? He could not send her into a post-office, or make her a dispenser of drugs. Poor Hilda!

But I was saying that it was she who first ventured to speak to Ada of the latter's marriage. It was on a walk they took together, over the bridge and along the Park edge of the river, one windy evening at the end of February. It was dusking, and they had the Embankment to themselves, so ran a race from Chelsea Bridge to Battersea Park Pier, to reach it before a steamer coming from the City; having won the race, they stood to see the boat move on towards the pier at Chelsea. The lights along the opposite bank were just being lit, and made a pretty effect.

"Ada," said the younger girl, as they walked on.

"Yes."

"When are you going to be married?"

A gust of wind excused silence for a moment; they both had to bend forward against it.

"Perhaps never," was the reply at length. Ada would not have spoken thus at another time and place just now she was enjoying the sense of full life, quickened in her veins by the run in keen air.

"Never? But I thought it was going to be very soon? - Am I rude?"

"Not at all; there's no secret conspiracy. It was to have been soon, but that's altered."

"Really? And how long will you stay with us?"

"As long as you'll have me. All the year perhaps."

"You don't mean that! Oh, that's splendid!" The school-girl came out now and then. "Really, now that is jolly! Do you know, I find it just a little dull with Rhoda. She doesn't seem to care to talk, or to sing, or to do anything. I suppose it's because she hasn't been

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feeling well for a long time. I do wish she'd get better; it makes everything rather miserable, doesn't it?"

"We shall have to take her to the sea-side at Easter," Ada said.

"Yes, so father was saying the other day. When you *are* married, where shall you live, Ada?"

"One of those houses," Ada replied, pointing to Cheyne Walk.

"That's a splendid idea! And you'll have musical parties, won't you?"

"Certainly I will and you shall sing."

"No, that's *too* good! Then we shall get more society; you'll ask us sometimes to dinner in state, won't you?"

"If you will honour me with your company."

"Now you shouldn't be ironical; you know very well the honour will all be on the other side. I mean in the case of us girls; father, of course could go anywhere."

It was an article of faith with Hilda that her father was a conspicuous man of letters, welcome at any table.

The same night Rhoda heard what had been imparted to her sister. She appeared to receive the news with indifference.

It was about this time that Ada received a letter, written on club note-paper, and in a scrawl difficult to decipher, from one of the trustees under Mr. Clarendon's will, the gentleman whose address she had sought from Mrs. Clarendon.

"DEAR Miss WARREN,

"In reply to your letter of the 26th inst., asking me for information regarding Mrs. Warren, and saying that you had Mrs. C.'s permission to apply to me, I am sorry to say that I cannot tell you anything of Mrs. W.'s present whereabouts, and that I do not even

know whether she is living. As you expressly state your desire for particulars, whatever may be their nature, I suppose I ought not to hesitate to inform you of such facts as have come under my notice, though I should myself have preferred to suggest that you should let Mrs. C.'s information suffice; I can't think that you will derive any satisfaction from pursuing these inquiries. However, I may say thus much: that up to about two years ago, Mrs. Warren was in the habit of making application to me for pecuniary assistance, her circumstances being very straitened, and such assistance I several times rendered. She had abandoned her profession, which was that of the stage, owing to ill-health. But for two years at least I have heard nothing of her. As you express yourself so very emphatically, I engage that I will send you any information about Mrs. W. which may come to my knowledge. I do not know any person that it would be of use to apply to, but you shall hear from me if I have anything to tell.

Believe me, yours very truly,

"C. LEDBURY."

This letter irritated Ada; she was sorely tempted to write back in yet plainer terms than she had used before, and to protest that she was not a child, but a woman who had all manner of difficult problems before her and who sought definite information which she held was due to her. But she remembered that this gentleman would of course only think of her as a girl not yet twenty, and would no doubt persist in what he deemed his duty, of keeping from her disagreeable subjects. And, after all, perhaps his letter contained all she really wished to know.

She had kept closely to her own room for more than a week, when one day at lunch she requested Mr. Meres to let her speak with him for a moment before he left the house. She came to the study holding a roll which looked like manuscript.

"Do you think," she asked, "that you could find time to look over something that I have been writing? It isn't long."

"By all means; I will make time."

"No, don't look at it now," Ada exclaimed nervously, as he put his eyes near to the first page. "Afterwards, when you are at leisure."

She stopped at the door.

"When shall I come and see you?"

"Say to-morrow morning, the first thing after breakfast," replied Mr. Meres, smiling benevolently.

This interview accordingly followed. Ada was requested to seat herself; and her friend, half turning from his desk, stroked his nose for some moments in silence.

"Now, Miss Ada Warren," he began, with alight tone, which rang kindly enough, yet was a little hard for the listener to bear, "I am not going to discourse vanity, and to prophesy smooth things, because I don't want you to come to me at some future date and inform me that I was an old humbug. I am at present, you understand, the impartial critic, and I shall use purely professional language. What I have to say about this little story of yours is that it shows very considerable promise, and not a little power of expression, but that, for a work of art, it is too - you understand the word - too subjective. It reads too much like a personal experience, which the writer is not far enough away from to describe with regard to artistic proportion. I suspected what was going on upstairs, and, on the whole, I was pleased when you put this into my hands. But, one question. This is not the only story you have written?"

Ada admitted that it was only one of several.

"So I supposed. Now let me have them all, let me look through them. Time, pooh! I am going to help you if I can. I believe you are quite capable of helping yourself if left alone, and for that very reason, a hint or two out of my experience may prove useful. In a manner, you have always been my pupil, and I am proud of you; I will say so much. There are several things in this sketch which I think uncommonly well put; and - a great thing - the style is not feminine. But - it isn't a piece of artistic workmanship. You haven't got outside of the subject, and looked at it all round. It is an extempore, in short, and that you mustn't allow yourself. Will you do something for me?"

"What is it?"

"Will you write a story in which every detail, every person, shall be purely a product of your imagination - nothing suggested by events within your own experience? That is, of course, *directly* suggested; you must work upon your knowledge of the world. Write me such a story in about a dozen of these pages - will you? Perhaps you have one already written?"

Ada reflected, and, with an abashed smile, thought not.

"Well, let me have all the others, and set to work upon the new one. Mind, I don't regard this impulse of yours at all in a trivial light. I say get to *work*; and I mean it. Write with as determined endeavour as if your bread and cheese depended upon it. Unfortunately, it doesn't."

"Unfortunately?"

"Well, let that pass. I have no right to speak in that way of the priceless blessing of independence - the gift of Heaven —"

"If it *be* the gift of Heaven," remarked Ada, with meaning.

"Oh, it always is; though not always used to celestial ends."

"You meant, though, that you doubted my power of perseverance, when there was temptation to idleness."

"Something of that, perhaps. But it's clear you haven't been idle of late. Did you write any of those stories at Knightswell?"

"One."

"Did you show it to Mrs. Clarendon?"

She shook her head.

Mr. Meres drummed upon his desk; there was an expression of pain on his forehead. But he dismissed it with a sigh.

"By-the-bye, this is a first manuscript?"

"Yes."

"Never dare to show me one again! You are to copy the new story twice, - you understand?"

"Copying is terrible work."

"So is every effort that leads to anything. You are beginning an apprenticeship; don't think you can carve masterpieces straight from the block, or dash on frescoes without cartoon. Now shake hands with me and go. And Ada, if you can find it in your heart to do me a great kindness —"

"Would I not?"

"Well, I can't ask it now. Some evening when we have talked the fire low, and our tongues are loosened. To work! To work!"

CHAPTER VII

In the first week of February, Mrs. Clarendon spent a couple of days with the Bruce Pages at Hanford. Among a vast accumulation of county and general news which Mrs. Bruce Page emptied forth for Isabel's benefit, there was mention of an accident that had befallen Sir Miles Lacour. Whenever, as had lately been the case, there was skating weather, Sir Miles assembled large parties of friends to enjoy this pastime on a fine piece of water that graced his grounds. One evening, when there was torchlight merriment on the ice, Sir Miles had somehow managed to catch a fall; it would have been nothing, but that unfortunately there came immediately behind him a sleigh in which a lady was being whirled along by a couple of skaters. The metal came in contact with the prostrate baronet's head, and he had remained for an hour in unconsciousness. However, he appeared to be doing well, and probably there would be no further result.

"Do you know," said Mrs. Bruce Page, "I ran up to town the other day, and took an opportunity of seeing the boy Vincent."

"Did you?" said Isabel indifferently.

"Shall I tell you something that I found out? But perhaps you have already got at the explanation of that affair?"

"No, I know nothing about it. It really does not concern me."

"Of course not," the other lady remarked to herself. She continued aloud. "It was all Ada's doing; so much is clear. She somehow came to hear of - well, of things we won't particularise. Vincent is open enough with me, and made no secret of it. I told him plainly that I was delighted; his behaviour had been simply disgraceful. Of course I can never have him here again, at all events not for a long time; whatever you do, don't mention his name in Emily's hearing," her daughter, that was. "And he wasn't aware that Ada was in town; of course I left him in his ignorance. It is to be hoped the poor girl won't be so foolish as to give in. Naturally, one understands her - her temptations only too well. And, my dear, you know I always say just what I think - you won't take it ill - I can't help blaming you; it was so clearly your duty to refuse consent. You were actuated by the

very highest and purest motives, that I am well aware. But you are too unworldly; to suffer ourselves to be led by our own higher instincts so often results in injustice to other people. I really don't think principles were meant to be acted upon; they are ornaments of the mind. My set of Sèvres is exquisite, but I shouldn't think of drinking tea out of them."

On returning to Knightswell, Isabel was informed that Mr. Robert Asquith had made a call that morning; hearing that she would be back before night he had written on his card that he should wait at the inn in Winstoke, as he wished to see her.

She took the card to the drawing-room, and stood bending it between her fingers, not yet having removed her bonnet. She was thinking very hard; her face had that expression which a woman never wears save when alone; the look of absolute occupation with thoughts in which her whole being is concerned. It ended in her passing to the boudoir, hastily writing a note, and ringing the bell.

"Let this be taken at once," she said to the servant who appeared. "And tell Hopwood to bring tea upstairs."

Robert Asquith was pleased to receive a summons to dine, with the information added that his cousin was alone.

At dinner the conversation busied itself with everything save the subject which was uppermost in the minds of both. Isabel was all the more delightful for having to exert herself a little to sustain her gaiety, and Asquith was in unfeigned good spirits. He gave an account of his progress in Anglicisation, related many drily humorous stories.

When the meal was over he said:

"You don't demand of me that I shall sit in solitary dignity over the claret for-half-an-hour? Is it *de rigueur* in my quality of English gentleman?"

"Perhaps you would like to smoke?"

"No."

"In that case come to the drawing-room."

He held the door open, and she swept gently past; Robert smiled, so pleasantly did her grace of movement affect him. There are women who enter a room like the first notes of a sonata, and leave it like the sweet close of a nocturne; Isabel was of them.

"How long does Miss Warren intend to stay in London?" he inquired, as they seated themselves.

"Indefinitely."

"Her friends there are congenial?"

"Entirely so. Mr. Meres is a clever man he has more influence over her than any one else."

"You give that as an illustration of his cleverness?"

"No; as the result of it. Ada wants intellectual society; she has no pleasure in talking of anything but books and art. And he has always been a sort of guide to her."

"Then you have the prospect of being alone for some time?"

"I shall go up as usual in May. Have you read this account of Indian jugglers in the *Cornhill*?"

"No, I have not."

"You really should; it is astonishing. Take it away with you; I have done with it."

"Thanks. I will. You wish to be in London in May? Two clear months before then. Could you be ready in, say, three days to go southwards?"

Isabel was quite prepared for this, but not for the way in which it was put. A man whose character finds its natural expression in little turns of this kind has terrible advantages over a woman not entirely

sure of her own purpose. She looked for a moment almost offended; it was the natural instinctive method of defence.

"To go southwards?" she repeated, rolling up the magazine she held.

"The yacht is at Marseilles," Robert pursued, watching her with eyes half-closed. "The Calders have made every preparation, and some friends of theirs, Mr. and Mrs. Ackerton - very nice people - are to be of the party."

She answered nothing. As he waited, coffee was brought in.

"I don't think I know anything of the Ackertons," Isabel said, naturally, as the servant held the tray.

"They are Somersetshire people, I believe. The lady was a Miss Harkle."

"Not a daughter of Canon Harkle?"

"Can't say, I'm sure."

The servant retired, and they sipped coffee in silence. Isabel presently put hers aside; Asquith then finished his cup at a draught, and walked to a table with it.

"I don't think you have any excuse left, have you?" he said, leaning over the back of a chair.

"That is a decidedly Oriental way of putting an invitation, Robert."

He was surprised at the amount of seriousness there was in her tone; she would not raise her face, and her cheeks were coloured.

"Let me be more English, then. Will you give us - give me - the great pleasure of your company, Isabel?"

"But I tell you so clearly that under no circumstances should I leave England just now. It is a little - unkind of you."

"Unkind? It is not exactly a spirit of unkindness that actuates me. It would do you no end of good, and you will find the people delightful."

Probably Isabel had by this time made up her mind, but disingenuousness was a mistake on Robert's part. He only slipped into it because he began to fear that he had really offended her, and the feeling disturbed his self-possession for the moment.

"Thank you," Isabel said. "I appreciate your kindness at its full, but you must not ask me again. I shall remain at Knightswell till I go to London."

He made a slight motion of assent with his hand.

"Now to think," Isabel said, with sudden recovery of good-humour - that sort of "well done, resolution!" which we utter to ourselves with cheering effect - "that you should have troubled to come all this way on what you might have known was an errand of disappointment!"

"Oh, I wanted, in any case, to see you before starting. I should have been very disappointed if I had missed you."

He began at once to give a lively sketch of the expedition he had planned, and Isabel listened with much attention, though she interposed no remarks.

"You will bring me an account of it all when you come back," she said on his ceasing to speak.

"It's not very clear to me whether I shall come back," Robert returned. "I have a friend in Smyrna whom I shall go to see, and I shouldn't wonder if I am tempted to stay out there."

"What, after all your perseverance in mastering English accomplishments?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't quite know what I shall do with myself if I stay here. Most probably I shall decide to go into harness again, one way or another. And that reminds me of the 'Coach and Horses.' I will wend my way to that respectable hostelry."

"You'll come and breakfast in the morning?"

"No; I must leave by the 8.15. I want to be early in London."

"You are rather an unreasonable man, my cousin Robert," said Isabel, as she stood at leave-taking. "Because I am forced, with every expression of regret, to decline an invitation to a yachting expedition, you are more than half angry with me. I thought you and I were beyond these follies."

"Did you? But, you see, I am not a hardened giver of invitations. The occasion has a certain uniqueness for me."

"Take courage. If one whom you invite declines, there is always a better one very ready to fill the place."

Robert went his way, and before many days Isabel had a written "good-bye" from London:

"To-morrow we start. It would have been a different thing if you had been with us here to-night. There are mysteries about you, cousin Isabel, and I rather think I was more at my ease before I began to puzzle over such things. If I settle in Smyrna, I will send you muscatels. Here or there, I believe I am always yours,

ROBERT ASQUITH."

He never wrote a letter much longer than this.

The day after his visit, Isabel took up her pen to talk with Kingcote.

"What do you think I have just done? Refused an invitation to go with friends yachting in the Mediterranean - an invitation it would have been lovely to accept. And why did I refuse? Wholly and solely on your account, sir. Will you not thank me? No, there was no merit in it, after all. How could I have been happy on the coasts of Italy and Greece, whilst you, my dearest, were so far from happy in London? You must get over that depression, which is the result of sudden change, and of the gloomy things you find yourself amongst. Do not be so uneasy about the future. Try to write to me more cheerfully, for have not I also a few hard things to bear? Indeed, I want your help as much as you need mine. Yet in one thing I have

the advantage - I look to the future with perfect trust. I laugh at your doubts and fears. Do you doubt of me? Do you fear lest I shall forget? I dare you to think such a thought! If I could but give you some of my good spirits. To me the new year makes a new world. I long for the bright skies and spring fields that I may enjoy them; they will have a meaning they never had before. It will soon be May, and then shall we not see each other?"

February passed, March all but passed. There were guests at Knightswell, and one fair spring morning, about eleven o'clock, Isabel was on the point of setting forth to drive with three ladies. The carriage was expected to come up to the door, and Isabel was just descending the stairs with one of her friends, when she saw the servant speaking with some one who had appeared at the entrance. A glance, and she perceived that it was Kingcote. She was startled, and had to make an effort before she could walk forward. She motioned to Kingcote to enter, and greeted him in the way of ordinary friendliness.

"We were on the very point of going out," she said, her voice shaken in spite of all determination. "Will you come into the library?"

She turned and excused herself to her companion, promising to be back almost immediately.

"What has brought you?" was her hurried question, when the library door was closed behind them. "Has anything happened?"

"Nothing," Kingcote answered, turning his eyes from her. "But I see you have no time to give me. I mustn't keep you now. I thought perhaps I might find you alone."

"And you have come —?"

"To see you - to see you - what else?" burst passionately from his lips. "I was dying with desire to see you. Last night it grew more than I could bear. I left the house before daylight, and I find myself here. I had no purpose of coming; I have done it all in a dream. My life had grown to a passion to see you!"

He caught her hand and kissed it again and again, kissed the sleeve of her garments, pressed her palm against his eyes.

"You have made me mad, Isabel," he whispered. "It is terrible not to be able to see you when that agony comes upon me. I neither rest nor employ myself; I can only pace my room, like an animal in his cage, with my heart on fire. Oh, I suffer - life is intolerable!"

"Bernard, let me go to that chair - to see you gave me a shock. For heaven's sake do speak less wildly, dear! Why should you suffer so? Have I not written to you often? Do you doubt me? What is it that distresses you?"

He stood, and still held her hand.

"Don't speak, but look at me very gently, softly, with all the assurance of tenderness that your eyes will utter. You have such power over me, that your gaze will soothe and make me a reasonable being again. No, not your lips! Only that still, smiling look, that I may worship you."

Her bosom trembled.

"Do you know yourself?" Kingcote went on, under his breath. "Have you any consciousness of that fearful power which is in you? No more, I suppose, than the flower has of its sweetness. You have so drawn my life into the current of your own, that I have lost all existence apart from you. I have dreamed of loving, but that was all idle; I had no imagination for this spell you have cast upon me."

"I am glad you came! I too was longing to touch your hand."

She pressed it to her lips.

"Oh, if I could only stay with you, now!"

"Yes, I know I must not keep you. You have friends waiting. They have a better right."

"A better right? That you know they have not, Bernard. But - I cannot —"

"They represent the world that is between you and me," he said, moving away. "You cannot leave them - no, it is impossible. Think

how strange it sounds. It would be as easy for you to do anything that is most disgraceful in the world's eyes, as to leave those friends to them selves for my sake. I am not speaking harshly; I mean that it is in truth so, and it shows us how amazingly we are creatures of conventional habit."

It was doubtful whether Isabel understood his meaning, her point of view was so different. A thought which strikes one into speechless astonishment will leave another quite unmoved. It is a question of degree of culture - also of degree of emotion.

"Dear, if you had forewarned me of your coming. Don't speak unkindly to me!"

"Rather I would never speak again. Go, and all blessings go with you! You have helped me to my calmer self. But, Isabel —"

"Bernard?"

"Are there often these friends about you?" he asked sadly.

"No, not often. I have told you how often I am by myself. And now, I *must*! Stay; do not leave the room when I do. Sit at the desk there and write me a letter. The drawer below is open; close the envelope, and put it in there; I will look for it. And you have not even breakfasted?"

"Oh, I will go to the 'Coach and Horses.' But no; I'm afraid of meeting Mr. Vissian somewhere. I will leave the park by the opposite road, and find some inn. Now I am well again. Good-bye, sweet!"

"Only a month, and I shall be in London!"

She hurried away. The ladies were waiting for her. The servant stood by the door with wraps.

"Isn't it too bad to keep you all like this? I give you leave to scold me all the way. Why didn't you get in? Lily, you know what you were saying about unpunctual people; take me for your text next time."

They passed out before her, and she said to the servant:

Isabel Clarendon

"Mr. Kingcote is writing in the library. Take him at once some biscuits and wine."

They drove off; and Isabel was gay as the sunshine. . . .

With her the month passed quickly enough. Through her solicitor she always obtained suitable rooms for the season, this time they were found in the neighbourhood of Portman Square. For some reason or other she did not to the end apprise Kingcote of the exact day on which she would be in town; after reaching her abode she let two days pass before summoning him to her. But this did not mean coldness, only - shopping. A host of things had as usual to be bought; the rooms had to be adorned in various ways; infinite - oh, infinite calls had to be made, or cards to be left. And one of the first houses she went to was that humble one in Chelsea. In her friendships Isabel was golden.

She went in the evening, that all might be at home. Before she could get from the door to the parlour Hilda's arms were about her, and Rhoda was waiting with a flush of pleasure on her usually pale cheeks.

"I don't think I shall as much as shake hands with *that* young lady," Isabel said, designating the elder girl. "Her behaviour to me has been too shameful. Not one scrap of a letter for two months at least! Ah, how good it is to be with you again! Hilda, you are taller than I am; that is most disrespectful. And it seems yesterday that I used to lift you up on my lap. - Well?"

So kindly said it was, that one word; a greeting that warmed the heart. It was for Thomas Meres himself, who came into the room. He never made use of speech in meeting Mrs. Clarendon; simply shook hands with her and let his eyes rest a moment upon her face.

"And where is Ada?"

Ada was summoned, and shortly presented herself. She showed no pleasure, but came forward holding out her hand naturally; she and Isabel did not kiss each other, it had never been their habit.

Isabel Clarendon

"You, I should say, want a good deal more exercise, Ada. Mr. Meres, you are the worst possible person to take care of a young lady who is too fond of shutting herself up over books."

"Oh, we have been rowing in Battersea Park," cried Hilda. "Ada rows splendidly. We are going up the river before long, if we can persuade father to come with us. Mrs. Clarendon, do order him to come. Father will do anything that you tell him."

Her father's yellow face changed colour for an instant; he laughed.

"If Mrs. Clarendon will guarantee that the boats won't capsize," he said; "that is the only question."

"Are you great at the oar, Rhoda?" Isabel asked, going over to a seat by the girl, and taking her hand affectionately. It was an impulse of pity; Rhoda looked so sad, though she smiled.

"My function is steering," was the reply.

"What a wise girl! And how did you all enjoy yourselves at Eastbourne? You can't think how tempted I was to join you. If only it hadn't been such a long way."

"I hope you feel no permanent ill results of your accident?" Mr. Meres asked.

"None, I really think. But, oh dear I'm growing old."

Hilda broke into her cheery laugh; Rhoda and her father smiled; even Ada moved her lips incredulously.

"How dare you all make fun of me? Hilda, stop laughing at once."

"Old, indeed, Mrs. Clarendon! That I don't think you'll ever be."

It was Isabel's delight to hear these words; she flushed with pleasure.

Isabel Clarendon

"I want you girls to come and lunch with me to-morrow - no, the day after; to-morrow I am engaged. But I forgot; can you come, Hilda?"

"Yes, on Saturday."

"That's just right, then. And can you dine with me on Sunday, Mr. Meres? I shall have some one you would like to know, I think. Mr. Kingcote, Ada; he is in London now. You must give Mr. Meres an account of him."

She did not stay much longer, and went, as always, leaving kind thoughts behind her. Should we not value those who have this power of touching hearts to the nobler life of emotion as they pass?

CHAPTER VIII

That friend of Kingcote's, Gabriel by name, of whom we have heard, had his studio on the north side of Regent's Park, in a house which also supplied him with a bedroom, this double accommodation sufficing to his needs. In regard to light the painting-room was badly contrived; formerly two rooms, it had been made into one by the simple removal of a partition, and of its three windows one looked south, the others west. From the latter was visible the smug, plebeian slope of Primrose Hill; the former faced a public-house. Gabriel would tell you impressively that the air in this part of London was very good. He lived here, in truth, because he could not afford to live in a better place.

He was the only friend Kingcote had retained from early years. Gabriel's father was a bookseller in Norwich, and the two boys had been companions at their first school. That their intimacy had survived to the present day was not easily accounted for, except perhaps by the fact that neither was fond of seeking acquaintances; knowing each other well, and continuing by the chances of life within reach of each other, they had found in this intercourse enough mutual support to keep their human needs from starving, and had been prevented by it from seeking new associates; it happens occasionally that, with reticent men, a friendship of this kind will terminate in a double isolation. In all other essentials of character they were very unlike. Kingcote we know pretty well by this time - his amiability, his dangerous passiveness, his diffidence, his emotional excess. Not one of these qualities manifested itself in Clement Gabriel. His temper was frankly sour; Kingcote had on occasions visited him and found him indisposed to speak. "Talk to me as much as you like," he said, when at length there came a question, "but don't expect me to answer; I shall say bearish things, and I'd rather not." They sat together for an hour, and the artist did not open his lips. It was his habit to declare that he loved idleness, that at times it cost him unheard-of efforts to go on with his work; that it would have been easier to cut off his hand than to take up the pencil. For all that, no man in London worked more continuously or with fiercer determination. He had not the physique of a robust man; at eighteen he had been declared consumptive; but the will in him was Samson. Ill-health was not allowed to affect his mind, and symptoms of positive disease he appeared to have outgrown; he was in the habit of saying that he could not afford the luxury of a delicate

chest, any more than of delicate food. An end he had set before himself, an ideal in art - it was equivalent in his case to an ideal in life - and only the palsy of death would check his progress. Emotions he seemed to have none, outside the concerns of his pursuit. In friendship he made no pretence of warmth; he carried to excess the reserve of an Englishman, and even handshaking he would escape if he could. That he had ever been in love (he was thirty) could not for a moment be supposed, and he spoke with contempt of men who could not live without "women and brats" to hang about them and weight them in the race. "You will never marry?" Kingcote asked him, and the reply was: "Never! I have work to do." Not a little of arrogance he displayed now and then; as, for instance, in adding after a moment's pause, "What wife had Michael Angelo?"

His life had, since boyhood, been desperately hard. Till the age of fourteen or fifteen, no bent towards drawing had marked him; then it exhibited itself suddenly and decisively. His father had no other son, and had made up his mind that Clement should go into the book trade; the lad begged to be allowed to study art. For answer, he was at once taken from school, and put into the shop. He did not grumble, but spent every moment of leisure time in drawing, and deprived himself of sleep for the same purpose. When he was seventeen, and in appearance three years older, he told his father that he must go to London; might he have a few shillings a week to live upon? If not, he must still go; the shillings would come somehow. His resolve was so evident that the father consented to supply him with seven shillings a week for one year; after that, he must shift for himself. Clement accepted the offer. His father expected to see him back in Norwich very shortly; in effect, he had not set eyes upon him to the present day. For the lad, when his year was at an end, nourished such bitterness against the cruelty to which he had been subjected, was so marked by the hungry memories of those twelve months, that, in a letter home, he vowed that he would never meet his father again. The parent responded angrily, and they held intercourse no more.

Gabriel passed his South Kensington examinations, in order to enable himself to teach. During that first year he had also found miscellaneous kinds of employment. He always protested that there was not a mean or repulsive pursuit in London by which he had not at one time or another earned a copper; which was his exaggerated way of stating that he had been driven to strange expedients to keep himself alive and have time to work up without assistance for the

successive grades of examination. One source of income he unearthed was the sketching in water-colours of pugilists and race-horses for a man who kept an open stall in Hampstead Road. It became a partnership, in fact; the salesman allowed Gabriel a certain percentage on the drawings sold; and they sold well, especially on Saturday night. Better days began when he got his first private pupil. He was admitted at length to study in the Academy schools, and only just missed a Travelling Studentship - it was a bitter loss. Not a penny did he receive in gift from any one (a prize at South Kensington excepted) after the remittances from Norwich ceased. An offer from Kingcote almost broke their friendship. Gabriel apologised for the violent way in which he had received this offer.

"Can't you see," he said, "that if I had not trained myself to savage independence, I should have broken down long since? I excite myself to anger lest I should yield."

Kingcote's respect for this character was unbounded. He had an ideal faith in Gabriel. To him he spoke with the utmost freedom of his own affairs, and did not feel the lack of corresponding openness on the other side. Gabriel would have found no relief in exhibiting his sorrows; shut up in his breast, they acted as a motive force. He worked at times in frenzy. Kingcote did not divine this; he regarded his friend as above the ordinary passions and needs; he accepted literally Gabriel's declaration that work was enough for him. Kingcote had not the power to maintain such reserve; sooner or later he had to find a confidant, and pour forth in sympathetic ears the stream of his miseries. His was essentially a feminine nature; in Gabriel masculine energy found its climax.

The days of race-horses and pugilists had gone by; with increased knowledge of his art, Gabriel had laid upon himself severe restrictions. He would not even paint portraits in the ordinary way, though therein he might easily have found a means of putting aside the teaching, which he hated. He was capable of stopping a girl who sold matches in the street and paying her to let him sketch her face, if it struck his peculiar fancy; but he would not paint the simpering daughter of a retired draper who sought him out. He said plainly that the head did not interest him; it would be waste of time, and he indulged himself in one of his rare laughs - a shockingly unmelodious cackle - as soon as the man had taken off himself and his dudgeon. He held that, as long as he could keep himself from starvation, the ideal exactions of art must be supreme with him. He

followed no recognised school, and his early pictures found neither purchaser nor place of exhibition more dignified than a dealer's window. He was a realist, and could not expect his style to be popular.

Kingcote sought him out as soon as he had leisure after his arrival in London. He had written to announce his departure from Wood End but left the causes to be explained subsequently. Going over to the studio in the evening, he found the artist at work upon some drawings to illustrate a novel. Gabriel did not leave his seat, merely nodded as his friend came in; it was with a distinct look of annoyance that he found himself obliged to shake hands. Let us see what manner of man he outwardly was. Tall and excessively meagre to begin with; when regarding his work, he thrust his elbows into his sides, and one wondered that he did not hurt himself with the sharp bones. His face was hard set, the mouth somewhat too prominent, the cheeks hollow, the eyes small and keen. His hair was very light, his thin whiskers of the same colour. He had a very long throat, and made it appear still longer by a habit of pushing forward his chin defiantly. No one ever saw his teeth; he even laughed with his mouth close shut. In speaking, his voice was high, often with a tendency to querulousness. When he walked, it was at a great rate, with head down, and cutting left and right with the stick he always carried. He was not at all of a refined type, but energy personified.

"What is the book you are illustrating?" Kingcote inquired.

"Oh, it's damned nonsense; but I manage to see some things the writer couldn't. It will be valued in future for the cuts."

This was characteristic of Gabriel. He said it in the most natural way, and seeing that he spoke truth there seemed no reason why he should not express himself freely.

"What are you going to send to the Academy this year?"

He rose, after a touch or two at the drawing, and took up the lamp, which was the only light in the room. (Though it was very cold he had no fire.) On an easel stood a large picture, nearly finished; he illuminated it. Kingcote started at the astonishing scene that was at once before him. It was a portion of an East End market-street at night; the chief group, a man at a stall selling quack-medicines to a

thronging cluster of people. The main light came from a naphtha-lamp on the stall, but there was also the gleam from one of the ordinary lamps of the street. The assembled men, women, and children were of the poorest and vilest, and each face seemed a portrait. That of the medicine vendor was marvellous, with its look of low brag and cunning; on it was the full glare of the naphtha flame.

"Anything else?" Kingcote asked, looking at the painter.

"One or two small things, which they won't hang. This they will."

"There can be no doubt of that; it will be the picture of the year. But let me see the others."

One of these filled Kingcote with delight; he uttered an "Ah!" of pleasure. It was a little girl standing before a shop-window, and looking at an open illustrated paper which was exposed there. The subject was nothing, the pose and character of the child everything. Poor and ragged, she had lost for the moment sense of everything, but the rich and comfortable little maiden displayed in the coloured page; her look was envious, but had more of involuntary admiration. This too was a night piece; the light came from the front of the shop, above the picture.

"The face is exquisite!" Kingcote said; "you have made great strides this last half-year."

The artist uttered a "h'm," and no more.

"So you got tired of your cottage," he said seating himself, and taking up his pencil again.

"You know I was that, long since. But a different reason brought me back to London."

He explained his situation.

"And what shall you do?" Gabriel asked, simply.

"It is impossible to say. I must find work of some kind."

"Well, this is good news! At last you'll do something."

"My dear fellow, it is the opposite of good news. I shall do something, no doubt; but it will be drudgery of some kind to earn a living. There is nothing more to come out of me than that."

"Humbug! You are not as old as I am."

"No, but old enough to have seen the end of my tether."

"Why don't you go in for writing?"

"Because I am unable to. I can enjoy other men's work, but I can produce none of my own."

"Of course not, if you take it for granted. You could if you made up your mind to."

"Don't forget that that making up of the mind is everything; it is the very ability which I lack. But literature is a vain thought. How is it for a moment to be imagined that I could earn a sufficient income by it? I have written verses at times; you don't advise me to go into the market with those wares? Journalism I am utterly unfit for, as you must recognise. Equally unfit to write for magazines; I have neither knowledge nor versatility. There remains fiction, and for that I am vastly too subjective; I have no 'shaping spirit of imagination' - at all events not of the commercially valuable kind. If I had lived in days when Undine and Sintram were the approved style, I should probably have been tempted to try my hand; but now —"

"Because," he continued, "you are blessed with genius and will, you think all men should, can do great things by dint of mere exertion. I shall *never* do anything; do you understand? And why should I? There are other ways of enjoying life."

"What other ways?" Gabriel asked, strangely.

"One can receive happiness, as well as be active in bestowing it."

"Whence is your happiness to come?"

“ Who knows? We must wait and see.”

Such an attitude as this went near to excite Clement Gabriel's contempt; he ceased to argue and plied his pencil. The respect which Kingcote entertained for his strenuous friend was now and then mingled with vexation that the latter should fall short in finer sympathies; and Gabriel, though he liked Kingcote's company could scarcely be said to respect him. He was conscious that the dreamer saw visions and heard voices of a sphere whence there came no message to himself, but he acknowledged the superiority grudgingly, and would have asked to what end the revelations were made if Kingcote could not translate them into one or other form of human art. With the least strain of self-conceit in Kingcote, their friendship would have been at an end long since.

It seemed as if indeed Kingcote had determined to wait upon Providence. He had said to himself that he would vigorously turn to discovering an occupation in life, as soon as he should have settled his sister in the new home at Highgate; but the settlement was effected, and he did not appear to be exerting himself. He bought newspapers, it is true, and sickened his soul with the reading of advertisements, but it was seldom indeed that anything presented itself which seemed in the least likely to assist him. For it was not a temporary pursuit that he needed, but a fixed station of recognisable activity; work, in fact, which would enable him to stand before Isabel without shame when she was free to fulfil her promise. He was not in immediate need, nor likely to be; the capital which produced him sixty pounds a year would permit him to live and support his sister for some time to come, with economy such as they exercised. But it was idle to take comfort from that; practically he was a beggar.

A more admirable housekeeper than Mary could not have been found. Long experience of grinding poverty had taught her how to make a sovereign go very far indeed; Kingcote was astonished at the accounts with which she regularly presented him. He would have had her increase her own comfort in many little ways, but she always refused; self-denial, formerly a harsh necessity, had now become a pleasure; a kind of asceticism was becoming her motive in life. This, a common enough phenomenon, allied itself with increased rigour in religious performances. Her brother's indifference in such matters was a distress to her, but she would not have ventured to speak. Her gratitude to him was deep and fervent, but Mary felt what a distance there was between him and herself.

She could love him as her heart desired, yet she was always hoping that time and use might make them more like brother and sister.

Before long there did happen something which resulted in a drawing nearer. Mary began to notice that her brother received frequent letters addressed in a female hand; she discovered, too, that they bore the Winstoke post-mark. Over this she mused much. It was clear to her that Bernard was anything but at rest in his mind, and that the source of his disquietude was something other than the mere difficulties of his position. His room was directly over that in which she slept, and she could hear him walking up and down sometimes half through the night; he would come down to breakfast looking ill and preoccupied. Now and then, when he had promised to sit with her in the evening and read aloud, which he often did, much to her joy, he would alter his mind at the last moment and leave the house. Then he was always very late in returning, and annoyed that she had sat up for him. She was obliged at length to leave supper on the table, and go to her room, though often she waited till she heard him enter the house before she hastened upstairs.

The morning that he went off to Knightswell, she had not noticed his early departure, and his absence throughout the day alarmed her. He reappeared about four in the afternoon. Looking anxiously at his face, she did not venture to question him. He took up a newspaper and glanced over it for a few moments.

"You wondered what had become of me?" he said at length, opening his lips for the first time, and trying to smile. "I went very early; I had to go out of London to see some one."

"I began to be very uneasy," Mary returned.

He sat down - not, to her surprise, going to his own room - and she began to lay the table for tea. He read the paper. In passing him she timidly touched his head with her fingers caressingly. Kingcote looked round; his face had the kindest smile.

"Do you know," he said, laughing, "what was in my mind at that moment? I was thinking how admirable the relations are between a brother and sister, when she is a good sister like you, Mary. Suppose you had been my wife instead of my sister. When I came in just now you would have overwhelmed me with questions, with complaints,

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with frettings, and made me angry. As it is, you have no anxiety but to put me at my ease, and your quiet kindness is a blessing to me."

"But all wives are surely not like that, Bernard?" she returned, with pleased protest.

"Most, I'm afraid; but no - not all."

The strangest speculations began to live in Mary's brain. Was it possible that her brother —? Oh, that was nonsense.

He was kind with the children when they came in from school, and, after tea, took a book and read to himself. Mary sent the youngsters a little earlier than usual to bed. When he and she sat alone, she saw that he made several beginnings of speaking; her eyes apparently busy over sewing, missed no phase of his countenance. At length he laid the book open on his knees.

"You remember my mentioning to you a large house called Knightswell, not far from my cottage?"

He did not look at her, but his eyes had an absent glimmer, not quite a smile, as they fixed themselves on the work she had on her lap.

"Yes, I do."

"I have been there to-day."

"Been all that way; Bernard?"

"Yes."

Mary did not fail to understand that it was now her turn to question.

"You have friends there?"

"A friend. If you will listen I will tell you a story."

He related all that he knew of the history of Isabel Clarendon, as if it had been told to him or he had read it somewhere, up to the time of his first meeting with her; he described her exactly, and described

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Ada Warren also, the latter, as far as his knowledge allowed, with perfect justice.

"One of those, Mary, is my friend; which do you think?"

"You have made it too easy to guess," his sister answered good-naturedly. She had listened with the utmost attention, leaning forward, her arms crossed upon her sewing. "*Not* Miss Warren!"

"But I do not dislike her; you mustn't think that."

"Still, you would not go all the way to Knightswell to see her."

He said nothing. Mary was nervously impatient.

"But what a strange, strange story! And she - Mrs. Clarendon - may be sent from her home any day? Is Miss Warren likely to marry?"

"She is engaged, but will not be married till she is of age. That will be in rather more than a year."

"And what will Mrs. Clarendon do then?"

He paused a moment before answering. But at length:

"She has promised to be my wife."

"Bernard!"

Mary threw her work down, and came and kissed his forehead. She could say nothing; stricken with wonder and confused emotions of pleasure, she strove to realise the truth of what he had told her. Then Kingcote took from his pocket the case in which he kept Isabel's portrait. Mary gazed at it in long silence.

"But how strange!" she murmured, when she turned her eyes away to dream absently.

"You think she might have made a better choice."

"I have no such thought, Bernard, as you know well. Is it known to her friends?"

"No," he replied, shortly.

"I wonder what Miss Warren would think?"

He mused, wondering himself.

They talked for a long time. To Kingcote the relief of having told his secret was so great, that he had become cheerful, hopeful. His sister did not show exuberant delight; she continued preoccupied, now and then, as if in result of her meditations, putting a question, and musing again upon the answer. A woman mentally occupied with woman possesses a lucidity of reasoning, a swiftness of apprehension, a shrewdness of inference, which may well render her a trifle contemptuous of male conclusions on the same subject. A very few details are enough for her to work upon; she has the categories by heart, and classifies with relentless acumen. It is the acme of the contradictions of her nature. Instinctively revolting against materialist views when held by the other sex; passionately, fiercely tenacious of spiritual interpretations where her own affections are concerned; the fountain of all purity that the world knows; she yet has in her heart that secret chamber for the arraignment of her sisters, where spiritual pleas are scoffed at, where the code administered is based on the most cynical naturalism. She will not acknowledge it; she will die rather than admit the fact as a working element of her own consciousness but she betrays herself too often. The countenance of a woman whose curiosity has been aroused concerning another is vaguely disturbing. She smiles, but the smile excites disagreeable thoughts, suspicions such as we would gladly put away. Happily she does most of such thinking when out of sight.

Kingcote said nothing of Isabel's pecuniary difficulties, and left the question of Ada's parentage as it was represented in the will. He laid stress all through, on the pathetic aspect of Isabel's position. Mary listened, questioned innocently, gathered data, and made her deduction.

On the day after Isabel's visit to Chelsea, Kingcote came and lunched with her. Her rooms, as he noticed, were sufficiently luxurious; a

trouble weighed upon him as he talked with her. With a new dress - which of course became her perfectly - she seemed to him to have put on an air somewhat different from that which characterised her in the country. She was impulsively affectionate, but there was an absence in her manner, a shade of intermittence in her attention, a personal restlessness, an almost flippancy in her talk at times, which kept him uneasy. The atmosphere of town and of the season was about her; she seemed to be experiencing a vast relief, to have a reaction of buoyancy. It was natural that she should speak of indifferent things whilst servants were waiting at table, but Kingcote was none the less irritated and hurt in his sensibilities. He lacked the virtue of hypocrisy. The passion which had hold upon him felt itself wronged even by harmless compliance with the exactions of everyday artificial life. Something gnawed within his breast all the time that he was speaking as a mere acquaintance; he had a difficulty in overcoming a sullenness of temper which rose within him. The end of the meal was all but the limit of his patience.

"Don't ask me to come in this formal way again," he said, when they were alone in the drawing-room.

"Why not?" Isabel asked, in surprise.

"Because I am absurdly sensitive. It is pain to me to hear you speak as you would to any one whom you had asked out of mere politeness. I think I had rather not see you at all than in that way."

She laughed lightly.

"But isn't it enough to know what there is beneath my outward manner?"

"I know it, but —"

"But - your faith in me is so weak. Why cannot you trust me more?"

He was silent.

"You must get rid of these weaknesses. It all comes of your living so much alone. Besides, I want you particularly to come and dine with me on Sunday. Mr. Meres will be here, and I should like you to know him. I shouldn't wonder if he can be useful to you."

Kingcote made a gesture of impatience.

"But you won't refuse, if I wish it? He is the most delightful man, and such an old friend of mine."

"The less reason why I should like him."

"Now, Bernard, this is foolish. Are you going to be jealous of every one I know? Oh, what a terrible time is before you!"

She said the words with mirthful mockery, and to Kingcote they were like a sudden stab. It was as though a future of dreadful things had suddenly been opened before his eyes, black, yawning, thronged with the shapes of midnight agonies. Her laugh had a taunting cruelty; her very eyes looked relentless. In this moment he feared her.

She was sitting some little distance away, and could not let him feel the touch of her hand which would have soothed.

"Have you told your sister?" she asked, after regarding him for a moment.

He found it difficult to answer truthfully, but could not do otherwise. He admitted that he had.

"I knew you would," she returned, with a nod and an ambiguous smile. "And your friend, Gabriel?"

"No. I told you I should not. My sister is different."

"Yes. Why should you not tell her? And you showed her my portrait?"

"I did."

"What did she say?"

"Many kind and pleasant things - things you would have liked to hear."

"Are you sure of that?"

"You don't dislike to be praised."

"No, on the whole I think not. But I could do with the praises of just one person - they would be enough."

"I may repeat your question - are you sure of that?"

"Very sure. But you will come on Sunday?"

"At what time? I thought you went to church."

"Only in the morning. We shall dine at eight o'clock."

"And will there only be Mr. Meres?"

"Only one other - a lady."

Kingcote looked about him restlessly.

"How long shall you stay in London?" was his next question.

"Not more than two months, I think."

"Two months - May, June. It will seem long."

"Long? Seem long to you?"

"Yes."

"Are you not glad that I am nearer to you?"

"Very glad. But I wish it were November, with no one else in town. I suppose you will be surrounded with people all the time."

"No, I shall see very few," she answered, rather coldly. "I should wish, if I can, to please you."

There was a struggle in him between obstinate jealousy and self-denial. She looked at him, with a half-suppressed smile about her lips, and the nobler feeling for the moment had its way.

"You will best please me," he said, with the old tenderness, "by pleasing yourself. You shall see nothing of my foolishness, even if I can't altogether overcome it; and I will try my hardest to do that, for my own peace indeed. I will bury myself in books."

Isabel was seeking for words to express what was in her mind.

"You see," she began at length, "I can't entirely isolate myself, even if I would. People find out that I am in town, and I cannot forbid them to come and see me. If they come, then I am bound to make calls in return, or to accept invitations."

"Yes, I understand it perfectly well," he assented, with a little too much of readiness. "It would be monstrous to ask you to live in solitude. Indeed, I will accept it all without murmuring."

"All that I can do I will. I promise you not to seek new acquaintances, and I will see no more of the old than I am absolutely obliged. You can trust me so far? It is rather hard to feel that you have not complete confidence in me. I have in you."

"Forgive me, and let us forget that I ever talked so unkindly. I ought to be proud of your successes in society. It would all be easier, I suppose, if —"

"If what?"

"Only if I valued myself more highly than I can. It is so hard to believe that you can compare me with others and not grow very cold."

"I should never think of comparing you with any one. Why should I? You are apart from all others; I should as soon think of asking whether the sun did really give more light than one or other of the stars."

She would not have used such a comparison in the days before his letters had revealed to her a gospel of passion. His pleasure in

hearing the words was mitigated by a critical sense that she had the turn of thought from himself, that it did not come from the fountains of her heart. Few men surpassed Bernard Kingcote in ingenious refinement of self-torture. His faculty in that respect grew daily.

"Is any one likely to call this afternoon?" he asked, when they had sat together a little longer.

"I don't expect any one in particular, but it is quite possible."

"Then I will leave you now."

Isabel did not oppose his going.

"Oh," she said, as a thought struck her, "Rhoda and Hilda Meres are going to lunch with me to-morrow, and perhaps Ada, though I don't know whether she will come. In the afternoon I dare say we shall go to the Academy. Will you be there, and show us Gabriel's pictures?"

He gave a hesitating "Yes."

"Not unless you would like to. Be in the first room about half-past three."

CHAPTER IX

Gabriel's "Market Night" was well hung, and kept a crowd about it through the day. Prelates, plutocrats, and even the British baby appeared on the whole to be less attractive. Setting aside landscapes, which we paint with understanding, our Exhibition cannot often boast of more than a couple of pictures which invite to a second examination on disinterested grounds; this of the unknown painter addressed itself successfully both to the vulgar and to the cultured. Its technical qualities were held to be high. Some people made a sermon of it, - which the painter never intended.

It being Saturday afternoon, Kingcote found himself waiting in a great press at the hour that Isabel had mentioned. The face for which he looked at length shone upon him, and he discerned the two young ladies upon whose appearance he had speculated - Rhoda Meres, with her tall, graceful figure and melancholy prettiness; Hilda, greatly more interesting, of flower-like freshness and purity, her keen look anticipating the pleasure that was before her. Kingcote was conscious of missing some one; whilst he was joining the three, he sought for Ada Warren, but she seemed not to be of the party. He could not understand why her absence should occasion him anything like disappointment, yet it assuredly did. He was wondering whether she had changed at all since he saw her.

He was presented to the two girls, and did what he could in the way of amiable interrogation and remark. Hilda, constraining her sister's companionship, began to examine the pictures.

"I must keep them within view," Mrs. Clarendon said to Kingcote, "but I have no intention of wearying myself by walking round each room. You have been here already; you can point out anything you would like me to see. Where are your friend's?"

"Much further on."

"What do you think of these girls?"

"The younger one is delightful."

Isabel Clarendon

"You don't care for Rhoda; yet she has always been my favourite. Poor things!" she added in a lower tone, "isn't it hard that they should have nothing in life to look forward to?"

Hilda turned to draw Mrs. Clarendon's attention to a picture.

"Miss Warren has not come with you?" Kingcote asked, when there was again opportunity.

"No; she kept at home. But the girls have just been surprising me. If you buy to day's *Tattler* you'll find something that she has written - a description - something about the river."

"Verse?"

"No, prose. They are all in great excitement about it. I must get the paper; I don't suppose she'll send it to me."

Kingcote was much interested; he promised himself to read this contribution as soon as possible.

When at length they reached the "Market Night," it was very difficult to get a view of the canvas. But for Isabel a few glances were enough.

"Oh, I don't like that at all!" she exclaimed positively, moving away from the throng. "Those faces are disgusting. I should not like to have such a picture as that in my house."

"In that I agree with you," Kingcote said. Hilda had also come away and was listening. "But it is a wonderful picture for all that."

"What a pity he paints such things! Why don't you make him choose pleasant subjects?"

"I imagine Gabriel's answer if I said such a thing to HIM," said Kingcote, smiling. "I suppose the artist must paint what he can and will; our likes and dislikes will not much affect him. But don't you admire the skill and power, at all events?"

Hilda went to look again, guided by this remark; she snapped up anything that seemed likely to instruct her taste with the eager voracity of a robin.

But Isabel only shook her head and shuddered a little.

"Is the other picture as bad?" she asked.

"It's just opposite; come and look."

This was the child in front of the shop-window.

"No, not quite as bad," was Isabel's judgment. "But he has such a taste for low subjects. Why doesn't he paint decent people?"

"I'd rather keep clear of the gutter myself," conceded her companion. "Still —"

He did not conclude, and they crossed to the girls again. Shortly, Mrs. Clarendon met with a party of friends, and Kingcote drew away. A tall, heavy man of a military type bent insinuatingly as he talked to her; Kingcote fretted at the sight. To avoid and forget it he joined Hilda Meres. The bright intelligence which made way through her shyness charmed him; possibly the extreme respect with which she received every word of his utterance did not diminish his interest in her. Rhoda scarcely spoke, but her smile, too, was very sweet. How he wished that his sister could have companions such as these! And, as Mary came into his mind - she sitting alone in her widow's weeds - he felt impatient with the bright mob crushing about him. He did not need to be reminded, yet it reminded him again, how heartless the world is. . . .

Ada had made pretext of a headache to stay at home. Possibly she would not have done so, but for the fact of her first piece of writing having appeared to-day. She did not care to present herself before Mrs. Clarendon as if anxious to be congratulated. Yet it concerned her not a little to know that Mrs. Clarendon read what she had written; she had joy in the thought that at length she could prove herself not insignificant. Henceforth her position was far other than it had been, in her own eyes at all events. Formerly she was scarcely a person, rather a mere disagreeable fact, troubling and puzzling people; she had no rights, and no satisfaction save the illiberal one of

feeling the brute power which circumstances had given her. Now she was a human being, and her heart was full.

This that *The Tattler* had printed was a little sketch called "River Twilight"; it occupied a column of the weekly paper, and was of course unsigned. Walking with Hilda along the Embankment a fortnight ago, when there was a finely dusky heaven, it had first of all struck her that she might find bits for her pencil about here; then came the suggestion to picture in words that which had so impressed her. She went home, and up to her own room, and by midnight had written her description. She resolved not to show this to Mr. Meres, but to try her luck at once with one of the papers which published similar things; it was despatched the first thing in the morning. In a day or two there came to her an envelope with which she hastened into privacy; she had seen the name of *The Tattler* stamped on the back. It contained a proof.

Perhaps it would be literally true to say that this was the first great pleasure that life had brought her. She sat and sobbed for joy; a vast gratitude possessed her whole being - gratitude to the Fates, as she would have said. She could not believe that in very truth her writing was going to be printed; nay, that it was printed, and lay before her! With eyes constantly blinded by a foolish rush of tears, she read through the composition - oh, how many times! One misprint there was, and one only; she laughed at the nonsense it made. Mr. Meres was not at home, or she could not have resisted showing him the proof; she could not delay the posting of it ("by return of post" was requested), and it was so much the better; she would astonish him with the paper on Saturday. She went out, dropped her envelope into the nearest pillar, and wandered along the Embankment, night-time though it was. The girls she had avoided - it was better to be alone. The blackness of the river was full of intense meaning; the stars above flashed and burned like beacons; the rush of the night air she drank like wine. Over to the south was a red glare; that was Lambeth - to her a mysterious region of toil and trouble. The fierceness of human conflict had all at once assumed for her the significance of kindred emotion. She, too - only a girl, and without that which in girls is prized - might perhaps find some work in the world. Would they *pay* her for this contribution? She stood still, as if her breath had been caught. The glare in the south became a mighty illumination of the heavens; it was like the rising of a new sun. She leaned upon the stone parapet, and strove to fix the idea which had shot so into birth. Would they *pay* her? Might she hope to earn by

writing enough to live upon? Mr. Meres had always spoken of that aspect of literature very gloomily; he, indeed, had never ceased to find it the hardest struggle to earn a living. But then he had his children to support. . . .

She turned to go home. On one of the seats which she passed, a wretched woman was huddling herself in her rags, as if preparing to sleep. Ada took out her purse and gave money.

"Who knows?" she said to herself, "my mother may be such an one. . . ."

Thomas Meres was exultant when Ada showed him her achievement. He reminded himself just in time, and only just in time, that excess of laudation was not advisable, but he could not prevent his eyes from twinkling with delight. Hilda was less cautious, nothing less than enthusiasm could satisfy her. Rhoda gave approval, which surprised her sister and her father by its cool moderateness.

Ada had meant to send a copy of the paper to Mrs. Clarendon, but at the last she altered her mind; she could not bear the thought of being misinterpreted. One copy she did dispatch, and that was to Lacour, having pencilled her initials at the end of the article.

At dinner there was of course talk of Academy experiences. It was mentioned that Mr. Kingcote had been met with and introduced.

"There were two pictures by a friend of his, a Mr. Gabriel," Hilda said, and described what they were. "Mrs. Clarendon couldn't bear them, but Mr. Kingcote said they were very powerful, and so they seemed to me. I wish I could have looked at them longer and closer, but there was such a crowd."

"I have seen mention of the 'Market Night,'" observed her father. "I must manage to get a look at it. I am not surprised Mrs. Clarendon didn't like it."

"Oh, but she didn't look at it from an artistic point of view," Hilda went on to explain with much zeal. "Very likely it wasn't a pretty subject, but that has nothing to do with its merits as a picture."

"You are an advanced young lady," jested Mr. Meres. "Art for art's sake, eh? What's your opinion, Ada? Must a picture necessarily be pleasant to look at?"

"It depends what we call pleasant," hazarded Ada. "I fancy people think very differently about that."

"Yes, I suppose that's the fact of the matter. What view did Mr. Kingcote take?"

Ada turned her eyes to Hilda and listened.

"I fancy," said the girl, with a roguish smile, "he didn't like to disagree with Mrs. Clarendon; but he thought the picture good for all that. I like Mr. Kingcote, don't you, Ada?"

The question was unexpected, and Ada was not ready with an answer. She tried to say something natural and off-hand, and could not hit on the right words. To her extreme annoyance, she saw that her embarrassment was attracting attention. Mr. Meres glanced at her, and then showed artificial interest in something at the other end of the room.

"I can't say that I have thought much about him," she uttered at length, with exaggerated indifference. She was intensely angry with herself for her utterly groundless difficulty. If she had not thought of Kingcote before, she at all events did so now, and with not a little acrimony.

She and Mr. Meres passed each other by chance about an hour after dinner.

"Will you come and give me some help?" the latter asked.

"Certainly."

He wanted her to read aloud several pages from a German book, the while he scanned an English translation which was under review. When this was done, he sat musing, and stroked his nose.

"You couldn't have done better," he exclaimed at length with abruptness. "That little thing is rounded and polished, complete in short pieces for awhile, and polish, polish! itself, an artistic bit of work. Stick to quite By-the-bye, you have been reading De Quincey of late?"

"How do you know?"

"A word or two, a turn in the style, that's all," he said, smiling.

"Will they pay me for it?" Ada brought herself to ask.

"Oh, yes; you'll have your guinea for the column. *The Tattler* pays at the end of each month, I believe. You look as pleased," he added, with a laugh, "as if your bread and cheese depended on it."

"The labourer is worthy of his - or her - hire," Ada remarked.

"Don't, for heaven's sake, don't begin to look on it in that way! Happily you are under no such vile necessity. Rejoice in your freedom. No man can bid you write your worst, that the public may be caught."

"Yet not long ago you made light of my efforts just because I was not dependent on literature."

"I have seen since that you mean serious things. Beggary is an aid to no one; if it impels to work, it embitters the result. With the flow of a hungry man's inspiration there cannot but mingle something of the salt of tears. One's daily bread at least must be provided - I don't say one's daily banquet. If the absence of need checks your creative impulse, it doesn't greatly matter; in that case you would never have done anything worth speaking of. No, no; rejoice in your freedom. Thank heaven that you can live, as old Landor says, 'Beyond the arrows, shouts, and views of men.'"

There was silence; then he asked:

"Have you sent the paper to Mrs. Clarendon?"

Ada replied with a negative.

Isabel Clarendon

He kept his eyes from her, and stirred in his seat.

"You think she would not care to see it?"

"I don't think she would."

"Do you remember," he began, with uncertain voice, "that not long ago I was going to ask you to do something to please me."

"I remember it."

"Can you guess what that was?"

She did not answer at once. Her face showed inner movements of conflicting kinds; she seemed to struggle to banish that hardness of expression which fixed her features against an unwelcome thought.

"Had it," she asked at length, "anything to do with Mrs. Clarendon?"

"Yes, Ada, it had. You do not like her. One's likes and dislikes cannot easily be altered to suit another's wish, but if by any means I could bring you to kind thoughts of her, I think I should be content to forget every other hope that life still nourishes in me."

She did not speak.

"Can you be open enough with me to say why it is you dislike her?" He spoke very softly and kindly, and with a hint of things which could not but touch a listener.

Ada began with trembling:

"It seems to have grown with me. I shrank from her when, as a child, I was first brought into her presence. Her look was contemptuous, cruel; for all that I was such a poor, helpless creature, and should have moved her pity. Since I have known everything, she has seemed to me the more to be blamed. I cannot sympathise with her, though I know others do. There is no motive in her life that seems to me noble or lovable. I think her selfish; I think she has brought upon

herself all her troubles by her deliberate choice of lower things. I may miss the better points in her character; I am intensely prejudiced."

Meres listened with pain which at length compelled him to turn his head away. Ada would not look at him. She knew what she was inflicting, but could not stay her tongue sooner. One of the million forms of jealousy fretted her, and jealousy is cruel.

"Did she ever tell you anything of my earlier life?" he asked, when he could command his voice.

"Nothing, except that you had - had not been happy in your marriage."

It was a little strange for her to be speaking thus with a man so much her elder, but the subject of their emotions put them on equal ground.

"Do you know that I was once secretary to Mr. Clarendon?"

She gazed at him with agitated interest.

"I did not know that."

"Yes, I was; all through the five years of his married life. I had many opportunities of understanding his private affairs, and I could not help seeing what the relations were between him and his wife. Mrs. Clarendon is to be forgiven everything."

Ada heard, with bowed head.

"What her moral claims and standing may be - with that we have no concern. Such judgments have little to do with personal feeling, and I want, if it be possible, to soften your heart to her, that is all. I owe Mrs. Clarendon more than I owe any one, dead or living. At her husband's death I was plunged into sufferings which I cannot speak of in detail - they would have been bad enough in any case, and were made all but intolerable by the completest poverty. If it had not been for the children, I should assuredly have killed myself. In my despair I wrote to her. I had never been on such terms with her as warranted me in doing this, but —" he waved his hand. "It would have been natural enough if she had thrown aside my letter, as

awakening disagreeable memories, and left it unanswered. Instead of that, she met me with such kindness as one human being seldom shows to another. She invited me to come to Knightswell, and insisted on my bringing the children - they had, happily, no mother. I was wretchedly ill, unable to exert myself in any way, only the workhouse was before me."

His voice failed him for a moment.

"I remember your coming," Ada said quietly.

"After that life was hard enough, but never what it had been. If I were to tell you all she has been to the girls since then —" He broke off "Perhaps you would think there was shame in it; that I should have been too proud to accept so much help. It may be so. A man submits for the sake of his children to what would perhaps degrade him if he stood alone. Well, these are the things that I wanted you to know. And more; Mrs. Clarendon has never spoken to me of you in any but the justest and most generous way. She has recognised your talents, and has always accepted gladly any suggestion I made for your good. Think, Ada - that cannot have been easy to her."

There was a long silence. Then the girl asked:

"Did you ever see my mother?"

"Your parents were unknown to me."

"I did not say my parents - my mother."

She corrected him with cold emphasis, looking into his face. Meres averted his eyes.

"No, I never saw her," was his uneasy reply.

"Mr. Ledbury, one of the trustees, tells me that she was on the stage."

He looked surprised.

"Mrs. Clarendon referred me to him," Ada explained, "for information she herself could not, or did not wish to give. He says she was in the habit of applying to him for money up to about two years ago, and that he knows nothing of her at present."

"My child, why should you make those inquiries?"

"Because I have a very natural desire to know whether my mother is suffering from want, and to help her if she is. It appears that nothing was left to her."

"Ada, there is only one thing I can say on this subject. I think it very unlikely indeed that you will ever hear any more of your mother. Mr. Ledbury will say no more than he has done, be sure of that."

"Then he should not have said so much."

"I myself think so. Try to put all that out of your thoughts. You are impelled by a sense of duty, I know; but remember that in the case of parent and child duties are reciprocal, or they do not exist at all. I earnestly beg you to put your mother's existence utterly from your mind; it can never be anything but a source of misery to you. I had hoped the subject would never give you trouble. Pray do not let it, Ada."

He spoke with extreme earnestness, and his words seemed to produce an effect. When, shortly afterwards, Ada shook hands and bade him good-night, she added:

"I will think much of all you have said tonight." Then, in a lower voice, "I am not unprepared for what you would teach me."

The listener attached no special meaning to the last words; they seemed to him only dictated by good-will to himself.

It was with a good deal of interest that Meres went to meet Kingcote at dinner on the following day. He had got one or two fancies about the young man, which made him anxious to gauge his character for himself. He was the first of the party to arrive, and Isabel's talk to him was about the object of his thoughts.

"If you find him congenial," she said, "it would be very good of you to ask him to come and see you now and then. You and Ada can talk about the things he cares for. Has Ada spoken of him?"

"She has told me about his singular rustication," Mr. Meres replied, trying to meet her eye. But he did not succeed.

"He lives with his sister, a widow. Her I don't know. I think - well, it seems she married somebody of an undesirable kind, and I don't suppose she sees people. Will you make a note of his address? Pray, pray don't let me put a burden upon you; it's only that he has need of pleasant acquaintances —"

"I quite understand," replied the other, smiling. And, in truth, he thought he did.

The lady who was the third guest was a genial and rather homely creature; she and Isabel talked women's talk whilst the gentlemen became friendly after dinner. In the course of chat Mr. Meres did not fail to say that he and his family were always at home after three o'clock on Sunday, and would be pleased as often as Kingcote chose to look in. He mentioned Ada's appearance in *The Tattler*, and was gratified to hear Kingcote's praise. The two got on very well together. Mr. Meres felt surer than ever that he understood. . . .

Kingcote did not look well to-night; he had the appearance of one who lacks sleep. The night before, Mary, after listening to his ceaseless footsteps till three o'clock, had gone up and knocked at his door. After a word or two he opened.

"Why are you up so late, Bernard?" she asked. "I heard you moving, and feared you might be unwell."

"I have been reading," he replied. "I quite forgot that you were underneath. It's too bad to wake you."

"I have not been asleep. I am anxious about you. Won't you go to bed?"

"To be sure I will. It's later than I thought. You shan't hear another sound."

"But it's not that I care about," she urged. "I would rather sit with you, if you can't rest."

"No, no; there's nothing to be anxious about. We shall wake the children if we talk so much. Be off and sleep, Mary."

She went, with a heavy heart. She was much disturbed on her brother's account.

To-night it was misery to him to have to go away with the others, without one word for himself. After walking to the end of the street, he came back and stood looking at the lighted windows. Presently the drawing-room became dark. He set out on his long journey to Highgate.

"Has it been a pleasant evening?" Mary asked. She liked to look at her brother in his evening dress; it gave her all manner of thoughts. At his entrance she had closed a folio volume of Jeremy Taylor's sermons, which, in impatience at some unwholesome little book she was bent over, Kingcote had put into her hands a few days ago. "At least read good English," had been the accompanying remark.

In answer to her question he gave a weary, indifferent affirmative.

"How did you like Mr. Meres?"

"Oh, he's a very decent fellow. He wants me to visit him next Sunday. I believe I promised, but it is scarcely likely that I shall go."

"Why not? Certainly you ought to. Society is just what you want."

"I can't talk!" he exclaimed impatiently. "I should be a bore. It was only out of politeness that he asked me."

"You wouldn't find it too disagreeable to meet Miss Warren?"

"Why should I? Rather the contrary."

During the next days he was not often at home. He tried to make distractions for himself in picture galleries and museums, and for a little while half succeeded. But when the fourth day brought no letter

from Isabel, impatience overcame him. In the afternoon he called to see her. He was conducted upstairs, and, as soon as the door opened for the announcement of his name, he heard the voices of people in conversation. It was too late to retreat, and, indeed, he had half expected this; he could not ask below whether Mrs. Clarendon was alone. He entered, and found half-a-dozen strangers; Isabel interrupted her vivacious talk, and received him.

It might have been five minutes or half-an-hour that he stayed; he could not have said which. He found himself introduced to some one, he said something, he drank tea. He was only conscious of living when at length in the street again. It was as if madness had got hold upon him; the tension of preserving a calm demeanour whilst he sat in the room made his blood rise to fever-heat. The voices of the polite triflers about him grew to the intolerable screaming and chattering of monkeys. Insensate jealousy frenzied him. He could not look at Isabel's face, and when she spoke to him he felt a passion almost of hatred, so fiercely did he resent the friendly indifference of her tone. . . .

He entered a stationer's shop, and bought a sheet of note-paper and an envelope, then walked into the park, and, on the first seat he reached, sat down and began to write in pencil. He poured forth all the fury of his love and the bitterness of his misery, overwhelmed her with reproaches, bade her choose between him and this hateful world which was his curse. Only lack of paper brought him to a close. This astonishing effusion he deliberately - nay, he was incapable of deliberation - but with a savage determinedness posted at the first pillar. Then he walked on and on, heedless whitherwards - Oxford Street, Holborn, the City, round to Pentonville, to Highbury. He was chased by demons; thought had become a funeral pyre of reason and burned ceaselessly. The last three days had been a preparation for this, only a trivial occasion was needed to drive him out of brooding into delirium. Alas, it was only the beginning! May - June. Could he live to the end of that second month?

Kingcote had often asked himself what was the purpose of his life - here it had declared itself at length. This was the fulfilment of his destiny - to suffer. He was born with the nerves of suffering developed as they are in few men. "Resist not, complain not!" Fate seemed whispering to him. "To this end was this nature, developing antecedents which were your frame cast. Your parents bequeathed you the preparation for it. Endure, endure, for the end is not yet."

"I cannot endure! This anguish is more than humanity can bear."

"Yes, you can and will endure it. Nature is cunning, and fits the fibre to the strain. Be proud of your finer sensibilities. Coarse men do not feel and suffer thus."

"There is nothing high in my torment. It is of vanity and of the flesh. In agonising, I revile myself."

"Do so. That also is the result of your compounding. Coarse natures never revile themselves."

"And what will come of it, if I live?"

"That is of the future. Suffer!"

He reached home when it was dark, he knew not at what time. Refusing the tea which Mary offered, he went to the solitude of his room. And there, in weariness, his frenzy passed. Wretchedness at what he had done took its place. He tried to remember all he wrote; a few phrases clung in his memory, and became his despair. How could he speak so to Isabel? And the letter would be delivered to-night.

He wrote another, explaining, imploring her forbearance, throwing himself at her feet. It was even now not nine o'clock, and she must not sleep with the other letter alone to think of. He went forth, took a hansom, and drove as far as Portman Square, then walked to the door of the house and rang the servant's bell as he dropped his letter into the box.

He purposed to return on foot, but a very short distance proved that his strength would not bear him half-way. By means of omnibuses he found himself at home again. This time he ate what his sister put for him, but scarcely spoke. Mary asked no questions, only looked at him with infinite sorrow and wonder. After eating he went to his bed and slept.

The postman brought him a letter in the morning.

"Bernard, Bernard, how can you be so foolish? Your first letter pained me dreadfully; your second makes all right again. Come and

see me at eleven to-morrow morning; I promise you to be alone. I cannot write more now, as I must send my maid out to post this, and it is late. For ever yours, whether you believe it or not."

It quieted him, but he said to himself that it was cold, very cold; not one word of endearment. It would have pleased him better if she had resented his ill behaviour. She seemed to care little for those words of fire, to have already forgotten them.

He was with her at the hour named. Isabel met him with scarcely a sign of reproach, but he felt that her smile was not what he had once known. She had, too, a slight air of fatigue, and seated herself before she spoke to him.

"I shouldn't have come," he explained, referring to the previous afternoon, "but that it was so long since I had heard from you. Why didn't you write?"

"I meant to, really; but all sorts of unexpected things have been taking up my time."

"And it is a week since I saw you."

"No; last Sunday."

"Oh, that is not seeing you. It is mere misery to be in your presence with others. I avoid seeing your face, try not to hear you speaking."

"But why? It is very hard to understand you, Bernard."

"That is my fear. You don't understand me. You can't see what a difference there is for me between love and friendship. I cannot treat you as a friend. All the time that I am near you, I am shaken with passion; to play indifference is a sort of treachery. I must never again see you when others are by - I can't bear it!"

She looked before her in a kind of perplexity, and did not move when he took her hand.

"You said very cruel things in your letter. I felt them more than you think."

"Don't speak of that, Isabel. I was mad when I wrote it. Try and bear with me, dear one; I am so wretchedly weak, but I love you more than you will ever know. Never tell me anything of what you do or whom you see; let me come to you when you have a spare half-hour, and that shall be enough. But write to me often. Give me constant assurance of your love. Promise that, for I suffer terribly!"

She was about to say something, but he went on.

"It is so hard that all these people can come and talk with you freely, and you can waste on them your smiles and your brightness, whilst I stand apart and am hungry for one little word. What is it that pleases you in their society? Are they better than I - those people who were about you yesterday? With a little trouble one might make a wax-work figure which would go through those forms every bit as well, even to the talking. Cannot you see how unworthy they are of you - you who are more beautiful than all women, whose heart can speak such true and tender and noble things! It is sacrilege that they should dare to touch your hands!"

Her lips trembled; as he came and knelt by her, she knew again an impulse of pure devotion.

"Bernard, do you wish me to go back again? Shall I go to Knightswell?"

"How can I say yes? It is your happiness to be here. You feel and enjoy your power."

"Bid me leave London, and I will not remain another day."

She feared his answer, yet longed to arouse in him the energy which should make her subject. A woman cannot be swayed against her instincts by mere entreaty, but she will bow beneath the hand that she loves. Had he adored her less completely, had the brute impulse of domination been stronger in him, his power and her constancy could have defied circumstances. But he would not lay upon her the yoke for which her neck was bowed in joyful trembling. He would not save her from herself by the exertion of a stronger selfishness. Neither his reverence nor his delicacy would allow him to constrain her. It is the difference between practice and theory; the latter is

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pure, abstract, ideal; the former must soil itself in the world's conditions.

"I cannot make myself so selfish in your eyes," he said. "If your love will not bear this test, how can it face those yet harder ones?"

"What have I done that you should doubt my love? Do you - do you doubt me?"

"Not when you look so into my eyes, bright angel!"

CHAPTER X

On Sunday the Meres dined early. It was very seldom that any one came to see them in the afternoon, which was generally much taken up with music. Mr. Meres had the habit of dozing over a book in his study. In theory he set apart Sunday for those great authors who are more talked about than read, for whom so little time is left amid the manifold demands of necessary labour and the literature of the day, yet for lack of whose sustaining companionship we are apt to fail so in the ways of plain living and high thinking. But between two and five o'clock the spell of drowsiness lay heavy upon our well-intentioned friend. On Sunday most people find it hard to exert themselves to much purpose. The atmosphere is soporific.

To-day there was expectation of Kingcote's visit. Mr. Meres had made up his mind that if he just showed himself, and then left the young ladies to entertain their visitor, he would be exercising commendable discretion. After dinner he went to his study as usual; Ada and the two sisters remained in the sitting-room. There was no mention of the subject which occupied the minds of all; other things were talked of; but in an artificial way. Hilda presently began to play upon the piano. An hour passed, and there was a knock at the front door.

Kingcote had had a long letter from Isabel the evening before, and his mind was not ill-tuned for the visit. He was pleased with the aspect of the small house; here at all events there would be what he longed for, domestic peace and simplicity. He was conducted to the study, and found Mr. Meres with a Shakespeare open before him. He smiled, reminded of the rector of Winstoke.

"Which is your favourite play?" asked Mr. Meres by way of greeting, taking it for granted that Kingcote would know to what author he referred.

"*Antony and Cleopatra*," was the unhesitating reply.

"Ha! I think my weakness is for the *Winter's Tale*. Perhaps it is because I grow old."

They talked awhile. Kingcote listened to notes of music from an adjoining room. Mr. Meres presently proposed that they should invade what he called the gynæceum.

The little front room looked very bright and pleasant; its occupants were each one interesting, and in different ways. Kingcote's eyes sought Ada first of all. It surprised him that she did not suffer so much by comparison with the other girls as he had anticipated. Perhaps it was familiarity with her face which enabled him to see it in a more favourable light than formerly. She was perfectly grave and, as usual, distant, but somehow she seemed more feminine than at Knightswell.

There was miscellaneous gossip, chiefly about the Academy. The old question of the artistic and the merely pleasing was rung upon in all its changes. Ada spoke very little, but Rhoda was unusually cheerful - perhaps she thought it became her to represent the hostess; perhaps also there were other reasons - and Hilda could not be other than charming. Only to look at her fresh, dainty youthfulness rested the eye like the hue of spring verdure. She was asked at length to sing.

"I have no sacred songs," she remarked with a dubious glance.

"You have many that are not exactly profane," returned her father, smiling.

Whilst she sang, Mr. Meres quietly left the room. There followed an hour or two of such pleasant animation as Kingcote had never known. Wholly at his ease, and forgetful of everything but the present, he surprised himself by the natural flow of his talk. The music stirred his faculties; the unwonted companionship soothed him. All he said was received with a certain deference anything but disagreeable; even Ada gave him respectful attention, and made not a single caustic remark. The girls' conversation was of a very pleasing kind, remarkably intelligent, as different as possible from that of girls of corresponding age who are trained in the paces of society. In Rhoda and Hilda the influence of their father and of Ada Warren was evident; they appeared absolutely free from unreasoning kinds of prejudice, and were strong in the faith of the beautiful, which is woman's salvation.

This visit Kingcote repeated twice before the end of July, not oftener, though he had invitations to do so. In the days through which he now began to live, it was seldom that he could regain the mood in which it was possible to mingle with society of any kind, even though the process might have relieved him. It was nothing less than an illness which fell upon him, an illness of the nerves and the imagination. There were intermissions of suffering, mostly the results of exhaustion; his torment rose to the point at which a mental catastrophe seemed imminent, then came a period of languor, in which he resumed strength to suffer again. Later, these three months became all but a blank in his memory, the details of the time, with the exception of one or two moments, forgotten.

He waited several days into the new week without hearing from Isabel, and at last had a very brief note from her, asking him to call before three o'clock. It was in his mind to write a refusal, saying that he was sure she had no time to give him, but this he could not carry out. He found her just leaving the dining-room; she had lunched alone. Her spirits were extravagant; he had never seen her so gay. The contrast with his own gloomy state did not tend to brighten him.

"What has happened to excite you so?" he asked.

"Happened? Nothing at all. Only I am well, and happy, and the sun shines; isn't that enough to put one in good spirits?"

"Happy?" he repeated, rather bitterly.

"Did you wish me to be miserable?" she exclaimed merrily. "It is you who make my happiness; why don't you keep some for yourself?"

"There you mistake. I have nothing whatever to do with it."

"No, the mistake is yours, Bernard. I tell you the truth, but you will not, will not believe me. I can't help it; I only know that you will believe me some day. Time will be on my side."

He sat mute and downcast.

"Oh, why do you take life so hard?" she asked him. "It is full of good things to make the time pass, if you will only see them. Tell me now, what have you been doing since I saw you?"

"Nothing - waiting to hear from you."

"Ah, that is not true! Who was it that went to Chelsea on Sunday, and made himself very agreeable indeed, charmingly agreeable, so that young ladies speak most flatteringly of him? I know, you see. Indeed I was just a little jealous, or should have been, if jealousy were not such a foolish thing."

"That I don't think you would ever feel."

"Perhaps not. I certainly should not without cause, and, if I had cause, that would be a better reason still for resisting it."

"Not if you --"

He interrupted himself, and turned away impatiently.

"You were going to say something very unkind, and you thought better of it. But you sadden me; it is dreadful to see you so low-spirited. Have you thought," she asked, with a little hesitation, "of finding some occupation for your time?"

"Yes, I have thought constantly, but of course without result. You think I should not trouble you so often if my time were taken up?"

He could not help it. Almost everything she said converted itself in his seething mind to a bitter significance. This was the first reference she had made to the necessity under which he stood. It was natural enough that the subject should occupy her thoughts; he had several times wondered, indeed, that she kept silence about it. Now that she spoke, he attributed to her unkind motives.

They talked on in this fruitless way. He saw her look at the clock, and endeavoured to leave his seat; no doubt she was going somewhere, or expected visitors. Minute after minute he said to himself that he would go, yet still remained. The door opened, and Mr. Asquith was announced.

Robert had been long back from his yachting at present he was entering with heartiness into the pleasures of the London season. His mode of life seemed to agree with him; there was ruddy health on his cheeks, and his whole appearance bespoke the man who found

life one with enjoyment. Kingcote had heard his name in former times from the Vissians, but Isabel had never mentioned her cousin to him. He regarded him with involuntary dislike; the placid good-humour, the genial contentment of Asquith's look and voice were enough to excite this feeling under the circumstances, and the frank kindness with which Isabel received him naturally increased it.

"Colonel Stratton," Robert remarked, *more suo*, as he seated himself. "I met him at the top of Park Lane, and he was most anxious to discover my exact opinion of the atmospheric conditions of the day; seemed delighted when I agreed with him that there was moisture in the air."

Isabel laughed heartily.

"Was that all that passed between you?" she inquired.

"Not quite. He wanted me to go with him to Barnet - was it Barnet? on a coach driven by a friend of his, a Captain Cullen - Hullen —"

"Captain Mullen," Isabel corrected, much amused. "He is a first-rate whip. Why didn't you go? It would have been delightful."

"I'm afraid the company would have been rather too military for my tastes. Besides, I told him I was coming to see you. He begged me to —"

"To do what?"

"Nay, he himself paused at the 'to'; the rest I was doubtless to understand. I presume from his manner that I was to present his respects to you."

"Our friend Colonel Stratton," Isabel explained to Kingcote, "is habitually at a loss for words. He really is the shyest man I ever knew. I tease him dreadfully, and I don't think he minds it a bit."

"Coach-driving," remarked Robert. "Singular taste that. One is disposed to suggest hereditary influences."

Kingcote rose.

"Must you go?" Isabel asked.

"I must," was the brief reply.

"I don't think you ever met Mr. Kingcote at Knightswell?" Isabel said, when the door had closed.

"I remember your speaking of him. Is he in London permanently?"

"I believe so."

A purpose, which Isabel had had in mentioning him, passed, and she spoke of other things. . . .

Kingcote was walking about the streets. He avoided home nowadays as much as possible; his madness seemed harder to bear in his own room, or with Mary watching him; it was always best to walk himself into fatigue, that there might be a chance of sleep in the night. Why had he not obeyed her hint, and left before visitors could arrive? And there again was the sting; she *wished* him to leave. Did she expect this cousin of hers, this prosperous, well-fed, easy-mannered gentleman? That mattered little; the one certainty was that her love grew less and less. She had not even the outward affectionateness which had once marked her when she spoke with him alone. Knowing perfectly the power of help and soothing that lay in her lightest loving word, she would not trouble to find one, not one. She was gay in the face of his misery. Love would be affected by subtle sympathies; yet she slept peacefully through those nights when he wrestled with anguish; when he called upon her, she was deaf to the voice she should have heard. So many other voices claimed her ear; those that murmured graceful things in bright drawing-rooms, those that flattered insidiously when she was enjoying her triumphs. It had been a mistake; to her an occasion, perhaps, for regrets and annoyances, to him a source of unutterable woe. Even if she really loved him at first, how could she continue to, now that every day brought something to lower him in her estimation? The worst of his suffering was in the thought that he himself was his own ruin. Could he from the first have borne himself like a man, have been affectionate without excess, have taken some firm, direct course in his difficulties, above all have seemed to be independent of her, then he might have held her his own. But that was requiring of him to be another than he was. Out of weakness

strength could not come. His passion was that of a woman. Could he even now put on a consistent show of independence, it might not be too late. Why had he not taken her at her word when she offered to return to Knightswell? Was it too late?

Too late; for in love that which is undone never can be made good. He was not worthy of her love; the consciousness was burnt in upon his brain. Had she met him now for the first time, and seen him as now he was, would she have loved him? Never; to think it was to rob her of woman's excellence. He had no one but himself to blame. He must bear it; go lower in her sight day after day, see her impatience grow, feel friendship wholly supplanting love, and fatigued endurance take the place of friendship. It was his fate; he was himself, and could not become another. . . .

Ah, he had indeed drunk too deeply of that magic water of the Knight's Well, the spring at her gates! One draught, and it would have sent him on his way refreshed. But the water was so insidiously sweet. . . .

He wrote her letters again, in which he spared neither reproach nor charge of cruelty. Isabel replied to him very shortly, but in pitying forbearance. At length she begged him earnestly to seek employment. He was undermining his health; it was imperative that he should apply his mind to some regular pursuit. Her he was making grievously unhappy; she would have to leave London. "Why, then, does she not?" he exclaimed angrily when he read this. "She knows it would be better for me." Another cause of complaint had grown up in his thoughts why had she never offered to come and see his sister? It would have been graceful, it would have been kind. But it would have been to commit herself too far, he reasoned. She was doing her best to show him in the gentlest way that the past must not be remembered too seriously. She never spoke now, never, of the day when she would become his wife. That was in any case at a year's distance. Another year! He laughed scornfully. In a year it would be as if they had never met.

"Isabel," he wrote to her one day, when memories had touched him, "I have given you all the love of which my soul is capable, and the soul of man never gave birth to more. I am weak and contemptible in your sight; it is because I faint for love of you. Oh, why have you stripped from my life every leaf and blossom, leaving only that red flower of passion which burns itself away? Every interest I once

cherished has died in feeding this love. I cannot see the world around me; wherever I look there is your face, in thousandfold repetition, with every difference of expression I have ever beheld upon it. I see the first smile with which you greeted me - the first of all; I see the look in which your love dawned, the flush of rapture with which you listened to my earliest words of gratitude and devotion. I see you in your careless merriment, and in your pained coldness; I see you when you smile on others. I shall never know again that heaven of your unspoken tenderness, never, never! It was well that you made no vows to me; how well it is that you have seen my unworthiness before it was too late!"

She found that letter waiting for her when she reached home long after midnight, coming from a crowded scene, with laughter and music still ringing in her ears. Till her maid had left her she did not open it; it was with fear - as always of late - that she at length broke the envelope. She read, and tears filled her eyes. They came rushing, irresistible; she ceased from her endeavour to check them, and wept as she had not wept for long years. Through the dark hours she lay, with the letter in her hand, and only slept when morning was at her window.

She wrote, but did not ask him to come to her. . . .

Two occasions marked themselves afterwards in his memory. To lose himself for an hour he went one night to the theatre. It was now early in July; Isabel was staying in town longer than she had purposed. He reached a seat in the pit, and sat through a farce which he in vain tried to follow. Then he watched the people who were beginning to fill the stalls. Two ladies came forward; he thought he knew the first, and remembered Mrs. Stratton; behind her was Isabel, then a gentleman - Colonel Stratton, he supposed. She was exquisitely beautiful, dressed as he had never seen her; the lights flashed upon her; her face had its own radiance. He forced his way out of the crowd, and into the street. . . .

He called and asked for her, early one afternoon, and was told that she was not at home. Half-an-hour's wandering brought him, scarcely with purpose, back into the same street. From a distance he saw that her carriage was waiting before the door, and immediately she came out and entered it. He turned away with blackness before his eyes. . . .

He wrote and told her of that. "It is true, dear," she answered, "and you must not blame me. I was obliged to leave home early, and I knew that if I saw you for a moment it would only cause you worse trouble than to believe I was away. You oblige me to do such things as this; I *dare* not be quite frank with you as I wish to be; you often frighten me. There is nothing that I wish to hide from you on my own account. What should there be?"

And so the time wore on to the end of July. Poor Mary's existence had become one of ceaseless grief. Only two or three times had she ventured to entreat her brother to take her into his confidence, and let her share his trouble. He could not tell her the truth; it would have shamed him to open his heart even to her. He put it all on the troubles which were in the future, the impossibility of marrying whilst he remained penniless.

"And I am the cause of that," Mary said, in deep sorrow.

"You the cause? You misunderstand me entirely. It would have been precisely the same if the old state of things had remained unaltered. In any case I was penniless - from her point of view."

Mary could gather from the last words a sense he did not consciously put into them. She had her own explanation of her brother's dreadful state. Dreadful it was, no less. His face was wasted as if by consumption. He scarcely ate enough to support life. His sleeplessness had become a disease. He never smiled, and spoke for the most part in a weary, listless tone. Mary believed that there was death in his hands.

There came the day for leave-taking; he was to go to her - Isabel wrote - in the afternoon, and she would be at home to no one else.

"You are glad that I am going?" she said.

"Yes, I am glad. I had rather think of you among the fields."

"Ada is going with me, to stay for a week or two. She proposed it herself; I was surprised."

"But she had not left you finally?"

"I quite believed she had."

They talked without any kind of emotion, but each avoided the other's eyes. Kingcote had his usual look of illness and fatigue; Isabel was not without signs that the season had been a little too much for her strength.

"I am going to Scotland in a fortnight," she mentioned. "Of course you shall have my address. Then in October you will come down some day and see me, will you not?"

"It is better that I should promise nothing. I can't say where I may be in October."

"Always distrusting the future! I dare not do that. The future is my best friend."

"Doubtless!" he replied.

"And are not our futures one and the same, Bernard?"

"Let us say so, and think so if we can. But I know you have many things to occupy you. Let us say good-bye."

"I don't like that word. *Au revoir* is better."

"Why not good-bye? It only means 'God be with you.'"

"Does it? Then, good-bye!"

She offered her lips and he just touched them. Otherwise his self-torment would not have been complete.

CHAPTER XI

Isabel and Ada were alone at Knightswell for a week. Though not in reality nearer to each other, their intercourse was easier than formerly, and chiefly owing to a change in Ada's manner. Her character seemed to be losing some of its angularities, she was less given to remarks of brusque originality, and entertained common subjects without scornful impatience. She had grown much older in the past six months. The two did not unduly tax each other's tolerance; during a great part of the day, indeed, they kept apart; but at meals and in the evenings they found topics for conversation. Ada was taking a holiday; she got as much fresh air as possible, and sketched a good deal.

"Ada, I don't think you have ever given me one of your sketches," Isabel said to her one evening, after praising a little water-colour drawn that day.

"Would you care for one?"

"Yes, I should."

"Any one in particular?"

"Let me see. Yes I should like the sketch you made of the cottage at Wood End. If you'll give it me I'll have it framed for the boudoir."

Ada kept her eyes fixed on the drawing she held.

"Will you?"

She gazed directly at the speaker; Isabel met her look with steady countenance.

"You can have it; but it isn't one of my best," the girl said, still gazing.

"Never mind; it is the one I should like."

Isabel Clarendon

Ada went from the room, and brought back the drawing with her. She was looking at some pencilling on the back.

"Midsummer Day of last year," she said.

"I know," was Isabel's remark. "Thank you."

As she spoke, she moved nearer, and, as if at an impulse, kissed the giver. Ada reddened deeply, and almost immediately left the room again; nor did she return that evening.

On the morrow they met just as before.

At the end of that week the Strattons came to stay until Mrs. Clarendon's departure for Scotland, where she was to be the guest of friends. With the colonel and his wife came their eldest son, the young gentleman studying at Sandhurst. He had very much of his father's shyness, curiously imposed on a disposition fond of display. He liked to show his knowledge of the world, especially of its seamy sides and, though not a little afraid of her, sought Ada's society for the purpose of talking in a way which he deemed would be impressive to a girl. There was no harm in his rather simpleminded bravado, and Ada found a malicious pleasure in drawing him out. In her own mind she compared conversation with him to prodding the shallowness of a very muddy stream. Here the stick hit on an unexpected stone there it sank into ooze not easily fathomed; there again it came in contact with much unassimilated refuse, portions of which could be jerked up to the surface. With the others she seldom spoke, and Isabel also she had begun to avoid again. She took long walks, or read in the open air. Sketching for the present she seemed to have had enough of.

One morning in the second week, Robert Asquith joined the party. He came half-an-hour before luncheon. Isabel and Mrs. Stratton were on the lawn; after a little conversation, the latter moved towards the house.

"By-the-bye," Robert said, when he was alone with Isabel, "have you heard of the death of Sir Miles Lacour?"

"The death!" exclaimed Isabel. "Indeed I have not."

"He died last night, in London, after a week's illness. I heard it by chance at my club. They say it was the consequence of an accident on the ice last winter."

Isabel became thoughtful.

"Probably Miss Warren will hear of it very shortly," Asquith remarked.

"I don't know, I'm sure. I can't even say whether she is in communication with Mr. Lacour. But it does not concern us. You won't, of course, mention the news."

She spoke of it in private with Mrs. Stratton.

"Whatever the state of things may be," said the latter, "I don't see that this can alter it practically. The match becomes a respectable one, that's all. And he can't marry at once."

"Ada, in any case, won't marry till next June; I'm sure of that," said Isabel.

Nothing was said openly, nor did Ada appear to receive any news which affected her.

The heat of the weather was excessive; only the mildest kinds of recreation could be indulged in. In the afternoon there was much seeking for cool corners, and a favourite spot was that embowered portion of the shrubbery in which we first saw Isabel. Tea was brought here. Colonel Stratton lay on the grass, deep-contemplative; his wife read a novel; Robert Asquith smoked cigarettes, and was the chief talker. Sandhurst Stratton was in the stables, a favourite haunt, and Ada sat by herself in the library.

Robert talked of Smyrna, and developed projects for settling there, causing Mrs. Stratton every now and then to look up from her book and view him askance.

"By-the-bye," he said, "who knows a meritorious youth out of employment? An English friend of mine out there writes to ask me to find him a secretary, some one who knows French well, a man of good general education. Can you help me, colonel?"

"'Fraid not," murmured the one addressed, whose straw hat had slipped over his eyes.

"What salary does he offer?" inquired Isabel.

"A hundred and fifty pounds, and residence in his own house."

"Would he take me?" she asked, turning it into a jest.

The subject dropped; but on the following morning, as she was riding with her cousin, Isabel referred to it again.

"Is it the kind of thing," she asked, "that would suit Mr. Kingcote?"

"Kingcote?" He seemed to refresh his memory. "Does he want something of the sort?"

"A few weeks ago he did. I don't know that he would care to leave England; but I think it might be suggested to him," she added, patting her horse's neck. "He has a sister, a widow, with her two children dependent on him."

"But, in that case, so small a salary would be no use."

"I believe he has some small means of his own. If he were disposed to offer himself, would you give him your recommendation?"

"Certainly. If you recommend him it is quite enough."

"He lived some time on the Continent, and I am sure he would be suitable - unless any knowledge of business is required."

"None at all; purely private affairs."

"I should like to have a list," he said, looking at her with admiration, "of the people you have befriended in your life. Did you ever let one opportunity slip by?"

Isabel reddened, and did not speak.

"Yes, one," Robert added, bethinking himself.

"What do you refer to?" she asked, still in some confusion, variously caused.

"Myself. Shall we give them a canter?"

After luncheon, Isabel went to her boudoir and sat down at the little writing-table. The sun had been on the windows all the morning, and in spite of curtains the room was very hot; cut flowers surcharged the air with heavy sweetness. She put paper before her, but delayed the commencement of writing. A languor oppressed her; she played with the pen, and listened to the chirping of birds in the trees just outside the windows; there was no other sound.

"Dear, Bernard," she wrote; then paused, resting her head on her hands. Why should he not pass a year so? she was asking herself. The change would be the very thing for him in his deplorable state of mind. There was no harm in her mentioning it, at all events. His moods were impossible to be anticipated; he might be delighted with the chance of going to the East. And it might easily lead to something much better. He would never do anything whilst he remained in London - nothing but suffer. He looked so ill, poor fellow; he would fret himself to death if there came no change. Why not go to Smyrna for a year, until —

She took up her pen again, and at the same moment Mrs. Stratton entered the room.

"Oh, you are busy," she said.

"Do you want me?" Isabel asked, without turning.

"I was going to read you an account of Fred's last cricket-match; it's at full length in a paper I got this morning."

"Only five minutes; I have just to finish a note."

She wrote on.

"DEAR BERNARD,

"I have just heard from Mr. Asquith, whom you know, that an English friend of his in Smyrna wants a secretary, an educated man who knows French. What do you think of going out there for a few months? The salary offered is £150 a year, with residence. Could you leave your sister? I should think so, as your lodgings are so comfortable. I am writing in a great hurry, and of course this is only a suggestion. It would be the best thing possible for your health; wouldn't it? I leave the day after to-morrow; if you reply at once, I shall get your letter before I go. Mr. Asquith's recommendation will be sufficient. Try and read this scrawl if you can, for it comes from your own

"Isabel."

This letter went into the post-bag, and Isabel only thought of it from time to time. On the following afternoon she was again in the arbour, and alone with Asquith. She had found him here talking to Ada, and the latter had subsequently left them.

"Miss Warren is - what shall I say? - considerably humanised since I last talked with her," Robert observed.

"I notice it."

When they had exchanged a few words, Isabel spoke of seeking the other people, and rose from her seat.

"Will you stay a minute?" he said, quite composedly.

She did not resume her seat, and did not reply.

"I said something in a jesting way yesterday, which I meant in earnest," Robert continued, leaning his elbow on a rustic table. "I thought of waiting another year before saying it, but a year after all is a good piece of life."

"Robert, don't say it!" she broke in. "I cannot answer as you wish me to, and - it is too painful. It *was* a jest, and nothing more."

Isabel Clarendon

He took her hand, and she allowed him to hold it.

"Very much more," he said, with earnestness which did not rob his voice of its pleasant tone. "I am disposed to think that everything has been a jest for a good many years, except that one hope. Do you mean that the hope must be vain?"

"My good, kind cousin! It is so hard to say it. I thought I had made it clear to you, that you understood."

"What should I have understood, Isabel?"

"That I am not free. I have given my promise."

He relinquished her hand, after pressing it, and said, with half a smile:

"Then I can only envy him, whoever he may be."

There was a motion behind the bushes, a rustling as of some one moving away. Robert looked round, but could see no one. Isabel hastily quitted him.

CHAPTER XII

For a couple of days Kingcote had been too unwell to leave the house. For the most part he sat in his own room, with the windows darkened; his head was racked with pain. Mary's anxious pleading to be allowed to send for aid drove him to angry resistance. He could not talk with her, and could not bear to have her sitting by him in silence. He wished to be alone.

On the third morning he did not rise at the usual time; Mary went to his room and entered. Her coming woke him from a light slumber; he said he had been awake through the night, and felt as if now he could sleep. An hour later she returned, and again he woke.

"Has any letter come this morning?" he asked.

"Yes, there is one. I thought I had better leave it till —"

"Let me have it at once!" he exclaimed fretfully. "You should not have kept it."

There was fever on his lips, and his eyes had an alarming brightness. When Mary returned, he was sitting in expectation, and took the letter eagerly. She left the room as he began to read it.

It could not have been a quarter of an hour before Mary, who was just about to take up such breakfast as she thought he might accept, saw her brother descend the stairs.

"I have to go out," he said. "Give me a cup of tea; I want nothing more."

She turned into their sitting-room, and he followed her.

"But you mustn't go out, Bernard," she objected timidly, looking at him in distress. "You are not fit —"

"I have to go," he repeated, in a dogged manner. "Is there tea here? If you won't give me any I must go without it."

"But you are so ill, dear! Bernard, do, do wait till you are better! I cannot let you go out like this!"

He looked at her, and spoke with perfect calmness.

"I am not ill. My head is much better. I am going into the country, and it will do me good."

"Are you going to Knightswell?" she asked, laying a hand gently upon him.

"Yes, I am. She goes into Scotland tomorrow; I must see her before. I am dreadfully thirsty. Give me some tea, Mary, there's a good girl."

When she brought it from the kitchen, he had his hat in his hand. She in vain tried to persuade him to eat. He said he should have an appetite when he reached Winstoke. In a few minutes he was ready to start.

"I may be late back; don't trouble yourself about me."

"But I *shall* trouble dreadfully about you, Bernard; how can I help?"

But she was as helpless to prevent his going. He merely waved his hand, and hastened into the street.

He knew by heart all the trains by which he could reach Winstoke. One at twenty minutes to eleven he should not be able to catch, and the next was at five minutes past twelve; for that he had more than enough time. He loitered on till an omnibus should overtake him; fortunately the first that came was one which would carry him as far as Charing Cross. He sat through the journey with closed eyes; at every jolt of the vehicle it was as though a blow fell upon his aching brain. Alighting at Charing Cross, he proceeded to pass the river by the foot-bridge; the clock at Westminster told him that it was only half-past eleven. At one time he had never crossed this bridge without pausing to admire the fine view eastwards, the finest obtainable, from any point, of the City of London; the river winding on beneath many arches, the dome of St. Paul's crowning the hilly mass of edifices, and beyond it the dark-drifting vapours of the region of toil. Even now he leaned upon the parapet, but only to look down into the dull, gross, heavy-flowing stream. He took from his

pocket the letter which he had received from Isabel, and tore it mechanically into small fragments; they fell from his hands, wavered downwards in the still, hot air, and made specks upon the water. Thames knows many such offerings.

Yet he had to wait at Waterloo, and the last few minutes were the most impatient. Then it seemed to him that he travelled for hours and hours. Constantly he looked at his watch; when it assured him that but a few minutes had passed, he examined it in the belief that it had stopped. With his impatience his fever grew. His brain throbbed to agony; he could not bear to look at the sunlight on the meadows.

There were two young people, a man and a girl, travelling with him for some distance; they seemed a couple recently wedded. It was holiday with them; they talked over what they would do at the place to which they were going, talked and laughed right joyfully. The sick man who sat opposite, perforce hearing and seeing their happiness, hated them as he had never hated mortal.

The end came. With difficulty he descended from the carriage; then drew back for a few moments under the shed of the station, to recover from his dizziness and shield his eyes against the light. In walking towards Knightswell the sun was full in his face; he held his hands clasped upon his brows as a shelter. Quicker and quicker he paced on; strangely, he could not feel the ground upon which he trod; he often stumbled.

It was not necessary to go round to the front gates. There was an entrance to the back of the park, and through this he passed. It led him into the garden by the rear of the shrubbery; to reach the house-door he would have to go past the arbour, where, at this moment, Isabel and her cousin were together. He came near, and, through the leaves, saw them.

Isabel stood looking down at Asquith, who, holding her hands, seemed to speak affectionately. Kingcote did not watch them. He turned, pushed between boughs, and, without consciousness of purpose, went from the garden into the park again. . . .

He was standing by a great elm-tree, his arms hanging at his sides, his eyes fixed on the ground. He must have stood there long and unmoving, for a rabbit nibbled a few paces off. Presently the rabbit

showed its white tail in flight. Kingcote saw a shadow move near to him; he looked up, and there was Ada Warren.

She uttered his name with surprise; then the sight of his face held her speechless. He seemed to recognise her, for a dreadful smile came to his lips; but, without speaking, he walked from the spot, shielding his eyes with one hand. Ada gazed after him for a moment, then hastened up to him again.

"Mr. Kingcote, are you ill? - can I help you?"

He smiled in the same way as before, and shook his head.

"No; you can't help me," he rather muttered than spoke, only half facing her.

"Are you going to London?"

"To London, yes," was his answer.

And he pursued his way. . . .

Ada went to the house. Mrs. Stratton was in the drawing-room.

"Can you tell me where Mrs. Clarendon is?" the girl asked of her.

"She has gone up to her room, Ada," was the reply. "Do you want her? She has a little headache, and meant to lie down for an hour."

"In that case I won't trouble her; it is nothing."

She wandered back into the park. Kingcote was long since out of sight. She went as far as the gate leading out into the road, and stood by it for a long time. . . .

He did not walk towards Winstoke station, but turned into a lane which would bring him to Salcot East. Going slowly at first, even standing still at times, his pace at length quickened, and before long he was walking at his utmost speed. Even thus, it took him an hour and a half to reach Salcot. He went straight to the post-office, which

was also a shop where stationery and very various things were sold. Having purchased paper and a large envelope, he wrote this:

"I cannot please you by leaving England, but there are much simpler ways of giving you what you wish. I send your portrait. It is a long time since I have dared to look at it, and I cannot do so now. May you be happy!"

He enclosed Isabel's picture, without taking it from the envelope in which he always carried it about with him; then addressed the letter to her and posted it.

He walked towards the railway station. Ah, there was the inn at which he lost his purse; he stood and looked at it for a moment. He looked, too, towards the branching of the old and the new roads to Winstoke. He had chosen the old road that day; it was picturesque. Even so it looked now, descending into the hollows, leafy, grass-grown, peaceful. To what had it led him!

He found at the station that there would not be a train for nearly two hours. But he dreaded waiting; motion was imperative. He would walk back again to Winstoke station, by the way he had come, and catch the train there. His head did not ache so badly now. Though he had eaten nothing all day, hunger he felt none, but much thirst. He remembered a stream on the way, and, hastened that he might reach it.

The stream he had in view ran across the lane; he made his way into the field, lay down, and drank at a convenient spot. The water had an ill taste, or seemed to have, but it refreshed him. Still, he found it hard to rise again; a heaviness tempted him to rest here. His head lay upon his arm, and for a time he dozed.

Then up and on again, or he would miss the train. The last half-mile he walked by the railway. He was not yet in sight of the station when the train he had hoped to take came along. He watched it with a strange sort of indifference, as if incapable of the effort of feeling annoyed. Nothing greatly mattered, it seemed as if nothing henceforth would greatly matter. Still more singular, he found himself confused with the idea of the future, unable to make it a subject of conscious speculation. His mind was occupied with a fixed

idea that his life had been, as it were, broken off short, and had a ragged edge; no forward continuity seemed possible.

It was a possession; he could not think of the details of his present, scarcely suffered from the thought of what he had done; his trouble took the shape of an intellectual difficulty. Wrestling with it he walked straight on, past the station, and in a direction away from Winstoke. His mental distress was the same in kind as that we experience when striving with wearied faculties to see clearly into a mathematical problem, a dogged exertion of the brain, painful, *acharné*, but accompanied with a terrible desolation of the heart. He would half forget what had brought him to this pass, and set to work to review events. There were no passionate outbreaks; a dead weight lay upon his emotions, and vitality was in the brain alone. He did not even pity himself; the calamity which crushed him was too vast.

He was conscious again of a torturing thirst, and the object of his progress became to discover a wayside inn where he might drink. He came to one at last, and entered it very much as any pedestrian might have done. What could they give him to drink? - he asked. Beer; no, for beer he had no palate. They had spirits. He diluted two half-tumblers, and drank them off in quick succession. A couple of men were talking in the parlour, discussing politics. One of them jocularly appealed to him, and he replied energetically, laying down the law on a subject which never occupied his thoughts, or had not done for years. Again he set forth, with understanding that he must make for Winstoke station. His limbs were of iron, he had not a sensation of weariness. The sun was no longer shining; there were clouds in the west, and the evening was drawing on. Again with dogged mental effort he clung to the fact that his end was Winstoke station; he did not question but that he was on the right road. On and on, and it grew dusk about him. Presently something shot painfully into his eyes; it was a flash of summer lightning; no thunder followed. He pressed his hands against his head, and moaned a little. The flashes became frequent, and then, of a sudden, the strength of his limbs failed him. He would have to rest, and the grassy edge of the road gave an opportunity. He lay down at full length, and hid his face; the lightning pained him too much.

It was as if he slept, but always with the weight of shapeless woe burdening his heart and brain. He turned at times, and knew that he was lying by the road-side, knew, too, that night was coming on, but was powerless to rise. He talked much and loud, inveighed with

forceful bitterness against some one who had done him a wrong, vast and vague. If he could but get one hour's quiet sleep; and that cruel tormentor would not suffer him. . . .

The summer lightning ceased, and it grew very dark. Over the meadows swept a warm wind, bearing mysterious voices, wafting sobs and sighs. Then a cloud broke, and rain began to fall. . . .

That night Mary sat long after every one else in the house had gone to rest. Till eleven o'clock she was only in a vague uneasiness, an anxious expectation of her brother's return; when midnight came her fears were excited. She constantly opened her window and looked up and down the street. It had rained since evening, and the street lamps shimmered drearily on the wet pavement. It grew too late to hope for his return.

It was easy to find plausible explanations of his absence, if only they could have given her genuine comfort. What more simple than that Bernard should have remained for the night either in Mrs. Clarendon's house, or with his friend the rector, of whom she had heard so much? Possibly there might not be a telegraph-office near enough to allow of his relieving her by a message, as he assuredly would wish to do. Her reason listened, but she could not overcome the presage of evil which had lurked in her heart since he left home. He was utterly unfit to take such a journey; his condition, she knew, was graver than he had been willing to admit. If illness prostrated him somewhere, quite away from friends, what would become of him? She could not try to sleep. The misery of suspense was scarcely to be borne.

She rose at a very early hour, and tried to occupy herself till the arrival of the post; if all were well, she could not but have a line of explanation. He had spoken of possibly being late, but not of remaining away all night; it would be cruelty most unlike him if he had not anticipated her anxiety. But the postman came and for her brought nothing. With difficulty she discharged her morning duties to the children. The trial was harder to bear because of her loneliness. The engraver and his wife from whom their rooms were rented, belonged to a decent class of people, but Kingcote had uniformly discouraged anything like intimacy with them. Mary could not relieve her mind with interchange of suggestion and encouragement. When the children had gone to school, she sat at the open window, watching the end of the street with painful intentness.

Often she deceived herself into a belief that she had caught sight of him, but a moment undid her hope.

What should she do if he neither came nor sent news of himself? There was but one source of help; she must write to Mrs. Clarendon. Only the extremest need could justify that; but what point was to be the limit of her endurance? She dare not wait for day after day to pass. One day she must live through, with what strength she might be able to summon. If he still remained silent, evil had surely befallen him.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, when, still looking from the window, she saw a policeman pause before the house, and ring the bell. Any unknown visitor would have filled her with apprehension; the sight of this one shook her with terror. She could not let any one else go to the door, it was so certain that the visit must be for her. It did not seem by her own strength that she reached the foot of the stairs; she opened, and stood for an instant in fearful waiting.

The constable made inquiry if any person of the name of Kingcote was known in the house.

"Yes. I am his sister."

"We have received information," the man continued, "that a Mr. B. Kingcote has been brought to the hospital at Lindow, in —shire, in an insensible state, and lies there very ill."

He showed her a telegram from the police-station in the town of Lindow. She looked at it, but could not read.

"May I keep this?" she asked.

He allowed her to do so, and, after naming the line of railway by which Lindow could be reached, took his departure with constabulary tramp.

Mary had to act, and she found the strength. She went to her landlady, communicated in part the news she had received, and begged that the children might be cared for in case she should have to be absent through the night. The charge was readily undertaken.

Then she took a cab and drove to Gabriel's lodgings. This was the only friend whose aid she could seek. Gabriel put himself at her disposal immediately, discovered the first train to Lindow, and, better still, offered to accompany her.

"Is it far?" Mary asked, moved to her first tears by the blessed relief of a friend's helpful presence.

"A journey of two hours and a quarter," Gabriel replied. "We shall be there a little after six."

They had not too much time to reach Waterloo Station, even with the aid of a cab.

"What on earth does this mean?" Gabriel asked as they went along.

"He left home yesterday very ill," she answered, "to go to - to Winstoke, to see friends."

"What friends?" asked the artist, with his natural abruptness. "Why did he go when he was ill?"

Mary professed that she knew nothing certainly, and after that they scarcely exchanged half-a-dozen words all the way to their destination. Lindow is some ten miles nearer to London than Winstoke, a flourishing market-town. They had no difficulty in finding the hospital; it was a very new building in the centre of the town. The house-surgeon came to them in the waiting-room; a young-looking man, with an apparent difficulty in suppressing native high spirits; he seemed often on the point of chuckling as he talked with them. The information he had to give amounted to this: Kingcote had been found early in the morning lying by the road-side a mile out of the town, and found, as good luck would have it, by a doctor, who was driving past. The respectable attire of the prostrate man had naturally invited close inspection, with the result that he was discovered to be in a state of coma. The night-long rain had completely soaked his garments. Robbery with violence had at the first glance suggested itself; but on examination, watch and purse was found untouched. He was carried straightway to the hospital. A letter in his pocket had disclosed his name and address, and the police had been communicated with. He lay at present in high fever; there had been as yet no return of consciousness.

The house-surgeon proceeded to interrogations, several of them so obviously needless that Gabriel made decisive interposals.

"The facts seem to be these," he said at length: "Our friend, Mr. Kingcote, left London yesterday morning to see friends in Winstoke. The need being urgent, he set forth in an unfit state, having suffered for two or three days from severe headache and feverish symptoms. He had, Mrs. Jalland tells us, experienced a good deal of mental trouble for some time. I suppose we may take it for granted that he, for some reason or other, tried to walk to your town here, and failed by the way."

The medical man gave a somewhat grudging assent to these propositions, as probably true. Mary, at her pressing wish, was then permitted to see her brother. The doctor could not tell her as yet whether or not the fever was infectious; mindful of her children, she kept at some distance from the bedside. Poor Kingcote lay in a sad state. There was no intelligence in his wide eyes; he muttered incessantly.

"My proposal is this," said Gabriel, when she returned to him in the waiting-room, "you had better take a lodging in the town, and I will fetch the children to you. Can they be left where they are over night?"

They could; so Gabriel would bring them in the morning. The house-surgeon was able to suggest a likely quarter for finding lodgings, and Mary rested at the hospital - subject to much interrogation - whilst her friend sought and discovered a suitable abode.

He saw her installed, said what he could in the way of encouragement, and took train back to London.

CHAPTER XIII

Mary continued to live in the town of Lindow for several weeks. The night of exposure had brought upon Kingcote a complication of ills; his life was in the balance. It was something for Mary to have her children with her, yet as often as not the sight of them was an added misery. What would become of her and of them if Bernard died? Kingcote was a frail reed to represent the support in life of any mortal. It was anything but clear how, if he lived, the responsibilities which had come upon him would be discharged. But his sister had all the shrinking from the world's demands which marked Kingcote himself, heightened by the sensibilities and incapacity of a gently-nurtured woman. He was her only stay. Her gratitude to him was very deep, and it had grown of late to a sisterly love which she had not known in earlier days.

Gabriel came from London once a week, after bringing the children. That morning he also brought a letter which had arrived for Kingcote. Mary saw that it was from Mrs. Clarendon; she put it away. At first she was much troubled with doubt whether it was her duty to send Mrs. Clarendon news of what had happened; she determined ultimately to wait and see if other letters came for her brother. But that which she kept had no successor. The fact strengthened a suspicion she had conceived, and she sent no news to Knightswell. . . .

The return to London was scarcely a cheerful home-coming. Kingcote, still feeble, very seldom spoke; after the first natural questions, when he entered upon convalescence, he was possessed by muteness; no interests reawoke in him; he watched his fraction of the world without curiosity, and, beyond a pressure given to Mary's hand from time to time, gave no sign that others' presence had significance for him. His catastrophe he briefly explained exactly as Gabriel had done. Already they had reached home, and he had not as much as asked if letters awaited him.

Mary determined to wait a few days before she gave him the letter which was in her possession; she feared for the result it might have upon him. Yet, on the other hand, it might be that to withhold it was an unwise thing. The contents of this letter she felt that she knew;

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what she could not know was how far her brother was prepared for them. But his very silence was significant; he expected nothing from Knightswell.

His health established itself day by day; of that there was, happily, every assurance. Yet he could not interest himself in anything. His mind was much like that of a child when it is weary. He would sit in his chair and watch what went on about him; even to read demanded too much exertion. She read to him for several hours daily, and he listened, or seemed to. At length Mary persuaded herself that to speak with him freely might perchance be the best course. She began to do so one day when she had been reading aloud.

"Bernard, can you remember all that happened on the day when you went to Winstoke?"

"Remember? Certainly; everything, till I lost my senses in walking along the roads."

"Did you go to Knightswell?"

He replied in the affirmative, without constraint.

"And did you see Isabel?"

"I saw Mrs. Clarendon."

It was a correction, but with no remarkable emphasis.

"Have you not expected to hear from her?"

He looked at her with more interest, but replied without emotion:

"No, I have not."

Then he asked calmly: "Is there any letter?"

"Yes, there is one. It came the second day after you left London."

"I will have it, please."

Mary had the letter by her in readiness, and, having given it him, left the room.

Kingcote examined the envelope deliberately, and opened it with equal deliberation. He read this:

“BERNARD,

“You have often wronged me so that it seemed to me that you did it wilfully. Surely there can be no real love without trust, and you have never trusted me. As you wish to free yourself, it shall be as if all was at an end between us. But I am not free, for I still love you, and I shall hold myself yours till you have rejected me a second time. Till then I will keep silence; I cannot help it if you misinterpret that, as you have misinterpreted my words.

“ ISABEL.”

He sat for a while musing, then went up to his own room. He walked up and down with the letter in his hands; at length, as if unwillingly, he destroyed it. When he had done so, he unlocked a drawer, and took out a collection of letters, all from Isabel. One of them he held to the paper still burning in the fireplace, then threw the others, one by one, upon the flame. As he watched the last sparks flicker, he was overcome with a rush of tears. He covered his face with his hands, and stood weeping.

There was a change in him after that day. He walked for several hours each morning, and the rest of his time gave to new books, which he got from a library. His own volumes did not attract him; he read simply with the pleasure in novelty, which is as far as most people ever get to in the matter of reading. His mind appeared to be quite calm, and in the evenings he spoke freely with his sister. By degrees the question of what he should do for a living actively occupied him. He answered advertisements persistently, and received no replies; that, circumstances considered, was in the order of things. The world has no place for a man who is possessed merely of general intelligence and a fair amount of reading. No one will take him on trust or on trial. There must be specific capacity, estimable in terms of the ledger. Lacking this, and lacking the aid of influential friends, a man may starve - or there is the workhouse. What would you have? We are civilised, and enjoy the blessings of a social order.

Kingcote believed that Mr. Meres might have helped him, but in that quarter he could not apply. Gabriel was his only friend; Mr. Vissian, though correspondence with him continued, could scarcely be counted. But neither had Gabriel any practical suggestions to offer. He always talked of literary work, and literary work Kingcote could not undertake; it was perhaps his one note of actual wisdom, that he recognised his unfitness for earning money by the pen, and did not waste time in efforts that way. He was prepared, he said, to do anything that promised an income whereon he and his sister could live. Were it manual labour, well and good; were it the basest of clerkships, equally well.

"I have a need of work," he said to Gabriel, one day about Christmas time. "It is getting to be a physical need. I must do something which calls for exertion. Do you know that I am at present exactly in the state which leads men to any kind of dissipation, which tests their character. If I had not my home and my sister, I should fall into the gulf by the edge of which walk such men as I am. And, if I fell, there would be no ascent to the light."

"In other words, you are nursing your weakness," said Gabriel unsympathetically. He was seldom sympathetic. It may have been as a tonic that Kingcote relished his society. "I perfectly believe what you say; you are capable of going to the devil. But remember that other people cannot devote themselves to hanging on at your coat-tails; you must put the drag on yourself."

Gabriel always worked during their sittings together; idleness was abhorrent to him.

"I," he went on, throwing himself back in his chair, "should have had as natural an alacrity in going to the devil as any man. I was made for it. I am by nature the most indolent fellow alive. I fight it, and I shall go on fighting."

It was stimulating, but without practical direction; nor was the artist to blame for this. Kingcote was not adapted for any one of the plain categories of money-earning labour. Only the benevolence of fate could come to his aid.

He was a sad man to regard in these days. Seldom or never came a smile to his face; the springs of his natural vivacity seemed broken.

He was not consciously melancholy, but then he did not give himself opportunities of brooding. The character of his countenance was a complete hopelessness; there was no forward-looking, no gleam of the joy of living. Anxiety gained upon him as the months succeeded each other, and when he was actively anxious his face had a look of age, which was more painful to observe than the passionate misery of youth. He often said that he felt he had lived his life, and that was indeed the impression his habitual look conveyed. When he turned back to the past, he saw hills and valleys; henceforth his path was on a dull plain, with the latter darkness upon the horizon. Formerly, when he said in conversation that he had come to know himself, and that he acquiesced in his inefficiency, it was always with the pleasurable expectation of being contradicted; there was a youthful insincerity in his confession. At present he made no such statements, as a general thing, and for the melancholy reason that they would no longer have been insincere; he believed in truth that his character was an inefficient one. He had not an ambition left. He had no passion left, which was worse.

He did at times think of Isabel, and with strange coldness. He had lost the power of realising her to his mind's eye; she was more of an abstraction than a living woman. In certain moods there came to him the temptation to dwell upon those tenderest memories, to try and hear the voice which had once haunted him only too persistently, to see her face as a living thing. He could not; her very features escaped him, when he closed his eyes to fix them on the darkness. It was all so remote, that happiness and suffering; it affected him only as would the poet's telling of a sweet and sad story. Anger he felt himself still capable of, had he allowed himself to indulge in it. What he had seen in the arbour at Knightswell could still be a source of indignation. That last letter she wrote in ignorance of his having seen her then; and it was a false letter. He accused her of paltry insincerity. That was why he had at once burnt all her other letters; and the tears he had shed were not so much on his own account as of regret for the vanished image of her nobleness and truth. Noble he had tried to think her, in the face of all he knew about her past; but it was all illusion, wrought in him by her beauty. Her love was her vanity. She liked to make slaves of men, and her coldness would preserve her independence to the end. That letter, she thought, would bring him back to her feet; so noble it seems to forgive. It was her better self that dictated the attempt to send him abroad; having won her rich cousin, who freed her from fear of the future. She meant for a moment to act honourably, and dismiss the lover who

had nothing to give her. When he took her at her word, the woman's instinct overcame her; she could not wholly lose her plaything. Nay, she was piqued that he broke so easily; she would have had a passionate scene, reproaches, entreaties - such as he, poor wretch, excelled in. There should be punishment for his literalness. . . .

It was in this way that he reasoned of Isabel. He entertained no doubt of his interpretations. This view of her character became fixed; and it made his heart as cold and heavy as a stone within his breast.

There was more truth in the words he spoke to his sister as they sat together late on New Year's Eve. Mary had not mentioned Isabel or Knightswell since she gave him the last letter, and he himself only now broke silence. He had closed his book, and was thoughtful for some minutes, then said:

"Mary, we will never speak of the things that have happened in this past year. I dare say you feel as if I were your debtor for a story, but the story is too simple to tell; you must have gathered it for yourself from what you have seen and heard."

"I would not ask you to speak of what pains you, Bernard," she replied.

"I scarcely think it does any longer pain me. There are some things," he added, after a pause, "which, however possible in themselves, the world agrees to make impossible in practice. My story is one of these cases. We forgot the world, or thought we were strong enough to overcome it. But" - he laughed - "it is the latter end of the nineteenth century."

Mary was not satisfied, naturally; but she only sighed, saying: "You have suffered so much, dear!"

"Yes, but what else are we born for?"

This evening they were to have had Gabriel with them, but the day before he had been called away to Norwich. A telegram came to him, saying that his father was dead; the old man had been killed in a couple of days by bronchitis. For the past half-year there had been communication between father and son. The bookseller was alone in his old age; a sister who had kept his house for many years was

dead, and he had no near relatives to take her place. He wished to see his son, and the artist had promised to go to Norwich early in the new year. The journey had to be taken sooner.

Within a week Kingcote received a note, asking him to go to his friend's studio. Gabriel was at work as usual. There was no need for hypocritical words on one side or the other; Gabriel pointed in silence to a chair, and talked for five minutes of an artist whose works were then on exhibition at Burlington house.

Then:

"My father seems to have left no will. But his affairs are in order, and I shall be a good deal better off than I was. In fact, the business has been profitable. No doubt his successor will continue to find it so."

"Who succeeds him?"

"I don't know."

He mixed colours on his pallet.

"The shop, and the house above it, were his freehold property; they belong, of course, to me. There is a good deal of stock, and there is an assistant who has been in the shop nine years. The immediate capital required to carry on the business will be next to nothing."

Kingcote was silent, and moved uneasily on his chair. The artist worked for a few minutes, then, turning suddenly round:

"Well, what do you say?"

"You surely don't mean —?"

"Certainly not, if it disagrees with you. Let us talk of something else."

Kingcote's face was gloomy, but at length he broke into a laugh.

"The idea is amazing!" he exclaimed. "And it really occurred to you that I should be capable of conducting a business?"

"Yes, it occurred to me," admitted Gabriel, in his unsmiling way. "There are many more disagreeable ways of getting a living. I went so far as to think that the chance savoured of the providential."

"But, my good friend, supposing for a moment that I were at all fitted for such things" - the touch of depreciation was involuntary - "how would it be possible for me to take over your father's business? What securities can I give you? What —"

Gabriel checked him with a peculiar look, very nearly a smile.

"You are giving yourself a testimonial. I scarcely credited you with such business faculty."

"Any man is aware that he cannot take a flourishing concern as a gift," said Kingcote, with a little annoyance.

"Please to remember," Gabriel remarked, "that I am an artist, and that you have certain pretensions to culture. I did not imagine that we ever talked on any other basis."

He painted on.

"Is that man in the shop to be depended on?" was Kingcote's next question. He had thrust his hands into his trouser-pockets, and was swaying one foot up and down, looking at the ground.

"Entirely. A first-rate man of business, and on the whole a gentleman; I have been at much trouble to get to know him."

Kingcote rose, and walked about the studio. He smiled frequently, though there was a twitching in his lips to show that his thoughts had their prickly points.

"If I am to be a man of business," he said at length, "I must accept the responsibilities of one from the first. Let me be bound by conditions you would lay upon a stranger, whom for some reason you were trusting rather liberally, and - I will go to Norwich."

The artist smiled, but did not look from his canvas.

"Your sister would have no objection?"

"I can foresee none. Rather the contrary, I should say."

"In that case, will you go down with me to-morrow?"

"I will."

"Good."

Kingcote walked home in a singular mood. He was glad, but without rejoicing; he was mortified, but without pain. It was done. His life had fallen from insubstantial cloud-heights to the lower level, to which fate had foredoomed it. To this end he had been travelling by how indirect a way! He began with thoughts of glory; he would finish his career as a shop-keeper. The sting was in the fact that he acknowledged the justice of Gabriel's estimate of him. Of himself he could never have taken this step, however ready for it he might declare himself to be; a push by a friendly hand, and he yielded with a sense of relief. Behind the counter at Norwich, he would not be out of his place. He could not make books, but he might very well sell them; he could foresee a pleasure in the pursuit. The life would be restful. To dwell once more in his native town would make a continuity between his boyhood and his maturity; all between was air-building and moonshine. A few of those people whom he used to know would still be living; perhaps it would cost him a twinge or two to put up his name over the shop, and invite the attention of all who remembered it; but a week of custom - in both senses of the word - would put an end to sentimental difficulties. And at length he would rest. His business would probably continue to flourish; in a few years he might achieve independence. He might marry, children would sit upon his knee. . . .

Mary listened with wonder, in the end with extreme happiness. He told her in the quietest way; it was not a future to excite enthusiasm, even had he been capable of it in any cause. To her, poor woman, it was admission to Elysian fields. This terrible London would be left behind, and with it her unceasing fears. Her children would be brought up in comfort, and enter naturally upon decent walks of life. The thought that it was the end of all her brother's hopes could not

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long dwell with her; he and she were safe. What more can one ask,
when the world is over-full, and every day the internecine war
grows deadlier?

CHAPTER XIV

Mrs. Clarendon did not hunt the next winter.

Her sojourn with her friends in Scotland was to have been for six weeks, but the end of a little more than half that time saw her back at Knightswell. She returned in uncertain health, and a very dull, wet autumn aided in depressing her spirits. Throughout September she lived almost alone; then, at the impulse of a moment, she set off for Chislehurst, and presented herself quite unexpectedly at the Strattons', where she dwelt till November was half spent. For a week after her arrival, she was so unwell that she had to keep her room.

It was the termination of a serious attempt to live by herself. Since receiving and answering Kingcote's last letter (it came to her on the morning of her departure for Scotland, and in hurriedly opening the envelope she had not even noticed that the post-mark was not of London), she had been in ceaseless nervousness of anticipation; that Kingcote would maintain silence, she could not believe. By every post she expected a letter, in which he would once more overwhelm himself with reproaches, and implore the continuance of her love. She could not have said, she did not in truth know, whether she hoped for such a letter; that she feared it was no proof of the contrary. In Scotland, the feeling of her distance from London was a trouble, growing day by day. That she should seem to be enjoying herself at such a time was an injustice to herself; enjoyment she had none. Apprehensions lay upon her in the night-time. Was he not capable of doing rash things in such a crisis of his life? Not seldom she rose with her eyelids swollen; Isabel wept more in three days than in all her life before. Of mere woman's resentment she felt nothing, for the accusation with which she visited herself was sincere and constant. At length she could not bear her remoteness, and, in her journey to the south, purposes the most various strove for the conduct of her mind. She reached Knightswell with a resolve to proceed on the following day to London.

It was not the anxiety and impatience of love; she knew it, and did not endeavour to deceive herself. But she suffered keenly in the thought of having inflicted pain. It was rather late, one may hint, to experience the reality of trouble on this score; but do not be unjust to

her. When she went to London at the beginning of the season, it was in the full expectation that Kingcote would be part of her world; it had been her intention to introduce him to the more intimate of her friends, and little by little to allow people to surmise the situation. The dream of breaking wholly with her past was already forgotten; Isabel did not lack sincerity of thought, and she knew that the projects she had at first entertained were impossible. Their marriage must be planned in a more practical way; let details be left for the future, but an essential was that Kingcote should understand the kind of life which custom had made her second nature, and should adapt himself to it. She could see nothing unreasonable in this, nothing too exigent. Quite failing of insight into his modes of thought and the peculiarities of his character, she believed that it lay with her to draw him forth from his unwholesome retirement, and to accustom him to a measure of social activity which could not interfere with his favourite pursuits, and might very well lead to something - that vague something which she kept well away on the horizon of her speculations, the indispensable help which good fortune would provide. This plan had lamentably fallen through; Kingcote would not adapt himself to the situation. There followed in her mind some irritation; she thought him unjust to her. Conscious of her perfect faithfulness in word and deed, she could not understand his frantic jealousy. It was something, she said to herself, that would pass; both for his sake and her own she must hold on her way, and he would overcome his weakness. Oh, if he had not been so weak! Had he but been led by his jealousy to take a strong attitude; had he, when she gave him the chance, bidden her return to Knightswell; she could have subdued her will to his, and love would have been strengthened by the act of obedience. He would do neither one thing nor another; it was she who must be strong. The prolongation of her stay in London was partly due to her lingering hope that he would still take the rational view of things, though in part it arose from a slight perversity excited by his behaviour. He accused her daily, he put her in the wrong, and she felt that it was neither just nor generous in him to do so.

She went from London with an unsettled mind, but with a distinct sense of relief. She had come to dread his visits, and to fear the letters he wrote her. She promised herself to think it all over whilst in Scotland. The idea of frankly admitting to Mrs. Stratton the nature of her interest in Kingcote, that together with her some plan might be contrived for obtaining him a reputable position, was just now uppermost in her mind. Then came Asquith's mention of the

secretaryship in Smyrna. We have seen in what mood she wrote to Kingcote. His interpretation of her letter was unjust, for Isabel had not consciously the thought which he attributed to her. Yet she wrote it, and certainly would not have done so four months ago.

Now she suffered in the feeling that she had inflicted pain. She remembered his face when she parted with him - its worn and haggard look. With all her soul she tried to yearn towards him as she had in those winter days at Chislehurst, when the flame of her love was new-kindled, and each letter that came from him was fuel of passion. That was what made her weep - the misery of knowing that her heart did not live as for a short space it had done, the sadness of a death within her. Was he less lovable than when first she knew him? Tears came for an answer; they meant that she did indeed think him so. But the loss, the loss! She had let slip from her hand something which had been like a gift from heaven. The loss was one that would affect the whole of the life that lay before her.

The last of her youth was gone.

Coming from Scotland, she reached Knightswell late in the evening; she gave orders that preparations should be made for a journey to London the first thing next morning. At the last moment that journey was postponed. It rained heavily; she made it her excuse. Then, in her changing purposes, another plan seemed better. She would live at Knightswell in complete isolation. Solitude would make him an ever-present need; her heart would soften to the old tenderness; at the end of the year she would write to him, tell him how she had spent her time, bid him come to her. She began a diary, in which she would set down her thoughts of him daily; this she would send. But when a week had passed she no longer wrote in the pages of the book; on the last which her pen touched there were marks of tears. . .

The visit at Chislehurst restored her health, and shortly after her return to Knightswell friends came to stay with her. Parties succeeded each other through the winter; she would not hunt - she did not clearly know why - but her stables were used by those who did. When, at the end of February, she was a whole week without guests, an uneasy loneliness possessed her.

Mr. Vissian visited her during that week. In September, that dread month of solitude, she had asked him if he had news from Mr. Kingcote; but the rector had then heard nothing. He was now, however, in a position to answer more satisfactorily, when she again asked the question. It was late in the afternoon; they were by the fire in the drawing-room, drinking tea.

"Kingcote? Oh, yes!" said Mr. Vissian. "He has gone to live in Norwich. I thought I should never hear from him again; but I find he has been seriously ill."

"Ill?" Isabel asked, not immediately. "Is that lately?"

"He speaks of the end of last year; a bad fever of some kind, which nearly ended his days - those are his words."

She murmured an "Indeed!" and looked at the fire.

"What is he doing in Norwich?" was her next question.

"Well, I was somewhat surprised to hear that he has turned bookseller, has a shop there."

Isabel looked at him without astonishment, but rather as if she were reflecting on what he had told her.

"He writes in a melancholy way," the rector pursued. "Circumstances have urged him to this step, it seems. I fear he will find business, even that of a bookseller, very uncongenial. He is a man of singular delicacy of temperament; quite unfitted to face practical troubles, I should say. Possibly you know that he has relatives dependent upon him."

"Yes, I know," Isabel answered mechanically.

When the rector went, she sat till dinnertime thinking. Whatever her thoughts were, they only ended in a sigh.

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More visitors, then the season once more at hand. At hand, too, the month of June - but of that she had resolved not to think. Not till the very day came would she turn a thought to the future.

Kingcote was not in London. She was glad of that; otherwise she would have gone up with a troublesome nervousness.

CHAPTER XV

Vincent Lacour - now Sir Vincent - had a letter to answer. It was the end of May, and his time was much taken up. A young and handsome baronet, of manner which many people held fascinating, of curious originality in drawing-room conversation, possessed of a considerable fortune, and without encumbrances - it was natural that he should be in request when mornings were too short for the round of seasonable pleasures, and nights were melodious with the strains of Strauss and Waldteufel. For full four days he had postponed the answering of this particular letter, and mentally he characterised the neglect as disgraceful. However, a Certain event had just come to pass, which made discharge of the duty imperative. He dined at his club, and there penned his reply. Afterwards he had a ball to go to.

It concerns us to know what he wrote:

"My DEAR Miss WARREN,

"You will blame me for my delay in replying to your letter; I can only excuse myself by begging you to reflect how difficult it is to answer at all. I wrote to you for the last time five months ago, and you did not reply, or at all events no letter from you reached me. I put a certain interpretation upon your silence; that which, you must admit, your previous tone naturally suggested. I implore you not to misunderstand these words. I mean nothing less than an ungenerous reproach. No blame can possibly attach to you; circumstances alone have led us to the position we at present occupy with regard to each other. Circumstances have held us apart; must they part us finally?"

Vincent paused at this point: "I'm hanged if I couldn't write a book," he said to himself. "Well turned, those sentences, and they come so easy. I dare say the Amontillado has something to do with it."

He proceeded:

"I can well understand a certain delicacy which has kept you silent so long; perhaps my last letter erred in the same direction, and you took for coldness what was merely an ill expression of my deep respect. You ask me now in what light I regard our relations to each

other. Shall I answer that I have no will but yours, and that you have not mis-estimated me in conveying so delicately the wish you are too generous to express as a demand? Circumstances have treated us cruelly; to whom are not circumstances cruel at one time or another? Our misfortune is that they have declared themselves hostile in a matter of the gravest moment. Which of us could say what utterance on either side, what instant in our relations, had the influence we both feel to have been so fatal? My life has been an unhappy one; your letter makes it clear to me that I must go my way with one more sad, the saddest, memory. I cannot reproach myself; it is still less possible to reproach you. There is a fate in these things; you feel it yourself. I wish my loss were no heavier than your own. I never was worthy of you, and of that you must be conscious. I may have abilities, but they are very poor compared with yours, and, such as they are, I have made a poor use of them. That you should desire to be free from the bonds, which, you so nobly say, you still deem binding, is only natural; you deserve, and will win, devotion of a higher kind than my nature is capable of. In plain English, I am a sorry fellow. You know it. Let us say no more."

At this point he made no internal comment, but hurried on to the end.

"Some day we shall, I trust, meet as friends; that is a privilege I shall covet. I am not incapable of appreciating high things, whether in character or in art. I think of you with reverence. Perhaps you will come to think, at all events, with tolerant kindness, of

"Yours very sincerely,
"VINCENT LACOUR."

A couple of hours later he went to a ball given by his friends, the Hagworth Lewinsons, at their house in Cromwell Road. Mr. Lewinson had formerly held a position in the Queensland Mint; he was now a member of Parliament, with a specialty in matters concerning currency, his own practical dealings therewith being on a substantial scale. He had one fair daughter and no more; Miss Lewinson was beautiful, and not more insipid than it generally falls to the lot of beautiful girls to be. To this young lady, Vincent Lacour had, a day or two ago, offered himself as a husband. To-night he appeared in the capacity of accepted suitor. Society inspected the two as they stood together, and discussed them with Society's freedom; a coming marriage is so obviously a fit subject for light and

frivolous chat. One circumstance was highly amusing; the bride-elect had a pronounced turn for jealousy, and did not conceal as well as she might have done, her anxiety to keep Sir Vincent well within view. There were not wanting ladies who remarked that Lady Lacour would have a busy time of it.

Vincent managed to sit out during one dance in which Miss Lewinson was engaged. He was looking rather absently at the couples when Mrs. Bruce Page placed herself beside him.

"Ah, you here?" he exclaimed, with something less than his usual politeness.

"Aren't we going to be friends again?" said the vivacious lady, casting her eyes about her.

"I didn't know we were anything else," said Lacour drily.

"You always take it for granted that you are forgiven. And is this true that I hear?"

"You must hear so many things."

"I do," was the pithy reply. "But of course you know what I mean. When, pray, did you get rid of poor A. W.?"

The music was loud, but there were people sitting very near, and Mrs. Bruce Page had a habit of referring to her acquaintances thus cautiously. She allowed herself the solecism, as she allowed herself sundry other freedoms which had got her a worse name than she deserved.

"I don't think we need talk of such things," said Vincent coolly. "You are abundantly gifted with imagination. It will supply your needs in conversation for the next few days."

"You are monstrously unkind," she said, in a lower voice, and with a manner which would imply to observers that she was saying the most indifferent things. "If I *liked* to talk, now - but I won't betray you. You might tell me all about it in return."

"There is nothing to tell. Engagements are broken off every day."

"True. A pity the practice isn't more extensive. I suppose she got tired of you? You were too conceited for her?"

"We'll say so," conceded Vincent, more good-humouredly.

"Then it was *her* doing?"

"You are impertinent, but I don't mind telling you that it was."

"Oh, what a frank boy! There was no reason on your side for - drawing back a little, eh? waiting to see what time would bring, eh?"

"Your insinuations are best not understood."

"It didn't by chance occur to you that - let us say, that A. W. might not in the end prove what she seemed?"

Vincent looked at her out of the corners of his eyes.

"There was nobody, I suppose, interested in hinting that perhaps the will -? You understand?"

"Look here, what do you mean?" he asked, thoroughly roused.

"Nothing. I only thought that perhaps some one might, in some way or other - let us say by an anonymous letter -"

She was off to another part of the room before he could detain her, though he even clutched at her dress; her mocking laughter was quite distinct through the music.

"That woman's the very devil!" was Sir Vincent's muttered exclamation. . . .

From the ball-room to the gardens and sunny glades of Knightswell. Ada went thither the day after she received Lacour's letter, purposing a week of solitude. Mrs. Clarendon was tasting the sweets of the season in her wonted way, and the girl had Knightswell to herself. She enjoyed it. Up but little later than the sun, she went to

see the rabbits at their dewy breakfast in the park, and to hear the thrushes pipe their morning rapture. And she, too, sang out loud in the joy of her youth, and health, and freedom, in the delight of things achieved, and in glorious anticipation of effort that lay before her. Her spirits were as the weather, sunny, fresh, unclouded. Dark moods had fled from the strong and gracious presence which thrived in her heart. She knew delight. The current of her blood was for the time cool and even-flowing. Life would not bring her many days like these, so free from regret and from desire; that she knew well, and ate the golden fruit of the present with unabated joy.

There were changes in her face. The harshness of her features was softening by some mysterious outward working of the soul within. If she lived another five years, that which had made her plain by over-emphasis of individuality would have become the principle of a noble type of beauty. She was not unconscious of it, and it contributed to her energy of hope. Face would ally itself with form; her body had strength and graceful ease of motion; the moulding of her limbs was ideal. Every drop of the blood in her veins was charged with health. The physical sufferings which had formerly assailed her, she seemed to have outgrown. Passion slept, but only to arise with new force; the heart would not always lie in subjection to the mind.

A walk one day brought her back from Salcot by the old road. When she came to the Cottage at Wood End, she paused to view it. A labourer's family lived there now, and there were two children playing by the oak trunk. As she stood the cottage-door opened, and Mr. Vissian came forth.

He raised his eyes and saw her; she met him half-way, and greeted him with a frank friendliness which he did not look for.

"Mrs. Vissian and myself were about to call on you," the rector said, with a little embarrassment. "I am rejoiced to see you looking so well, Miss Warren."

"You have been making a pastoral visit?" Ada remarked, as they walked on together.

"Yes. I dare say I come here rather oftener than I should in the natural course of things, owing to my associations with the place.

My good friend Kingcote used to live here. I believe you met him once or twice at Knightswell?"

"Oh yes, and in London, at a friend's house."

"It was a loss to me when he went away, a serious loss. I am doing my utmost to persuade him to come over and spend a week with me, but he won't promise. We had a surprising similarity of tastes. He enjoyed the old dramatists, who, I think, you know are my favourite study."

"Does he live in London?"

"No. In Norwich. It is his native town."

Mr. Vissian, ever discreet, made no mention of his friend's pursuits.

"Really, Miss Warren," he continued, "you must allow me to tell you what pleasure you have been giving me of late. That story of yours in *Roper's Miscellany* is one of the most delightful things I have read for a long time. I don't read modern fiction as a rule, but it is my hope that I may not miss anything you publish henceforth. I should not have seen this, I fear, but for my friend Kingcote. He sent me a copy of the magazine, and with it words of such strong commendation that I fell to at the feast forthwith."

There was a glow of pleasure on the girl's face; she said nothing, and looked away over the sunny meadows.

"There is an energy in your style," pursued the rector, "which I relish exceedingly. Clearly you have drunk of the pure wells of English. Doubtless you read your Chaucer devoutly? A line of him has been ringing in my head for the last two days; no doubt you remember it, in the 'Legende of Goode Women' -

'And sworn on the blosmes to be trewe.'
One of the sweetest lines in all English poetry."

He repeated it enthusiastically several times.

"Ah, Kingcote and I used to hunt up lines like that and revel over them! I have no one now with whom to talk in that way. He had a fine taste, a wonderful palate for pure literary flavour. His ear was finer than my own, much finer. He showed me metrical effects in Marlowe which I am ashamed to say I had utterly missed. There was one sonnet of old Drummond's - Drummond of Hawthornden - that we relished together. Of course you know it well; the one beginning -

'Lamp of heaven's crystal hall that brings the hours.'

In it comes that phrase, 'Apelles of the flowers.' A grievous loss to me, an irreparable loss! I am engaged at present on an edition of *Twelfth Night*, in which, by-the-bye" - his eye twinkled - "I explain 'the lady of the Strachy,' I constantly miss Kingcote's comments."

Ada listened with thoughtful countenance.

"He ought to do something himself," Mr. Vissian added, "but I fear his health is very bad. Last autumn he had a severe illness —"

"Last autumn?"

She interrupted involuntarily, and at once dismissed the curiosity which had risen to her face.

"Yes; I didn't hear from him for a long time. He told me afterwards that he had been at the point of death."

"I hope you will let me have your *Twelfth Night* when it appears," Ada said, after a short silence.

"With pleasure; if only you will promise to keep me apprised of your own publications. Ah me! how delightful it is to talk literature. I with difficulty part from you, Miss Warren; I could gossip through the day. If I only durst invite you in Mrs. Vissian's name to take a cup of tea at the rectory this afternoon. It would be a charity. You have never seen my books, I believe; I have one or two things you would not disdain to look at; one or two first editions, among them a 'Venice Preserved,' which Kingcote gave me."

"I will gladly come," said Ada.

"Ah, you rejoice me! I shall go about my parish with the delight of anticipation."

The tea-drinking duly took place. Mrs. Vissian was a little alarmed at the prospect of such a visitor, but went through the ceremony very well. The change in Ada surprised both the rector and his wife.

"I suppose it is the thought of coming into possession," Mrs. Vissian said, when alone with her husband. "But really I don't envy her. It ought to be very painful to her to take everything from poor Mrs. Clarendon."

"I shouldn't wonder," remarked the rector, "if Mrs. Clarendon lives at Knightswell just as before. Miss Warren cannot but insist upon it."

"I couldn't do that!" exclaimed Mrs. Vissian, shaking her head. "No, I'm sure it won't be so. No woman who respects herself could submit to that."

"But, my dear —"

"But what?"

"Ah, I really forgot what I was going to say; something about Mrs. Clarendon. Never mind."

Returning to London by the first of June, Ada brought all her high spirits with her. With Rhoda and Hilda she was an affectionate sister, and outdid them both in mirthfulness. Rhoda had got over her long depression; she was in the habit of looking forward with a very carefully-concealed expectation to the not infrequent visits of a certain friend of her father's, a gentleman of something less than forty, who was a widower, with one little boy of his own. This youngster occasionally accompanied his father, and received much affectionate attention from Rhoda; Hilda looked askance at the exhibition of his graces. The house in Chelsea had certainly a brighter air than of old.

On the evening of the day after her return, Ada went to walk by herself along the river. Hilda wished to accompany her, and was surprised by her friend's request to be alone.

"Oh, you are thinking out another story," Hilda exclaimed.

"Yes, I am; a very interesting one."

Her face was very bright, but grave. She walked till the sun had set, watching the changing clouds and the gold on the river. On her way home, she paused a moment before each of the historic houses close at hand, and stood to look at the face of Thomas Carlyle, who had just been set up in effigy on the Embankment. At ten o'clock, when the sisters went up to bed, Ada knocked in her usual way at the door of Mr. Meres' study.

Mr. Meres was reading; he welcomed her with a smile.

"Have you got Drummond's poems?" she began by asking.

"Drummond of Hawthornden? Alas, no!"

"No matter. Mr. Vissian happened to mention him to me with some fervour."

She was silent for a little, seemingly thinking of another matter. Then she said:

"Mr. Meres, I shall be one-and-twenty a fortnight to-day."

"I know it, Ada."

He watched her under his brows; she was smiling, with tremor of the lips.

"I went down to look at my property," were her next words.

Mr. Meres made no answer.

"You will never, I fear, be able to congratulate me."

He shifted on his chair, but still said nothing.

"And if you do not, who will?" pursued the girl. "I am afraid I shall be very friendless. Do you think it will be worth while to have a London house as well as Knightswell?"

"You will scarcely need one," said the other, tapping his knee with a paper-knife, and speaking in rather a gruff voice.

"Some people in my position," Ada went on, "would half wish that such wealth had never come to trouble them. They might be tempted to say they would have nothing to do with it."

Mr. Meres raised his face.

"And so give much trouble," he remarked, in a tone of suppressed agitation. "A state of things would follow equivalent to intestacy. Ten to one there would be law-suits. The property would be broken up."

"Yes, I have thought of that," Ada assented, looking up at the Madonna over the fireplace. "Still there would be a resource for such a person's foolishness. There would be nothing to prevent him or her from giving it all away when once possessed of it."

"Nothing in the world," said Mr. Meres, scarcely above a whisper.

"Mr. Meres, will you help me to get that legally performed?"

He half rose, his hands trembling on the arms of his chair.

"Ada, you mean that?"

"Yes, I mean it."

He caught her head between his hands, and kissed her several times on the forehead.

"That's my brave girl!" was all he could say. Then he sat down again in the utmost perturbation. He was completely unnerved, and had to press his hands upon his brows to try and recover calm.

Ada kept her eyes upon Raphael's Madonna. She could not see quite clearly, but the divine face was glowed around with halo, and seemed to smile.

"I cannot be quite independent, you know, she said at length. "For the present I must ask Mrs. Clarendon to give me just what I need to live upon - that, and no more. I shall be glad to do that. I had rather have it from her as a gift than keep a sum for myself."

"When did you first think of this?" Mr. Meres asked, when he could command his voice.

"I cannot tell you. I think the seed was in my mind long ago, and it has grown slowly."

She spoke with much simplicity, and with natural earnestness.

"I never rejoiced in my future," she continued, "unless, perhaps, in a few moments of misery. I never in earnest realised the possession of it. How could I? This wealth was not mine; a mere will could give me no right in it. I have often, in thinking over it, been brought to a kind of amazement at the unquestioning homage paid to arbitrary law. You know that mood in which simple, every-day matters are seen in their miraculous light. My whole self revolted against such laws. It seemed a kind of conjuring with human lives - something basely ludicrous. And the surrender costs me nothing; I assure you it costs me nothing! To say there was merit in it would be ridiculous. I simply could not accept what is offered me. Oh, how light I feel!"

Meres looked at her admiringly.

"And to consent to be the instrument of a dead man's malice!" Her scorn was passionate. "Isn't it enough to think of that? What did he care for me, a wretched, parentless child, put out to nurse with working-people! It was baser cruelty to me than to Mrs. Clarendon. Oh, *how* did she consent to be rich on those terms?"

"Ada, you must try and think tenderly of her," said Meres, with the softness which always marked his voice when he spoke of Isabel. "I have told you of her early poverty. She was a beautiful girl, and without the education which might have given her high aims; the pleasant things of the world tempted her, and frivolous society did

its best to ruin her. It did not touch her heart; that has always been pure, and generous, and womanly. Try never to think of her failings."

"I wish I were not a woman!" Ada exclaimed. "It is that which makes me judge her hardly. Men - all men - see her so differently."

"Ada Warren!" he grasped the arm of his chair convulsively, speaking in sudden forgetfulness of everything but his passion, "if by my death I could save her from the most trifling pain I would gladly die this hour!"

She gazed at him with a daughter's tenderness, and sighed:

"I shall never hear such words as those."

"My child, your reward is in the future. Fate has given you nobility alike of heart and brain, and, if you live, you will lack no happiness that time has in its bestowal. Go, now, Ada, and leave me to myself. This hour has made me feel old. My quiet life does not fit me for these scenes. I am horribly shaken."

She rose, and bent her head that again he might kiss her on the brows.

"You shall be my father," she said, her voice faltering. "May I call you father from now?"

He turned from her, pressing her hand, and she left him.

CHAPTER XVI

Kingcote's abode was in one of the principal streets of Norwich. The shop was narrow but ran back some distance, and above it were two storeys for dwelling; to reach the house door you went up a yard, beneath an archway, the side entrance to a respectable public-house being opposite. The name of Gabriel had been left undisturbed along the top of the shop-front; above it, in fresh gilt letters, was the name of the present tradesman; a small "late" connected the two.

In the rear of the shop, a small dark room, with windows of which the lower half was in ground glass, served during the day-time as counting-house; after business hours it became the private sitting-room of Mr. Billimore. It was to Mr. Billimore that Gabriel referred, when he spoke in terms of confidence of the assistant who had so long been his father's right-hand man. He was middle-aged, rather above six feet in stature, and entirely bald; not a hair remained upon his head. He had, however, a thin moustache, reddish mixed with gray, and a goat-beard beneath his chin; the chin itself, for some strange reason, he carefully shaved. His cheeks were marked with healthful ruddiness, and he had eyes which twinkled with a pleasant and kindly humour. When he met a customer, he stood with bowed head, performing the action of hand-washing; when discussing a matter with his employer, he invariably took his handkerchief from the breast-pocket of his coat, and polished his head with it, as if the act implied a seemly combination of self-respect and deference. Never was a worthier assistant, never a more capable. His knowledge of the outsides of books was considerable; his acquaintance with them as literature was such as might be gained by a complete perusal each Sunday morning of *The Athenæum*. In the pleasantest manner possible, he set to work from the first day to instruct Kingcote in the details of shop-keeping; without a smile of presumption he answered questions which Kingcote himself put with a half-ashamed laugh; his seriousness and honesty were beyond suspicion.

Mr. Billimore had a bedroom at the top of the house; breakfast, mid-day dinner, and tea, he took with the family; his supper, consisting of bread and cheese and a pint of beer, was, in accordance with immemorial usage, laid for him in the counting-house at nine o'clock. Kingcote wondered much what his assistant did with

himself during his free hours, for no acquaintance ever came to see him, and his excursions were limited to a walk before breakfast on Sunday morning, and another after supper on the same day. If Kingcote went by chance through the counting-house after the shop was closed, he found Mr. Billimore sitting with a glass of beer at his elbow, a churchwarden pipe between his lips, either musing or reading some periodical. The pipe and glass were invariable; the assistant had the habit at Sunday dinner of pouring out his second tumbler of ale just before the meal ended, and carrying it with him into his own quarters, that the afternoon tobacco might not be unmoistened. That he suffered no ennui was demonstrable, for it was no uncommon thing to hear him laughing by himself, a remarkable laugh, half a crow and half a scream. When Kingcote heard the sound for the first time, he had apprehensions that Mr. Billimore was unwell; discovering the truth, he was annoyed by the thought that it was himself and his inaptitude that occasioned the assistant's mirth. This, however, he was soon convinced was equally a mistake, and he and Mary derived not a little amusement from these grotesque outbursts of solitary mirth; occasionally they could hear them even when seated in their drawing-room, which was immediately above the shop. It only remained to suppose that Mr. Billimore was a philosopher of the school of Democritus, a conclusion not perhaps wide of the mark.

By the end of his first three months, Kingcote was acquiescent in his life, even contented with it. The customers who had been in the habit of using the shop still came, for Mr. Billimore's continued presence was reassuring, and the little that was seen of the new proprietor was not repellent; there was every likelihood that the business would still be what it had been. It was a week or two before Kingcote broke himself to the habit of remaining at the counter when a purchaser entered, but even this grew to be very simple, and quite in the order of things. With the bookselling proper was joined a stationery business, and perhaps on the whole it was a little harder to sell a newspaper or a quire of note, or a bottle of gum, than to take an order for a volume or part with one from the shelves; still, no mortal is above satisfaction in receiving cash payment, part whereof is calculable profit, and the very till soon began to be more than endurable in our friend's eyes.

The trial was when acquaintances of old time presented themselves to claim recognition. There were not more than half-a-dozen who did so, and two or three of these were not, in the end, unwelcome. They

were worthy people of the middle-class provincial sort, full of natural curiosity, but also not lacking kindness. Their curiosity Kingcote satisfied only in broad terms, and perhaps the fixed melancholy of his face prevented the grosser kind of inquisitiveness. He let it be known that his sister kept house for him, and that she was a widow, but it was some time before any one called to see Mary. The circumstances of her marriage were remembered, and created prejudice; there had not been wanting those who, at the time, hinted at worse things than a mere elopement, and now such points were rediscussed with the relish of a provincial appetite which has only limited diet. Still, even Mary was in the end accepted. The first lady who called upon her no doubt suppressed a hesitation for the sake of getting a glimpse of the domestic interior; one or two others justified themselves by the precedent. There followed invitations to heavy tea, and it was made known to Kingcote that he would be welcome here or there at supper. For his sister's sake he obliged himself to go wherever he was sought. He might not enjoy the conversation at these houses, but in future he must have that or none, and to keep up pretences would savour of the ludicrous. He was a shopkeeper, and likely to remain one to the end of his days. Nor did he in truth repine.

He rested. From his illness there had remained a good deal of physical weakness; it was more apparent now than it had been during the late months of the past year. He had no longer a desire to take walks, and indeed seldom left the house for such a purpose; when at leisure, he sat with a book, and it was a trouble to stir from his chair. His appearance was that of a man ten years beyond his own age; always grave, he had only to sit in silence for a quarter of an hour to fall into a dreamy state of absent-mindedness; as often as not he turned the pages of his book without knowledge of what he seemed to be reading. This was not the same thing as unhappiness; his mood was emphatically one of contentment. He interested himself in the details of his business, and was in nothing neglectful. Only it was all done without active pleasure; his life remained joyless.

"What are those lines you are repeating, Bernard?" his sister asked him one evening, when he had turned from the finished supper, to take up a magazine.

"Did I say them aloud?" he asked. Then he quoted:

For not to desire or admire, if a man could learn it, were more
Than to walk all day like the Sultan of old in a garden or spice.

"I am not far from that end," he added; then went on with his reading.

There was truth in what he said, and he would not have exchanged his state for one more active, even though it had been an activity that promised happiness. For in happiness he had no faith. It did exist on earth - in the form of sleep; all other bliss he held to be illusion. Heights to which he had once looked up with envious eyes, he did not now contemplate; if a glimpse of them arrested him, he hurriedly turned away, pained by a sudden sense of unrest. The thought of exertion was intolerable. His reading was no longer study, but mere pastime in idle pages; books which demanded thought or suggested a high and energetic ideal, he put aside. This habit of mind, at first involuntary, he was beginning to take consciously for his direction; it preserved to him an even calm, which was now the most desirable of things.

"Do not tell me of your work," he wrote to Gabriel in London. "It will seem unfriendly that I should not wish to hear of it, but your progress and achievements I take for granted; they are the essence of the distinction between your world and my own. When you say you have done this, and are planning that, it disturbs me, I know not how; I neither act nor plan, and hope never again to do either. Formerly, when I should gladly have heard these details, you kept them from me; pray do so now. The change in yourself which this new habit implies, I believe I understand. There is a joyful tone in all you write, formerly never to be found. You are less severe, more human. Naturally so; success is before you, and the anxious toil of your years of poverty is at an end. I, too, have ceased to fear poverty - thanks to you - but I dread the more anything that can give a shock to my placid materialism. I dread awakenings of sympathy, I dread discontent, I dread the ideal."

Whereto Clement Gabriel took occasion to reply:

"My friend, you are in a bad way. Fortunately you are young; there is hope for you in the years that bring the philosophic mind. Allow me to suggest that your present mind contains as little of the philosophic as it well could. I will not for the present trouble you

about my doings. We will talk over them when you have recovered your interest in the things which alone are worth living for."

So the days moved on. Towards the end of the first week in June, Kingcote exhibited a slight return of restlessness; he complained, when Mary questioned him, that he could not sleep; it was nothing, it would pass. It did not, however, pass immediately. For ten days the trouble of mind or body rather grew than diminished; the old dislike of society showed itself, and at length he seemed to be shrinking from his daily occupations. Mr. Billimore, who was observant, noticed that he displayed much anxiety to take the letters from the post man, when the latter came into the shop each morning, and that an examination of the batch seemed always to occasion him some disappointment. But the trouble did in the end prove transitory. A day or two of headache, which kept him to his room, led back to the ordinary routine of life. Business received attention in the usual way, and his impassive countenance was restored. . . .

A week later, there came to the shop a messenger from a hotel, with a note addressed to Mr. Kingcote. He was at that moment in the house; knowing he would appear speedily, Mr. Billimore laid the note on his masters desk in the counting-house. Within a few minutes Kingcote entered, and took up the envelope carelessly. He dropped it again as if it had burnt him.

Mr. Billimore was advancing to explain by whom the note had been left. Kingcote's face struck him as so singular, that he retired into the shop without having spoken.

Had he still power to feel this? That terrible sinking at the heart which had once been so common an experience had again come upon him. He had to sit down; his limbs would not support him. His face was hot, his mouth all at once parched; his hands shook as if they never could regain their steadiness.

When he opened the envelope, he found two lines:

"If you could come to see me here before five o'clock, I should be glad. I have a private room; ask for me by name.

"ISABEL CLARENDON."

It was now two in the afternoon. Kingcote, after consulting his watch, went upstairs to his bedroom. There he paced up and down for half-an-hour. On recovering from the shock of agitation which was incompatible with thought of any kind, his first sentiment was one of anger. He had thought that the time for this was gone by; the assurance of it had been a new beginning of calm. What right had she to disturb him? As she was in the town, she doubtless knew what his position was; probably she had heard that from Mr. Vissian long ago. What inspiration save of woman's cruelty could have led to this summons? He had forgotten her; she had gone from his life; was he never to be secure from a renewal of that intolerable anguish, anguish even physical, which she had it in her power to inflict upon him?

Nay, she had worse power than that. From the long-sealed chambers of his heart came a low cry as of reawakening life, life which would fain be free again. The sweat stood on his forehead as he crushed down the tenderness, the passion which he had thought dead. The sight of her handwriting, after so long, had given back to him the dreadful power of seeing herself, her features, her beautiful form. He flung himself by the bedside, and smothered his face; the striving of the old spirit drew groans from him.

What, what was he to her, or she to him? What conceivable circumstances could render possible the realisation of that mad dream, of which he had well-nigh died? It was imbecility to flatter himself with the fancy that she loved him; but, if he could believe it, if she proved it to him —. Had all his suffering been mere frantic jealousy? Had he misunderstood? Had time proved to her that his love was worth more than the pleasures the world could give her? Had it grown within her soul, whilst he had sunk to brutish indifference?

At first it had seemed possible to refuse to see her; would it not be fair reprisal for all that he had borne at her hands? Would it not gratify his pride to coldly tell her that he saw no good end to be gained by a personal interview? It needed another than himself to act upon such a thought. Already he was preparing to go and see her. He threw water upon his face to cool its burning. The fear now had become lest his delay in answering her summons should have led her to conclude that he would not answer it. With haste which only heightened his nervousness, he completed his preparations, and

went downstairs. Fortunately he met no one; he could take his hat and leave by the house-door unobserved.

The walk to the hotel was short. On reaching the entrance he had to turn aside and go a little further on, that he might be able to use his voice and present any appearance but that of a man under stress of violent emotion. Between the door of the hotel and the private room to which he was conducted, he knew nothing but the pain which came from the throbbing at his temples and the rush of blood in his ears.

She stood at the farther end of the room, a dark object to him. She wore a summer travelling dress, but of that he could take no note; her face alone came out of the confused mist, and he saw that it was pale and agitated. There was no joy in it; that he knew at once. None of the old sweetness dwelt in her eyes and about her lips. She was austere, fear-stricken.

"You have kept me long," were her first words, and as she spoke them her hand pressed upon her bosom. "I thought you would come at once."

The sound of her speaking had the effect of a cold hand upon his forehead. He saw with clear vision; the throbbing at his temples allayed itself.

"Why are you here?" he asked. "Why have you sent for me?"

With perfect consciousness he made his tone as gentle as he could. His words did not seem to himself spontaneous; these were prompted to him from within, and she repeated them as if playing a part.

Isabel came nearer, and held to him the photograph he had returned her. Since sending the note, she had stood there with it in her hand; it was bent.

"Will you take it back again?" she asked. He saw her throat swell; she seemed to swallow something before she spoke.

He did not move to take it.

"You wish," he replied, "to be a shopkeeper's wife?"

With no smile he said it; yet it cost him an effort. Again it was the repetition of prompted words.

"I thought you had perhaps heard," Isabel said, letting her hand fall again, and speaking quickly, still with that swelling of the throat. "Ada refuses to take what is hers by law. She has given it back to me."

Kingcote's eyes held themselves fixed upon her face. The silence seemed to be long; he was conscious of prolonging it purposely. He saw her put her hand upon the table and lean heavily on it.

"Will you answer me?" she uttered in an agitated whisper.

"Surely it is needless to answer in words," he said at length. "Why have you come to offer me that which you know I cannot accept?"

The evil spirit stirred in his breast, and, with scarcely a pause, he continued vehemently:

"Why did you not spare both of us this? Do you think so basely of me? Cannot I read in your face that you believed it to be your duty to make this offer to me, at whatever cost to yourself? You are conscious that your unkindness drove me to part from you in frenzy, and what has happened seemed to impose a necessity of restoring to me a piece of good fortune which I had thrown away. And you have feared lest I should take you at your word! If you had ever loved me you would know me better."

Her head bowed itself before his violence; he could scarcely catch the words when she said:

"I did love you."

"For a day - for an hour; I believe it. You gave me your love in recklessness. It was a fatal gift."

"I think you should not reproach me," she said, in the same faint voice. "I gave you the one love of my life. I would have married you

then. It would have been truer kindness to take me - to have given me something to live for. My love would not have failed you."

For an instant he could have implored what fate had written unattainable. He knew the unreality of the vision that tempted him, and could not have uttered the words his tongue half-formed. But the mood showed itself in gentler speech.

"I have no right to speak so harshly. The last words we shall ever say to each other must not be unkind. If I did not still love you it would be easier to speak smooth things."

Her tears were falling.

"If you still love me," she said brokenly, "it is your right to take me, whatever seems to hinder." She held forth her hands, but without looking up. "Your voice is the highest leading that I know. Oh, are you not strong enough? Can you not bend me to your will?"

A sob stayed her, but there came another cry:

"If I were young!"

Kingcote quivered, then fell to his knees, holding the hands she had outstretched.

"Say good-bye to me in the kind voice I once knew!" He spoke in hoarse, choked accents. "Say it kindly, that it may be a sacred memory whilst I live, and a hope in death!"

She did utter the word, but in such a passion of weeping that it fell upon his ears like a moan. Then he kissed both her hands, and broke away. . . .

"The tragedy," Kingcote had once said, "is not where two who love each other die for the sake of their love; but where love itself dies, blown upon by the cold breath of the world, and those who loved live on with hearts made sepulchres." . . .

Here is a letter which came to Kingcote from Mr. Vissian some six months later:

"Methinks, my friend, I have grounds of complaint against you. Though I have submitted to your judgment three conjectural emendations which, in my poor thinking, do not lack propriety, you fail even to acknowledge the receipt of them. I trust this does not signify any incapacity to write; for you are of those whom I would rather challenge for unkindness than pity for mischance. I should - taking the more probable view of the case - scarcely have written again thus soon, but that I have sundry items of news to communicate, one of which concerns me nearly. Learn, then, that at the end of the year I surrender my present living, on the ground that another and a better has been offered me. When I say 'better,' I mean in the worldly sense; that, I fear, my usual way of speaking will have made you too ready to take for granted. I shall in future be nearer to you by a matter of fifty miles, my new parish being that of S—. There will be a necessity for keeping a curate, as the work is much more considerable than what has here been my share. It is in no spirit of levity that I express my hope of being able to adapt my energies to the larger sphere. It is possible that I have occasionally been remiss, owing to the manifold temptations of pursuits which my graver judgment often condemns as incompatible with my duties.

"I should hardly have consented to leave Winstoke were it not for an event which has weakened the tie which bound me to the spot. I refer to the final departure from Knightswell of that gracious lady whom I have so long regarded with affectionate reverence, and whom my wife truly loves. Mrs. Clarendon is Mrs. Clarendon no longer; she has just married a wealthy and, I doubt not, worthy gentleman, her cousin Mr. Asquith, who takes her to live in another part of England. Knightswell is to be sold. The marriage was celebrated privately in London. I am glad I was not asked to officiate; it would have been painful to me. The old name has come to mean so much in my ears; I should but grudgingly have aided in its casting off.

"Now here be news. Moreover, I have it in charge from Mrs. Vissian to say unto you, that, as a final test of your good will to us, we invite you to visit us in our new home not later than the end of January. That you can come, I am convinced, and in very truth we want to see you."

"I must not forget to add that I have just received from Miss Warren a weekly paper containing a poem by herself, and, it seems to me, one of striking merit. After the unprecedented act of generosity

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which this young lady has performed, I am disposed to regard everything she writes as the outcome of a very noble nature, and to study it in a serious spirit. I am very anxious to know her better, personally, for I have always grievously misjudged her. I do not think she will refuse to come and spend a few days with us in the spring. Would it not be agreeable to you to renew your acquaintance with her at some time?"