



The day's journey

NETTA SYRETT

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BY

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Phone:02188-299295

Email:saptarsheeprakashan@gmail.com

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CHAPTER I

ROSE SUMMERS paused a moment before she lifted the latch of a little gate set between two walls of yew. It was June. The sky had the blue of larkspur, the air was sweet with the scent of flowers. The gate in the yew hedge opened upon a small flagged court leading to a porch wreathed with roses. Above the porch clematis and ivy continued the wall of living green almost to the gables of what had once been an Elizabethan farm-house, and was now the picturesque home of Robert Kingslake and of Cecily his wife.

To the left, above a walled garden, great chestnut trees reared their heads, and flung shadows across the lane in which Mrs. Summers was standing. The stillness, broken only by the sleepy clucking of fowls, was of that peculiar peacefulness which broods over an English country-side. On the white dust in the road the shadows lay asleep. The trees themselves drowsed against the blue sky; the very roses above the house-porch laid their pink faces together, and, cradled in leaves, dreamt in the sunshine.

Only a moment passed before Mrs. Summers lifted the latch, yet in that moment she saw in imagination one hill station after another; she hurried through adventures and experiences which had filled five years, and came back to the realization that, in the meantime, her cousin Cecily had just lived here at the Priory, listening to the clucking of the fowls, looking at the chestnut trees against the sky, perhaps tending the roses round the porch. She walked up the flagged path and rang the bell. The door was opened in a few moments by a neat maid, who said that Mrs. Kingslake was out. "But she won't be long, ma'am, if you'll come in," she added.

The porch led almost directly into one of those square, panelled halls which make the most charming of sitting-rooms. At the farther end a long, low casement window framed a vista of the garden—green, luxuriant, brilliant with flowers. On the window-ledge there was a china bowl of sweet peas.

Mrs. Summers looked about her with interest. There was not much furniture, but each piece, though simple, was beautiful in form at least, and in some cases obviously rather costly. It was furniture chosen with discretion. "Better off than they used to be," was her mental comment.

She glanced at the fresh chintz curtains, at the two or three little pieces of silver, exquisitely cared for, on mantelpiece and tables; at the flowers everywhere. "She's as dainty as ever," was her next reflection.

A photograph on the top of a writing-table caught her wandering attention. She took it up, and examined it with interest.

It was that of a man of a possible five-and-thirty, clean-shaven, handsome, with something eager, enthusiastic, almost childlike about the eyes, and the mouth of a sensualist.

Mrs. Summers replaced the photograph; it was of Cecily's husband, but she was more interested in Cecily, and of her she could find no picture.

She walked presently to the door which led into the garden. Looking out upon its cool greenness and beauty, her thoughts were full of its owner. A very close friendship, rather than the tie of blood, bound her to the woman for whose coming she waited. Much of her girlhood had been spent with Cecily, and up to the time of her own marriage, six years ago, she had stayed weeks at a time at the Merivales' house in Chelsea. It had been an interesting house to visit. Cecily's father, a widower and a well-known doctor, was the type of man who attracted the better minds, the more striking personalities, and Cecily was undoubtedly the woman to keep them.

Apparently gazing into the quiet Surrey garden, in reality Mrs. Summers was looking into the drawing-room at Carmarthen Terrace, seeing it as it had appeared on many an evening in the past. The room was full of firelight and candlelight, a quiet, restful room, a little old-fashioned with its traces of mid-Victorianism, brought by Cecily's clever touch into harmony with a more modern standard of taste. Mrs. Summers remembered the pattern of the long chintz curtains, remembered the subdued tone of the walls, the china in the big cabinet, the water-colors which were the pride of her uncle's heart. She saw him talking earnestly at one end of the room, his fine gray head conspicuous among the group of men who surrounded him—men well known in the world of science, of letters, and of art. Even more distinctly she saw Cecily, the young hostess and mistress of the house, in the midst of the younger men and women of their circle. She heard the laughter. There was always laughter near Cecily, whose airy *insouciance* was amusing enough successfully to disguise real ability.

"I'm quite clever enough to pass for a fluffy fool—when necessary." This, a long-ago remark of her cousin's, suddenly recurred to Mrs. Summers, *à propos* of nothing, and she wondered whether Cecily ever wrote anything now. Then her thoughts went back to Cecily as a hostess. She had been looked upon by some of her friends as a brilliant woman, a woman whose social gifts, whose power of pleasing—as well as leading—should carry her far in the yet wider world which would open for her when she made the excellent marriage that every one predicted.

And, after all, Cecily had married Robert Kingslake, a writer with nothing but his pen between him and starvation.

Rose remembered the first day he came to the house, a rather sombre, rather picturesque figure, with his dark eyes and graceful, lithe body. Things moved very quickly after that first evening, so quickly that in retrospect there seemed to Mrs. Summers to have been scarcely a moment of ordinary acquaintanceship. There was a slight interval devoted to impetuous, ardent love-making, and then the wedding, for which she, herself a year-old bride, had not been able to stay.

Her husband's regiment had been ordered to India a week before Cecily Merivale became Cecily Kingslake, and she had sailed with him. A breath of warm air

swept towards the open door, and fanned the short curtains at the window; it brought with it the scent of carnations, and to Mrs. Summers a sudden vision of Cecily as she had last seen her.

She was sitting on the edge of her bed in her room at Carmarthen Terrace. The room was flooded with sunshine. The basin on the washstand was, Mrs. Summers remembered, full of carnations, and as she entered the room she had exclaimed at their beauty.

“They’ve just come. I’m going to arrange them,” Cecily had said. She held a letter which had also evidently just come, and as she raised her head the look on her face had startled her cousin. She remembered fearing for her. Could any human being with impunity be as ecstatically happy as that? It was like tempting Providence.

Something of this, half in jest, half seriously, she had tried to say, and Cecily had laughed, the low, trembling laugh of a delight too deep to find other expression. She had given herself over to her love as the woman a little difficult, more than a little fastidious, always gives herself—with a surrender complete and unquestioning.

The sunny bedroom, the dainty new frocks over the backs of the chairs, the litter of boxes and paper about the room, the brilliant flowers, and Cecily in her white petticoat, her white shoulders bare;—beautiful, proud, and smiling,—Mrs. Summers saw her as though five days rather than five years had passed since they had met.

She moved, and glanced back over her shoulder. The memory was so vivid that it stirred her to impatience. Why didn’t Cecily come? A door closed sharply.

“Where? Where is she?” It was the same clear, eager voice, and Mrs. Summers smiled, suddenly reassured.

The next moment Cecily’s arms were round her, and there was a rush of incoherent questions. Then Rose gently pushed her back, and they looked at one another.

Involuntarily an exclamation rose to the elder woman’s lips, mercifully checked, as she recognized, by Cecily’s eager words.

“You are just the same!” she cried. “You’ve scarcely changed at all.” And then came the inevitable pause. Rose listened to a thrush singing, and to the distant sound of a mowing-machine. She seemed to have been listening quite a long time before Cecily broke in so sharply that her voice was almost like a cry.

“Ah no! don’t look at *me*! I’m old and ugly. I’ve changed, haven’t I, Rose?” The question ended in a nervous laugh.

CHAPTER II

"I'M dying to go into the garden," said Mrs. Summers. She slipped her arm within Cecily's, and while she talked volubly, felt its trembling gradually lessen. "Tongue cannot tell what I've endured since I landed on Tuesday," she exclaimed. "The children's *ayah* has been ill, relations have incessantly banged at the front door, Mother has had one of her attacks—excitement, you know,—and I've been tearing my hair. I daren't write to tell you when to expect me because I didn't know from hour to hour when I could get away. At last to-day there was a lull; so, *forbidding* anything to happen in my absence, I just rushed off to you."

"And the babies?" asked Cecily.

"Splendid. They got horribly spoilt on board, and now Mother's putting the finishing touches."

"And Jack?"

"Very fit when I left him, a month ago. But I'm not going to talk babies, nor even husbands. I want to know about *you*."

Cecily shrugged her shoulders. "There's nothing to tell," she said. "You saw me a month before I came into this house; I've been here ever since. This is rather a nice seat."

They sat down on a bench under a beech tree, and for all her volubility Rose felt herself nonplussed. She glanced at Cecily, her momentary hesitation as to what to say next indicated by a little furrow between the eyes.

Rose Summers was scarcely a pretty, but certainly a striking woman, who, in spite of trying circumstances in the shape of an Eastern climate, looked younger than her thirty-one years. Her figure, of the athletic type, was good; she was exceedingly well dressed, and she wore her clothes with distinction. Her slightly freckled face had a healthy tint, and her eyes—gray, clear, and steady—were beautiful as well as kindly. Their expression was contradicted, to some extent, by the sarcasm indicated in a rather large and certainly humorous mouth. The eyes she turned upon her friend now were troubled, almost incredulous. Her mental picture of the Cecily of five years back had been so vivid that, even with the witness before her, she could not realize the change those years had brought.

Cecily was still graceful; nothing could rob her of the beautiful movements which characterized every change of attitude; and as she threw herself back against the cushions in the corner of the bench, for the first time Mrs. Summers recognized the Cecily of the past.

But her beauty was wellnigh gone. It was a beauty that had always largely depended on happiness, and now, with her blue eyes faded, the delicate color gone from her cheeks, her hair still soft but lustreless, she was almost a plain woman. Rose glanced furtively from her face to her dress. It was of simple dark blue linen, quite neat, quite serviceable. She thought of the dainty muslins, the ribbons, the flowers of

earlier summers—and the ludicrousness of even imagining Cecily in a gown that could be characterized as serviceable!

“When you begin to neglect your frocks, Cis, I shall know the end is near.” In the old days Mrs. Summers had often told her this. She recalled it now, and made haste to break the silence.

“Where is Robert?” she asked. “Do I call him Robert? I forget.”

“Of course you do. He’s in town—reading at the British Museum.”

Rose raised her eyebrows with a laugh. “Since when has our Robert become so studious?”

“He’s writing a historical novel, and has to study up the period. Robert is getting quite famous, you know, Rose,” she added, after a moment’s pause.

“Yes—but *you*, Cis? Why are *you* not famous?”

“I? Oh, I’m married—instead,” she replied, with a little laugh.

“Tell me all about Robert,” demanded Mrs. Summers. “If you only knew how horribly out of things I feel! I know nothing of what’s been going on in the book world.”

“I should think not—with two babies to look after.”

“And the constant moving from one station to another. One loses touch so quickly, and you know, Cis,” with a touch of reproach, “you haven’t written. Why didn’t you write? For the last year or two I’ve scarcely heard anything of you.”

For a moment her cousin was silent, and when she spoke her voice trembled.

“I know. But after baby died, I hadn’t the heart. And then——” She broke off abruptly.

Mrs. Summers’ voice was very gentle.

“Yes, dear, of course—I understand,” she said. “But tell me everything now. Robert’s getting famous? That means that you’re getting rich, you lucky little wretch!”

“Yes,” returned Cecily. “Yes, I suppose we shall be rich,” she added, slowly.

“Bless the child! Aren’t you glad? Isn’t he glad?”

“Oh, yes, he’s very glad. We can get away now.” She spoke in a quiet, unemotional tone, and Rose glanced at her sharply.

“Get away? But doesn’t he love this place?”

“No, he’s sick of it,” she said, still in the same indifferent voice. “We’re going to sell it, and move to London in the autumn.”

“But Robert was so wild to take it!”

“That was five years ago.”

“It’s perfectly lovely, of course,” returned her friend, glancing round her. “But *you* never wanted to come, I remember. You wanted so much to live in town. The discussion of town *versus* country was at its height when I left. So country won?”

“Yes, country won,” Cecily repeated.

“Well, it’s beautiful,” Rose repeated. “I never saw such flowers. What a gardener you must have!”

Cecily laughed. “I am the gardener. I do it nearly all myself.”

Rose’s astonishment kept her silent. Cecily, who knew nothing of country things! Cecily, who, in spite of her love for nature, belonged first to the town—to its life, its thoughts, its opportunities! To this meeting with the friend of her girlhood she had been looking forward for months, and she had met a stranger. She had foolishly expected to take up the thread of intimacy where she had dropped it, and in the interval a whole new pattern had been woven,—a pattern in faded colors, whose design she did not understand.

Cecily was obviously unhappy; obviously, also, she was keeping her at arm’s length, and with such success that she had not the courage to ask direct questions. With gratitude she hailed the appearance of a maid who came with tea, as a relief to her embarrassment—that terrible embarrassment one feels in the presence of a close friend to whose mind one has lost the key.

While the cloth was being spread, and the maid was moving to and fro from the house, they exchanged information on family matters.

“Diana is almost grown up,” said Cecily, speaking of her sister, whom Mrs. Summers remembered as a child of twelve. “You know she’s been living with Uncle Henry and Aunt Mary since father died?” The softening of her voice, the hesitation with which she spoke his name, reminded Rose of one great grief, at least, through which in her absence her friend had passed. “You will like Diana,” Cecily added after a moment. “Of course you’re going to stay to-night, Rose?”

Mrs. Summers admitted that she was open to an invitation. “When is Robert coming back?” she inquired.

“This afternoon, I think. He was staying last night at his godmother’s—Lady Wilmot, you know.”

The mention of her husband’s name did not, as Rose hoped, lead to confidences. Cecily began at once to inquire the earliest date at which her friend could leave the children long enough for a “proper visit,” and Mrs. Summers was soon driven to make conversation.

“What a ridiculous little world it is!” she remarked, stirring her tea; “I haven’t yet been home a week, and already I’ve run across people I’d lost sight of for years before I left England. Now, on Monday, for instance, I was going to the dressmaker’s when I met a girl I used to know, a girl called Philippa Burton.”

“*Philippa Burton!*” echoed Cecily, with interest. “Why, I went to school with her. A rather pretty dark girl?”

“Major Burton’s daughter? Yes? How strange!”

“Philippa Burton! How it brings all the schooldays back!” exclaimed Cecily, with a retrospective laugh. “I had no idea you knew her, Rose. When did you meet her?”

“That year I went to Leipzig to study music, you know. She was in the same *pension*, studying something or other also; I forget what. Affectation, I should think.”

“But she had brought that to a fine art even as a schoolgirl,” Cecily remarked. “Tell me about her. We left school the same term, I remember. Is she as pretty as ever?” She spoke with animation, obviously glad of a topic which drew conversation away from personal matters.

“Pretty?—yes, in a floppy fashion.”

Cecily laughed. “Oh, she still flops? She used to be a most intense young woman. When she asked you to pass the salt at dinner, you felt inclined to burst into tears. She was High Church when I knew her, but that was early in her career.”

“Oh, yes, there’s been Rationalism since then, and Socialism, and Vegetarianism, and Theosophy, and what not. Just now it’s Sandals and the Simple Life, whatever that may mean. It seems to cover a multitude of complexities.”

“Does she still yearn?”

“Oh, horribly! She begins at breakfast-time, I’m sure. She’s doing miniatures and mystic drawings now.”

“And mouse-traps, and moonshine, and everything else that begins with an *M*? It sounds like *Alice in Wonderland*. Go on. I’m awfully interested to hear of her again. Even as a schoolgirl Philippa posed more than any other human being I’ve ever met.”

“She has a studio in Fulham somewhere,” Mrs. Summers continued. “I happened to be quite close to it when I met her, and she asked me to come in to tea. *She* had grape-nuts and plasmon. It’s astonishing what lurid views of life can be nourished upon this apparently mild diet,” she added, reflectively.

“Are Philippa’s views lurid?” asked Cecily.

“Oh, my uninstructed married ignorance is to blame, of course!” declared Mrs. Summers, with a meek expression.

“What did she say?”

“A great many things—most of them quite unfit for publication. But the latest and simplest gospel, according to Burton, appears to be, ‘Down with the proprietary view of marriage.’”

Cecily leaned back against her cushions. “Ah!” she said.

“Yes,” continued Mrs. Summers, meditatively, “there should be room in life for frank, free comradeship—*camaraderie* was, I think, the word—between husbands and ladies who are living the Simple Life. Room for beautiful, breezy, ennobling friendships, untrammelled by vulgar jealousy on the part of the wife.”

“I see,” returned Cecily. “And is the wife to have beautiful, breezy friendships too?”

“Oh, yes! Liberty, Fraternity (presumably), and Equality, of course.”

Cecily was silent a moment. “And you don’t believe in that kind of thing?” she asked.

Mrs. Summers shrugged her shoulders.

9“My dear, I haven’t lived the Simple Life,” she returned, dryly.

“Some more tea?” Cecily suggested. “Well, a complicated biscuit, then? I’m afraid I haven’t any plasmon in the house. I wonder now whether a woman like Philippa Burton is more of a hypocrite or a self-deceiver?” she added, thoughtfully, after a few moments.

“About her theories, you mean?”

“Or her practices. A woman seldom has a theory without a concrete example to illustrate it. Philippa has a concrete example, of course?”

“Oh, yes, one of the husbands who comes to be ennobled.”

“Isn’t his wife suited to the task?”

“Apparently not. He is a great genius, warped, stifled, suffocated by the atmosphere of domesticity.”

“Poor man,” said Cecily.

“The wife’s crime, as far as I can understand,” pursued Mrs. Summers, “is her existence, and from Philippa’s point of view I admit it’s enough. No doubt when a man’s tired of his wife it *is* awfully annoying and stultifying to his genius. But somehow, while Philippa talked, I felt rather sorry for the poor little woman whose mind is so ill-balanced that she can’t turn off her emotions to order.”

“Is the man in love with Philippa, do you think?”

“Well, as he generally spends several hours a day with her, I should say he was—speaking of the human man as I know him.”

“And Philippa?” asked Cecily.

“Philippa, my dear, has sandals and an exalted mind. I also suspect her of a certain amount of concealed *jaeger*,—and she thinks him very noble. He always speaks ‘quite nicely’ of his wife.” Mrs. Summers paused, the ironical smile deepening upon her lips. “Under these circumstances,” she continued, “the *dénouement* may be a little delayed.”

“Ah well!” observed Cecily, rising. “It’s a very common little story, no doubt.” There was an underlying ring of bitterness in her words which did not escape her friend’s notice, as she too got up from the bench. “You’d like to come to your room, Rose? Dinner’s at half-past seven.”

“Oh, common enough, of course,” returned Rose, in answer to her first remark. “There’s nothing particularly remarkable about Mr. Fergus Macdonald, I should imagine——”

She was stooping to pick up her handkerchief as she spoke, when a half-articulate exclamation made her sharply raise her head.

Cecily was standing looking at her. “Mr.——? I didn’t catch the name,” she said, in an odd voice.

“Fergus Macdonald,” repeated Rose. “She didn’t tell me his name, but I couldn’t help seeing a very soulful inscription in a book. Why, Cecily, do you know

him?” She stammered over the last words, for while she spoke, every drop of color had ebbed away from the other woman’s face.

“Cecily!” she urged.

Cecily sank into the seat she had just left. There was silence for a moment, and then she began to laugh.

“Cecily!” said Mrs. Summers again. “Don’t, Cecily! Do you know him?”

“A little,” she replied. “He’s my husband.”

There was quite a long silence. Rose noticed the long shadows on the grass, was conscious of the brilliance of a bed of flowers in the sunset light.

“*Robert!*” she whispered at last. “But how——”

“It’s his writing name,” said Cecily, wearily. She had left off laughing now. “Oh, of course, you didn’t know, dear. As you say, you have been out of things——” Her voice trailed off without finishing the sentence.

Mrs. Summers mentally reviewed the preceding conversation. “O Cis,” she murmured, “I could kill myself for it. What a fool I am!—what a *fool!*”

CHAPTER III

“HERE’S Robert!” exclaimed Cecily, under her breath. “Don’t worry. I’m all right. It doesn’t matter.”

Rose saw with relief that though her face was still colorless it was quite calm, and almost before she had realized that a man was crossing the lawn towards them, she heard her voice again.

“Robert,” she said, “it’s Rose. She took me by surprise to-day.”

Kingslake put out his hand, smiling. “You have been expected for some time. Why, it’s—how many years?”

“Five,” returned Mrs. Summers, laconically.

“Only five? I thought it was longer.” He began to ask about the journey, the date of her arrival, all the conventional questions relating to the circumstances, in the midst of which, as Rose observed, he had apparently forgotten a greeting to his wife. He turned to her at last.

“Well, dear! I’m rather late.” He put some letters on the tea-table. “The post’s in. I found these in the hall.”

Cecily took them up, and began to open the envelopes.

“May I, Rose?” she murmured, absently.

“Do sit down, Mrs. Summers,” urged Kingslake, “we need not go in for ten minutes.”

He seated himself also as she complied, and while he continued the desultory conversation he had begun with her, Rose noticed that he glanced every now and then at his wife, who was deep in her letters.

At first sight he was not much altered. He was still the good-looking, rather picturesque man she remembered; but the hint of weakness in his face was more pronounced, and the lines about his mouth had grown querulous. As she talked, Rose watched him curiously. She was wondering at the reason for the furtive looks he occasionally threw in his wife’s direction. There was a trace of anxiety in his face for which she could not account. Cecily’s correspondence lasted for some time, but at last she raised her head.

“This is quite remarkable,” she said, in a voice which struck Rose as rather clearer even than her usual clear tones. “I’ve just heard from an old school-fellow—a girl I’ve lost sight of for years.”

Mrs. Summers’ eyes flashed with sudden comprehension.

“She says she has met you, Robert,” continued Cecily, in the same tone.

“Oh? May I smoke, Mrs. Summers?” He drew out his cigarette-case. “Who is the lady?”

“Philippa Burton.”

“Oh, yes! She was dining at Lady Wilmot’s last night.” He threw away the match. “What does she say?”

His wife began to read:—

“DEAR CECILY,—You will wonder who is addressing you in this familiar fashion, and even when you look at the signature, I wonder whether you will remember your old school-fellow—Philippa Burton? I am writing because, after this week, I shall be a near neighbor of yours. I have broken down a little, over my work; my doctor has ordered me country air, and I find the village to which he is sending me is *your* village! Sheepcote is so easy of access to town that I can run up when it is absolutely necessary, do as much work as I am allowed, and, I hope, renew my friendship with you. I met your husband yesterday at Lady Wilmot’s. What a charming man he is, and how proud you must be of him.”

“Spare my blushes,” interpolated Kingslake, in a lazy voice. Cecily concluded—

“May I sign myself, as in old days,

“Affectionately yours,

“PHILIPPA BURTON.”

She folded the letter deliberately, and replaced it in its envelope.

“Well, you can look after her a little, can’t you?” observed Kingslake. “You might see about getting her rooms, perhaps? Wouldn’t old Mrs. Green take her?—or the Watford woman? But this isn’t very amusing for Mrs. Summers, I’m afraid.” He turned to her politely.

“Oh, on the contrary,” she answered, “these bright, brave young women who work for their living, and at intervals have nervous breakdowns, interest me enormously. It’s a new type to me.”

Kingslake’s face darkened at her flippant tone.

“Ah! you happy married women who are shielded from the world are rather slow to understand some of the truths of life,” he observed, a note of indignation struggling through the suavity of his tone.

“Is it only the lies we encounter then—we happy married women?” she returned, lightly. “That doesn’t speak well for the men who shield us!”

Cecily rose. “Come,” she said, “it’s nearly dinner-time.”

Upstairs, in the spare room to which she showed her friend, Rose turned round with sudden vehemence. “Little devil!” she exclaimed, pointing to the letter her cousin still held. “It’s a feminine masterpiece. Not one untrue statement, yet a lie from beginning to end.”

Cecily was silent. “Don’t!” she said at last, under her breath. “I’ve got to get through the evening.”

Rose glanced at her, and, without speaking again, let her go.

When Cecily entered her bedroom, Kingslake opened his dressing-room door.

“Miss Burton told me she was a school-fellow of yours,” he began. “Were you great friends?”

“Not particularly,” returned Cecily, taking her tea-gown from the wardrobe.

8There was silence for a moment.

“She seems a nice sort of girl,” he continued, tentatively.

“She used to be pretty,” said Cecily, staring at herself in the glass as she took down her hair. “Is she pretty now?”

“Yes—rather. At least, yes, I suppose she is.” His voice was studiously careless. “Mrs. Summers hasn’t altered much,” he continued. “Looks very young still.” He pushed the door wider, and came into the room as he spoke, still fidgeting with his tie.

“We’re a contrast in that respect, aren’t we?” said Cecily, slowly. “I’ve altered a great deal since we were married, haven’t I, Robert?” She still kept her eyes fixed upon the glass from which, as she arranged her hair, her own set face confronted her.

Robert was wandering rather aimlessly about the room. “Oh, I don’t know. Have you?” he replied, absently; then, glancing over her shoulder into the mirror, “You’re looking very washy just now,” he added.

His wife said nothing, and presently he flung himself on the window-seat, and began to play with the silver ornaments on the dressing-table.

9“Oh, by the way, whom do you think I ran across at Waterloo this afternoon?” he broke out with a suddenness obviously premeditated. “Mayne—Dick Mayne, you know, just home from Alaska, or Siberia, or wherever it was.”

Cecily pinned on the brooch in front of her tea-gown with deliberation.

“Central Africa,” she said. “Did you speak to him?”

“Speak to him? Of course,” echoed her husband. “I asked him to come down and stay a bit,” he added, opening and shutting a pin-box while he spoke. “He’s a great fisherman, fortunately, or else I don’t know what amusement we could offer him in this God-forsaken spot.”

He glanced at Cecily.

“Well?” he broke out impatiently, after a moment. “You’ve no objection, I suppose? What’s the matter?”

She began to put on her rings, very slowly.

“Nothing’s the matter,” she said. “I was only thinking——”

“Yes? Thinking what?” he urged, moving irritably.

“How jealous you used to be of Dick Mayne.” She turned from the glass, and her eyes, for the first time, met her husband’s. He evaded their glance by springing up.

“Oh, my dear Cecily,” he began angrily. “What nonsense! I do *hate* this——” The deep sound of the gong downstairs cut him short.

“Please don’t let us discuss it now,” she said, and moved before him out of the room.

CHAPTER IV

THE evening had worn to an end—a really terrible evening for Rose, though both she and Cecily had talked and laughed with apparent ease. Cecily followed her cousin into her bedroom, lighted the candles, rearranged the curtains, was solicitous for her comfort, and, with a flow of light talk, kept her at a distance.

“Good-night, dear,” she said at last, kissing her hastily. “You must be dreadfully tired. Don’t be frightened if you hear a footstep on the stair in the small hours. Robert doesn’t generally come up till then. He writes so late.”

Mrs. Summers’ eyes questioned her mutely, but Cecily’s did not waver.

“Jane will bring your tea when you ring in the morning. Good-night. Sleep well.” She went out smiling, and as the door closed upon her Rose moved mechanically to the nearest chair and sat down. She felt dazed and stupid. Emotions had succeeded one another so rapidly in the past eight hours that the state of mind of which she was most acutely conscious was bewilderment. Through this confused sense, however, self-reproach pierced sharply. How like one of life’s practical jokes it was, to bring her thousands of miles over-sea to tell her best friend what any spiteful acquaintance in the village might have placed within her knowledge. Mrs. Summers looked round the pretty, peaceful room with a sense of oppression. Over the windows, the rose-patterned chintz curtains hung primly. She got up and pushed them aside, and then blew out the candles. A lovely night had succeeded the lovely day, and the garden was magical with moonlight. Sweet scents rose from it. Pools of shadow lay on the silvered grass. Deep and mysterious the great trees stood massed against the luminous sky.

Rose leaned against the window-frame, and let the silence and the peace quiet her thoughts, while she tried to realize the stranger she had found in the place of the old impulsive Cecily. It was the self-control that chilled and baffled her, even while she admired its exercise. Mentally she reviewed the evening, and found Cecily’s demeanor excellent. Her manner towards her husband had been perfectly friendly. A stranger seeing them together, she reflected, would have thought them on very good terms, though Robert might have been pronounced rather absent-minded and preoccupied. At the remembrance of Kingslake, Rose’s face darkened.

“She needn’t have taken so much trouble,” was her bitter reflection. “He wouldn’t have noticed even if she’d been disagreeable. His mind was elsewhere.”

To Rose, whose recollection of Robert was as a lover, so devoted that the only clear idea she had retained about his personality was that he loved Cecily,—to Rose, his present obvious indifference seemed a thing almost incredible. It brought to her, as nothing else since her home-coming had brought to her, the realization that five years is long—that the heart of life may be cut out with its passing.

Mrs. Summers felt her eyes dim with sudden tears. She was hurt at her friend’s reticence. The Cecily she knew had vanished, and with her, it seemed, she had taken

all youth, all keenness, all desire. In that moment of disappointment, Rose had a horrible premonition of age.

A tap at the door startled her. While she was hurrying towards it, across the moonlit room, it opened, and Cecily came in.

She was in a long, pale-colored Japanese wrapper, her hair all loose about her face. Standing there in the moonlight, she was the girl Mrs. Summers remembered, and with a revulsion of feeling too glad for words she took her by the arms and put her into an easy-chair near the window.

"It was so lovely, I blew out the candles," she began.

"Yes," murmured Cecily, absently. She leaned forward and touched her cousin's dress with trembling fingers. "It wasn't because I was horrid or anything that I didn't stay," she said, incoherently. "It was because I was afraid to begin. I'm afraid to let myself——" She put her hand on her breast with a gesture that, to Rose, was more eloquent than the broken sentence.

"Tell me, dear," she urged. "I would have bitten off my tongue rather than have said all I did to-day, but, apart from that, I can't help seeing that things are wrong with you. I felt it from the first moment. It made me nervous, I suppose, and so I babbled on like a fool about the first thing that came into my head."

"It doesn't matter," returned Cecily, in a weak voice. "It isn't that."

"Tell me," urged Rose again.

"It's difficult," she murmured, after a moment, "because there doesn't seem anything definite to tell. It's just *come* like this."

There was a silence through which Mrs. Summers waited patiently.

"Rose," she heard at last, "you saw Robert with me, before you went away. He seemed in love, didn't he?"

"I never saw any one quite so infatuated." Mrs. Summers' reply was emphatic.

"And now he speaks of me 'quite nicely.'... It seems strange, doesn't it?" She spoke very quietly, as though she were tired.

"I shall never forgive myself!" murmured Rose, turning her head away.

Cecily was roused. "Don't worry about that!" she exclaimed. "It's almost a relief to know that there's something definite—that it's not only just boredom—with me." Before Rose could speak, she added, hastily, as though with a determination to get out the words, "Do you know he's invited Dick Mayne to stay here?"

Rose's dress rustled with her quick movement of surprise. "*He!* Invited Dick Mayne?" she echoed.

"Yes—Dick Mayne—to amuse me," replied Cecily. In the moonlight Rose saw the bitter little smile on her lips.

"But surely he remembers—why, he used to be as jealous as——"

"Hush!" exclaimed Cecily, with a mockery at which her friend winced. "Jealousy is a vulgar passion!"

"Don't!" murmured Mrs. Summers, vaguely.

"No," returned Cecily, after a moment. "Because I suppose there's a good deal to be said for Robert. I didn't understand the game. I didn't understand men a bit when I married, Rose, though I knew so many. And I was no baby either. I was five-and-twenty."

"One can be very much of a baby at five-and-twenty," observed Mrs. Summers.

"You see, when we married," Cecily went on, in the same even voice, "Robert wanted me all to himself. He was quite unreasonable about it. He was hurt because I urged that we should live in town.... I tried to have some common-sense. I tried to look ahead—for both of us. I knew in my heart it would be bad for him—for any man—to have no circle, to drop out of things. But he wouldn't see it. We needed only one another, he said. So I gave in at last, and we settled down here. And naturally we dropped out of all the town set. You know how easily one can do that, especially when there's very little money. And we had very little indeed at first."

Rose nodded. "I know," she said.

"At first, of course, for the first year or more perhaps, it was Paradise. I needn't bore you with all that.... Then at the end of the second year, baby came ... and I was awfully happy. Perhaps even then Robert was beginning to be bored—I don't know. I was too happy to suspect it." There was a long pause. As she talked, Cecily had drawn herself into the shadow, so that her face was hidden; when she spoke again her voice was almost inaudible.

"She was a sweet baby, Rose.... Her hair...." She checked herself abruptly, with a half sob. Mrs. Summers' hand touched hers. She knew the whole bitterness of the tragedy. Cecily's life had been in danger at the birth of her little girl, and later she had written that this would be her only child.

"I got very ugly after that," she went on at last. "I fretted so. I couldn't help it. I must have been very dull then. I dare say I didn't amuse Robert."

Mrs. Summers made an impatient exclamation.

"Ah, but it was a mistake!" cried Cecily; "men expect to be amused. If we want to keep them we must work hard.... And then when I did try to pull myself together and be cheerful, it was too late. Nothing I did pleased him. If I put on a pretty frock he never noticed. If I tried to talk in my old way—I used to be quite amusing once, wasn't I, Rose?" She broke off with a pathetic little laugh. "When I fooled, you know, he was irritated, and asked me what on earth I was driving at. He would never let me talk about his work. He said it annoyed him to have it 'pawed over.'" She stopped short, and Rose felt her trembling. "I can't tell you all of it," she whispered. "It hurts too much."

Mrs. Summers waited a few moments.

"And lately he has begun to talk about the necessity for friendships," she began, in a voice purposely hard and matter of fact.

"Yes," she continued, "while you were telling me about that girl and her theories it all sounded so familiar."

"She has adopted your husband's theories, you think?"

Cecily shook her head with a faint smile.

"No. He has adopted hers. It's a new phase with Robert. That's why I've been suspecting a fresh influence lately." She hesitated. "Robert's like that," she said at last. "He's susceptible to every new impression. He reflects everything that——" She paused. "It's the same with his work," she went on. "He is always under some fresh influence. Lately it's been swashbuckling. He's made money out of that."

"Why, his work used to be psychological!" exclaimed Rose. "Minute analysis and hair-splitting distinctions!"

"I know. That was one of the phases. There have been many masters since then. And now, I suppose, there will be as many—mistresses."

She spoke with a quiet irony, more painful than any display of grief. It was the tone of a woman already so disillusioned that a fact more or less made comparatively little difference.

"Cecily," ventured Mrs. Summers, almost timidly, "there may be nothing wrong."

Cecily made a weary movement. "Do you know, that seems of little importance. It's the other things that count, and when they've gone——" She did not finish the sentence. Outside, the garden, all vaporous, blue and silver, was like a vision. Softly, quite softly at first, a nightingale began to sing, each note falling like a drop of crystal water through the blue air. Both women were motionless till the song ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

"How beautiful!" murmured Rose.

"I shall miss this garden," said Cecily, suddenly. "I have worked in it for three years. Every woman ought to have a garden—then at least she gets *some* of the roses of life. Are *you* happy?" she added, almost in the same breath, with startling abruptness.

Mrs. Summers hesitated. "Yes," she returned, finally, "in a placid way—yes. But then, I'm a practical woman. I always left the stars out of my calculations, didn't I? Jack and I suited each other. We have continued to suit each other. I never expected him to be the lover of romance. Poor dear! he's not at all made for the part. But he wears well, you know, Cis. And," her voice softened, "I have the babies."

Cecily was silent. "Yours is the sane view of life," she said at last.

"I know; though in moods, fortunately rare, I would exchange it for an *insane* one," returned Mrs. Summers, with a laugh. "Though I leave the stars out, I don't forget they are there."

"I wonder?" returned Cecily.

"Are you going to say anything about this to your husband?" asked Mrs. Summers, with apparent irrelevance.

"No," said Cecily, briefly.

"And Mayne? Are you going to have him down here?"

“Yes. Why not? If Robert wishes it, how can I object? I shall be very glad to see Dick again,” she added.

“Is it wise?”

“That’s Robert’s affair.”

“I was thinking of Dick.”

“That’s *his* affair. He had my answer long ago, and he knows I meant it. Besides,” she smiled a little, “don’t worry—I’ve lost my looks.”

“Dick is not that sort.”

“Every man is that sort.”

Mrs. Summers glanced at her, as she sat with the little mocking smile still on her lips.

“O Cis, dear,” she murmured, deprecatingly.

Cecily got up. “I must go,” she said; “I’m wearing you out.”

Mrs. Summers also rose. With a sudden movement she drew her friend into her arms. For a moment Cecily resisted. Then to the elder woman’s relief she broke into a passion of tears.

“I’ve been so wretched, Rose,” she whispered, incoherently. “He was everything to me. All the world! And now he goes to another woman, and tells her all the things that he used—and says all the words that—— Oh, what’s the good of talking!” she wailed. “It’s all over and done with. He doesn’t care any more. And I suppose he can’t help it. Sometimes I think I don’t care either. And then, all at once——”

It was the old wail, the woman’s plaint, eternal as the hills, ever recurring as the wind and the rains recur; as monotonous as they.

CHAPTER V

IT was Lady Wilmot's at-home day, but so early in the afternoon that she could still indulge in the *tête-à-tête* gossip with the friend who had lunched with her, a branch of her life's occupation in which she excelled.

She was a woman who supported well her fifty-five years. A little portly, her gray crinkled hair arranged *à la Marquise*, her ample skirts further suggesting the era of powder and patches, her bright eyes full of rather malicious humor, Lady Wilmot was a somewhat striking figure. That she was more feared than loved probably flattered the vanity which was not the least of her characteristics. The circumstance certainly did not affect her. Possessed of an income sufficiently large to make the exercise of life's amenities a matter of inclination rather than of necessity, her inclination was naturally capricious, and she not infrequently smiled to hear herself described with a nervous laugh as "so delightfully uncommon."

"Uncommon rude, my dear," had been her reply in one instance, "as you would have discovered if I had happened to be Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Smith, or Mrs. Robinson."

As it was, Lady Wilmot's parties were attended by as heterogeneous a throng as any private house in London. In search of possible amusement, she cast her net wide, and, in company with men and women of her own sort, drew into the Onslow Square drawing-room, journalists who wrote fashion articles, novelists who went into many editions, painters whose imposing canvases appeared every year on the sacred walls of the Academy, as well as those who worked in Chelsea garrets. Then there were the faddists.

"I have the best collection in London," Lady Wilmot was wont to boast. "I have several excellent antique Vegetarians, a very good color, considering; a complete set of Mystics, only slightly cracked; any number of women athletes in a fairly good state of preservation, as well as one or two interesting oddments."

Lady Wilmot's present guest was her niece, a sharp-faced little woman, who for two or three years had been living quietly in the country on account of her health. This fact at least was stimulating. It meant arrears of gossip to be retailed respecting the life-history of their common acquaintances, and since half-past one Lady Wilmot's tongue had not been idle.

The doings of the immediate family lasted through a protracted and hilarious lunch, and when, somewhat maimed and damaged, its members had been dismissed, there still remained the concentric circles of acquaintances. Lady Wilmot began at the inner rings.

"You know Rose Summers is home?" she said, settling the fat cushions at her back with a view to lengthy comfort. "No, dear, *without* her gaby of a husband. She's left him out there to get into mischief. Oh, yes, my dear, he's not too great a fool for that. None of them are. Did you never meet Jack Summers? A huge imbecile, you know. Over life-size, all body and no brains. The ideal man for a soldier."

“Rose had enough brains for two,” returned Mrs. Carruthers.

“Yes, but no looks. Most unfortunate arrangement for a woman. She has to marry a man stupid enough not to know she’s got them. She’s staying with Cecily Kingslake.”

“Oh, tell me about the Kingslakes,” asked Mrs. Carruthers, with interest. “They were just married the last time I met them. I used to think Cecily so pretty. *What* a mistake to make such a poor match!”

“You should see her now,” returned Lady Wilmot, composedly.

“Gone off?”

“Gone under. Buried beneath honeysuckle and green stuff. The worst of love in a cottage is that love doesn’t last, and the cottage does.”

“But I thought Robert was getting on? Some one was talking about his last book the other day, and saying——”

“Yes, quite lately he’s been making money. There was always a popular streak in Robert which only needed working. Some woman’s shown him where it lies, and he’s got it in full swing now, so the guineas are beginning to roll in.”

“Why some woman?”

Lady Wilmot chuckled. “Don’t you know our Robert? A clever woman laughs when she sees him coming.”

“Susceptible?”

“That’s putting it mildly. All men can take flattery in gigantic doses. Robert lives on it entirely. He dined here last night. Incidentally he ate his dinner, but his true meal was provided by the girl he took down, who flung at him *pounds* of the best butter,—solid pounds. I blushed for her and trembled for him, but I might have spared myself the trouble. She’s too clever, and he has too good a digestion.”

“Didn’t his wife come?”

“No. He comes up to town ‘to read,’ if one may believe him. And I happened to have asked Philippa Burton and young Nevern in to dine last night—not a dinner-party—so I invited Robert too.”

“Perhaps she’s the lady who inspires the new style of writing?” observed Mrs. Carruthers, building better than she knew.

“She’s quite capable of it,” returned Lady Wilmot, “but they only met last night. She has designs on Nevern, I think, temporarily abandoned for Robert. She’s coming this afternoon, by the way.” Lady Wilmot laughed again. “I asked her on purpose to meet Dick Mayne. I thought they’d be so quaint together.”

“Why?” inquired her niece.

“You haven’t seen Philippa? She’s one of the most interesting objects in my collection.”

“Where did you find her?”

“Don’t you remember Major Burton, that seedy-looking man at Cheltenham? Retired, you know, on half-pay. Used to be in your father’s regiment. Well, she’s his

daughter. He died some five or six years ago, leaving her next to nothing, and now she potters about. You know the sort of thing such girls do; tinkering with copper, messing about with furnaces to make enamel hat-pins, designing horrible, bleak-looking furniture, and so on.”

“Does she get a living at that?”

“My dear, don’t ask me to probe the mysteries of a woman’s income,” exclaimed her hostess with a laugh. “She’s pretty, and evidently she finds sandals and mystic gowns useful. When a woman’s not sufficiently original to get money or notoriety by her brains, she often achieves both through her fads. Philippa is one of those young women who will always be ‘taken up’ by some one. Silly spinsters of uncertain age have a habit of doing it. She’s just been living with one of them who adored her—thought her a transcendent genius instead of a clever little humbug. Now the smash has come. If you mention Miss Wetherby to Philippa, she looks pained and sighs: ‘It is so sad to lose one’s illusions. Miss Wetherby is not *quite* the fine⁹ woman I thought her.’ What Miss Wetherby says about Philippa, I don’t know—I’m not acquainted with the lady—but I can guess. There used to be a man about. What’s become of him now I don’t know. Another illusion gone, possibly. Philippa’s mysterious in more ways than one. But there, my dear, what does it matter? If you begin to be moral, you lose half the fun of life. I’m strictly *unmoral* on principle—*unmoral*’s such a good word, isn’t it? Anyhow I’m looking forward to the meeting between Philippa and Dick Mayne. He doesn’t know the type, and she’ll embarrass him so beautifully. I hope she’ll try to flirt with him. I think I shall scream with joy if she does. It will be too funny.”

“You know Mr. Mayne is going to stay with the Kingslakes?” gasped Mrs. Carruthers, placing edgeways with difficulty her little contribution to “the news.”

“*No!*” It was a piece of information that had hitherto escaped her aunt, whose manner of receiving it caused Mrs. Carruthers to bridle with importance.

“Yes, I happened to meet him yesterday at the Vezey’s, and he told me so. Why shouldn’t he?”

“Why, you know how desperately in love he was with Cecily.”

“But that was years ago.”

“When they were engaged? Yes. My dear, if you’d heard Robert’s ravings at the time! Heavens! how funny it was! He and Cecily nearly came to grief over it, because Cecily said Mayne was an old friend, and she couldn’t refuse to see him, which was, I believe, what the lunatic wanted her to promise. Robert’s my godson, and he’s good-looking enough to make me quite fond of him, but he’s a heaven-born fool for all that. Have you ever heard his rhetoric when he’s excited? You should. It’s worthy of a successful melodrama. He used to do the romantic hero-in-love to perfection. His feeling for Cecily was such that it was a profanation for any other man to touch her hand, and did I think a woman who allowed a rejected suitor to have tea in the same drawing-room with her, *could* possess that burning, white-souled

adoration for her affianced husband which he required from the woman who was to bear his name? I offered him the impossible advice of not being a fool, and Mayne went away to catch tigers and fevers—and the public ear.”

“Yes, he’s done that,” returned Mrs. Carruthers. “He’s quite a great man now—the papers are full of him.”

“Mr. Mayne,” announced the footman at the door.

“We were talking about you,” said Lady Wilmot, rising graciously.

“I was unconscious of my danger,” returned Mayne, with an audacious smile which met its friendly response. Mayne was, with Lady Wilmot, a privileged person, chiefly because he took her maliciousness for granted.

“You’ve grown,” she remarked, regarding with critical attention his bronzed face and tall, well-knit figure.

“What did you expect? I was but a lad of thirty when I left you.” He had shaken hands with Mrs. Carruthers, and seated himself on the end of a divan by this time—very much at his ease.

“You’re much better looking,” was Lady Wilmot’s next comment.

“I can bear it,” he returned, imperturbably. “If I say *you* haven’t altered at all it’s the best compliment I can pay you.”

“I will ignore its lack of truthfulness, and give you some tea,” she said, crossing to the tea-table. “Are you going to read any more papers this time? Why didn’t you come to see me when you were home two years ago?”

“Because, dear lady, *you* were abroad.”

“Was I? So I was. Who did you see then? Did you see the Kingslakes?” She shot a glance at him as he rose to take the cup she offered, but his face was immovable.

“I didn’t see any one. After reading an exceedingly dull paper before the Royal Society, I fled to the shelter of the paternal roof in Ireland, desperately ashamed of myself.”

“You don’t want me to ask you about your travels and explorings, do you? It would bore me a great deal to hear them. Sugar?”

“Thanks, no. Not half so much, I’m sure, as it would bore me to tell them. I came to hear all the latest scandal. Won’t you begin before the actors arrive?”

“Miss Burton,” said the man at the door.

“Too late!” ejaculated Lady Wilmot, as she went forward to meet her new guest.

“Ah, how do you do, Philippa, my dear? Did you bring an escort of police?—or is the untutored savage getting used to sandals? My dear, where will your hair stop? You look like Mélisande. Can’t you throw some of it out of the window? Mr. Mayne will run down and climb up. He’s used to athletic exercises. By the way, Mr. Mayne—Miss Burton. Now you can go and talk lions and things. He’s an explorer,

you know. Here's Mr. Nevern. He'll have to put up with me. How do you do, Mr. Nevern?"

During these somewhat incoherent remarks Miss Burton had adopted the simple expedient of doing nothing, and, as Mayne was constrained to admit, doing it rather well.

She stood with a faint, dreamy smile just touching her lips, and waited till there was an opportunity of offering her hand to Mayne. This she did with a slow movement, according to the state of mind of its recipient, subtly graceful, or somewhat affected. Rather characteristically Mayne inclined to the least flattering of these strictures. He did not like "that kind of thing," even though in this instance it was the act of a woman by many people considered beautiful.

Philippa Burton's tall figure was of the sinuous type, and she clothed it in trailing garments, cut on the latest hygienic principle, combining conspicuousness with impracticability. The robe she now wore was of some coarse white material, a little soiled at the hem where it trailed, and a little too low at the neck, where several necklaces of beads were wound about a full white throat. Her hat, of that peculiar make which flies from the head, and is restrained by ribbons tied under the ear, revealed, rather than covered, quantities of dark, rippling hair of the Rossetti texture.

Her dark eyes, full of a cultivated mystery, very effectively lit a pale face, whose excessive spirituality was redeemed by full red lips.

"You are *the* Mr. Mayne?" she began, with an elusive smile. "I read your travel-book. It is wonderful. A book that sets the blood racing in one's veins. *You* are one of the strong men. I worship strength in men."

Mayne felt uncomfortable. He had been out of the civilized world for some time, and was new to the fashion of emotional conversation in drawing-rooms and omnibuses.

"Oh—my little book!" he answered, carelessly. "I can't write a bit, you know. It was awful stuff. At least, the way it was put together. The material was all right."

"But indeed you do yourself injustice," Philippa returned, in her peculiar low voice, as always, surcharged with feeling. "Mr. Kingslake was saying only the other night how wonderfully vivid is your style. So much color—so much——"

"You know Robert Kingslake?" interrupted Mayne, with interest.

"We met here the other night, at dinner," she said, fixing her wonderful eyes upon his face in an abstracted way. "What a charming man! He has a beautiful soul, I'm sure. There is poetry in his work, idealism——"

"He's made a lot of money over this last novel of his," remarked Mayne, a little brutally.

"Yes. Doesn't that *show* that the world is waiting for a message? The poor sad world that longs to be shown the beauty it is missing."

"I hadn't noticed it," returned Mayne. "But then I haven't seen much of the paying world lately."

“One must have faith,” said Philippa, softly. “The faith that removes mountains.”

“And brings in the shekels,” laughed Mayne. “Kingslake’s has been justified, anyway. I’m going down there next week,” he added, for the sake of changing the rarefied atmosphere of the conversation. “To Sheepcote, you know, with the Kingslakes.”

“Yes, so Mr. Macdonald told me—Mr. Kingslake, I mean. I knew his work first through his *nom de guerre*, and I can scarcely think of him yet as Mr. Kingslake. We shall meet again, then,” she went on. “I’m going to Sheepcote too.”

“What’s that?” asked Lady Wilmot, who, as Mayne rightly surmised, had been keeping one amused ear upon the conversation, while she failed to listen to Mr. Nevorn with the other. “What’s that? *You* going down to Sheepcote, Philippa? What for?”

“So strange!” returned Philippa, absolutely undisconcerted by the brusque impertinence of the question, and she recounted the information she had written to Cecily. “And do you know, dear Lady Wilmot, that I went to school with Mrs. Kingslake—Cecily Merivale? Wasn’t it a charming discovery to make? I’m longing to meet her again. Dear Cecily! I haven’t seen her since she was about seventeen. She was *so* pretty.”

“Well, if it’s her looks you care about, you’ll be disappointed. She’s lost them. I’ve no patience with a woman who loses her looks. It’s so careless.”

“But, dear Lady Wilmot,” began Philippa, with a tender smile, “after all, do looks matter?”

“Don’t be a humbug, my dear. You know they do,” returned her hostess with finality.

Mayne rose. “Don’t go, I haven’t spoken to you,” Lady Wilmot commanded. “Now, Mr. Nevorn, you can talk to Philippa. So you are going to stay with the Kingslakes?”

“Kingslake asked me to go down—yes.”

“I thought you and he were not the best of friends?”

Mayne shrugged his shoulders with a smile. “I have no recollection of any quarrel.”

“*Quarrel?* No, but——” She paused. It was difficult even for Lady Wilmot to continue, before the impassivity of his face.

“I’m sorry Cecily is not looking well,” he said, deliberately mentioning the name he knew trembled on her tongue. “Diana told me. I went to see her yesterday. *Diana’s* grown,” he added, with a broad smile.

“Grown up. How do you like Philippa?” she inquired, in a slightly lower tone, as she walked with him to the door.

“There are questions of yours which I have always resolutely refused to answer.”

Lady Wilmot laughed with evident enjoyment.

“You felt what a little boy feels when some one sings a hymn in the drawing-room on 8 week-days,” she declared. “Turn round. She’s telling Nevern what a beautiful soul he’s got.”

Involuntarily, Mayne followed the direction of her eyes. Mr. Nevern, a round-faced young poet, was leaning towards Miss Burton, and regarding her with an expression in which flattered vanity struggled with boyish admiration, and it was with difficulty that Mayne checked the laugh his hostess had been anxious to provoke.

“Good-bye,” he said. “I meant what I told you. You haven’t altered a bit—in any way.”

CHAPTER VI

ROSE SUMMERS had gone, and during the week which separated her departure from Mayne's expected visit, Cecily spent the long solitary days in the garden. Early every morning Robert cycled to the station. There was always a little fuss and confusion before he started. Robert was more helpless than most men. He could never find anything. His cigarette-case was lost, and when it was discovered by Cecily under a heap of papers in his study, there were no cigarettes left. She must open a fresh box; she must run to find his notes without which he could not get on at the Museum. Always, since their marriage, Cecily had been at hand to perform these little services, which had gradually become a matter of habit to both of them.

For the last few days, however, as she ran from the dining-room to the study, and from the study to the flagged courtyard, where Robert was feverishly busy at the last moment, adjusting bicycle screws, and blowing up tires, Cecily's mind was active. She thought of early days, and of the joy of discovering that Robert was such a child, needing so much care, and, in little things, so dependent upon her. She remembered his kisses, his words of extravagant praise when she found one of the many things he had lost, the brightening of his eyes when he saw her running downstairs.

To-day, just as he was started, she had found a note-book he had evidently intended to take, lying on the hall table, and she had dashed out with it. He had travelled a few paces down the lane when she called to him, and with an irritable exclamation he had dismounted and returned, wheeling his bicycle with one hand, and reaching for the book with the other.

"It didn't matter," he muttered, and absent-mindedly took the book without thanks, and rode off.

Cecily stood leaning upon the gate, watching his retreating figure. Presently her lips parted in a bitter smile. "No. It didn't matter. He won't use notes to-day," she thought, and quietly retraced her steps up the flagged path, through the hall, and out into the garden.

She went at once to her favorite seat under the beech tree and sat down. For the last few days she had done this almost mechanically. It seemed impossible to do anything else. She idly sat there with a book on her lap, and let thoughts sweep through her mind. Thoughts and memories—memories of past caresses, of intimate talks, when she and Robert had been really one; when to disassociate her mind from Robert's would have seemed an absurdity at which to smile. She and Robert had been *like that*—she could not even to herself phrase it otherwise. And it was possible that he could forget, ignore, wipe it all out, and begin again with some one else; begin the same dear words, the same intimacies, convey to this other woman the same belief that it was she, she, out of all the world, who *mattered*, who meant the heart of life to him?

Though the process of disillusion, of the overshadowing of her happiness, had been a gradual one, this fresh knowledge had the effect of reviving with intolerable poignancy the memory of the early sunshine, the early sense of being blessed above all women. It placed that memory in bitter contrast to her outlook of to-day.

“Fool that I was!” she whispered, drawing in her breath with a spasm of physical pain. “What a fool!” Her partly realized thoughts ran on, ran high, like tumultuous waves. “It’s a common experience. Why should I escape? Men are like that. I knew it theoretically. Why should I have thought that Robert——” And then would come the impotent rush of protest and despair. It was just that! He was *Robert*, and mad, childish, futile as it was, it was just that which made the truth impossible.

She looked round her. The sunshine on the grass was hateful, the warm blue sky an insult. All beauty was a lie, a meaningless, soulless lie, like the love of men and women, which held no faith, no steadfastness, no pity even.

She thought of her five years of married life. Five years of self-immolation in which she had known no desires, no ambitions, no joys except through the desires, the ambitions, the joys of her husband. “All wasted, all no good,—no good,” she wailed unconsciously in her misery, saying the words half aloud. She sprang to her feet, and began to pace restlessly to and fro between the borders of flowers she had planted and tended. The sight of them reminded her of how they had come into their existence. She remembered how she had fought to still some of her first heartaches with the planting of these lilies, the pruning of that rose-bush. It had been a relief to work hard, manually, while she hoped that the old glamour would return and once more descend upon their lives. Now the roses mocked her with their glowing, passionate faces.

“What shall I do? What shall I do?” Over and over again the despairing question welled up into her mind.

It was out of these long blue summer days, which for her held nothing but chaotic memories, rebellious and hopeless thought, that self-condemnation and a resolve grew slowly in Cecily’s mind. She had been wrong, wrong so to sink her individuality. It had been one of those mistakes for which one suffers more than for one’s sins. She had been lacking in self-respect. It was time she found herself again—a miserable, shattered, helpless self, it was true, but a self for all that. From the outset she had dismissed the idea of telling her husband of Rose’s unconscious revelation. With a sick prevision she had imagined the whole scene, heard his “reasons” for not having told her of a “perfectly harmless friendship.”... Women were so deplorably jealous; they could not take large views; they refused to believe in ennobling companionships; they deliberately stunted their spiritual growth by attributing base motives.... There was no need to sketch out further the inevitable line of defence. She knew Robert’s powers of rhetoric, she knew now whence came the influence which had lately directed its nature, and with a weary sigh she recognized the futility of provoking a discussion. It would be enough to take the step she intended, without

assigning any specific reason. "Diana is coming to-morrow," she reflected. "It must be settled between us before she comes."

She was in the garden that evening in her usual seat, when she saw her husband coming towards her across the grass. Her hands grew suddenly cold, and a nervous trembling seized her. More than anything she dreaded the possibility of a scene with Robert; exhortations, counsels of perfection, all the dialectical machinery he would bring to bear to prove the unreasonableness of her attitude—to put her in the wrong.

"And the mere fact that it's come to be a matter of reason means that, from my point of view, there's nothing further to be said." So she mentally opposed the forthcoming argument while she watched his approach. He came slowly, his hands in his pockets, his eyes absent-mindedly fixed upon the grass. A half smile was on his lips. Bitterness rose and swelled like a flood in his wife's heart. Her trembling ceased. How transparent he was! He was like a child. For a moment contempt, a woman's contempt for unsuccessful concealment, was her predominant emotion.

"How much better I could do it!" was her mocking comment.

He sank into a basket-chair near the tea-table, and absently took the cup she offered him.

"Have you had a tiring day?" Cecily asked, picking up some needlework.

For a moment he did not reply. Evidently the sense of her question had not yet reached his preoccupied brain.

"Tiring?" he repeated at last, with a start. "Oh, yes. But I've nearly come to the end of it, thank goodness. I sha'n't go up after to-morrow."

"I've taken Mrs. Taylor's rooms for Philippa Burton," pursued Cecily after a moment, working steadily.

"Oh! Let me see, when does she come?" She could have smiled at the quick turn of his head, and the carelessness of his voice. "Decent rooms?" he went on, dropping lumps of sugar into his tea.

"Very nice, I think. That sugar will begin to show at the top if you don't stop." Robert flushed, and dropped the sugar-tongs with a clatter.

"I've heard from Diana. She's coming to-morrow."

Robert leaned back in his chair, frowning, and felt for his cigarette-case. "I can't think why you asked Diana," he observed, irritably, "with Mayne coming, and—Miss Burton. She'll expect to be asked up to dinner and things, I suppose. It'll make a lot of work for the servants."

"You are very considerate—for the servants."

He moved restlessly and glanced at her, as he lighted his cigarette.

"Well, you know best, of course," he began.

"Robert," said Cecily, suddenly, "there's something I want to say. And I want to say it before Diana comes, so that we—we may understand each other, and things may go smoothly—as I want them to go."

His start of apprehension was not lost upon her. It had the effect of making her want to scream with laughter, and she tightened her grasp on the arm of her chair and went on quickly.

“We’ve been coming to this for a long time. Let us speak frankly this once, and afterwards let the matter alone. All that you’ve been saying lately, about the wider scope and broader interests necessary for your intellectual growth is just another way of explaining that you’re bored with me.”

“Now, my dear girl!” ejaculated Robert, relief making his tone almost jocular.

“No, please, Robert, let me finish. I’m not complaining, you understand, or pleading, or doing anything futile of that sort. I’m merely stating the fact—and accepting it. I want to do what I can, to—to make things more interesting for you. All this summer we shall have visitors. In the autumn, when we go to town, it should not be difficult to see very little of one another. But we needn’t wait for that. Let us be free now. I mean, let us give up pretending to be lovers. We shall then, perhaps, be better friends.”

For a moment before he began to speak he looked at her uncertainly. Then he broke into the torrent of speech she had dreaded.

8Wasn’t it time to take a broader outlook? Why did she resent any attempt on his part to widen the horizon of their married life? What had he done to be treated in this fashion?... But, of course, if she wished this state of things, so let it be. He could not coerce her. He respected her rights as an individual. That was, in fact, his whole philosophy of existence,—individual freedom, individual liberty, the expression of oneself....

“I regret it, of course, but if you wish it, that is enough. It is your doing, remember—entirely yours. If you choose to put your own interpretation upon views of life which, in all sincerity, for our mutual benefit I have tried to make you share, I have nothing to say. Must a man necessarily be bored with his wife because he wishes a wider outlook for her, as well as for himself?” He paused indignantly on the question.

Cecily took up her embroidery. “Not necessarily, perhaps,” she said, “though he generally is. But need we say any more, Robert? The thing is settled, isn’t it?”

“By you, remember,” returned Robert, “in utter unreason, in——”

“Never mind how, so long as it *is* settled,” murmured Cecily.

9He rose, and walked away, while mechanically with a sort of feverish haste, Cecily went on working. His words rang in her ears, false and insincere. His eyes had spoken truth, and in them she had read relief. In the beech tree, above her head, a thrush began to sing. Cecily listened to the first low, passionate notes, then letting her work fall into a heap on the grass, she sprang to her feet and hurried blindly towards the house, and the shelter of her own room. There she crouched against the bed, and drew the counterpane up till it covered her ears.

CHAPTER VII

DIANA came next day, and with her, brought the atmosphere of gay irrepressibleness that belongs to extreme youth. Diana was seventeen. She wore her hair tied, as she expressed it, with a “cat-bow,” and something in the poise of her head, and the shining in her greenish eyes, recalled an alert, half-grown kitten.

She was no beauty, though she carried her head well, and in her slim body, straight as a reed, there was the promise of a figure that would not disgrace the goddess whose name she bore. She laughed a great deal, she chattered more; she was utterly irreverent, and Cecily was glad to have her in the silent house.

“How is Archie?” she inquired in a pause of the conversation carried on during the process of Diana’s unpacking. “Do you hear from him now? Where is he?”

“In Florida. Oh, yes, often; he’s a faithful hound, you know. Prides himself on it. How do you like this blouse?” She shook it out before her sister. “I look perfectly vile in it. But then, I’m such a hideous monkey. Have you noticed that I’m exactly like a monkey, Cis? Look at my monkey eyes!” She sat on the floor and gave a startling imitation of the animal in question.

“Yes, but Archie?” questioned Cecily again, when she had recovered her gravity. “Doesn’t he consider himself engaged to you?”

“He may,” returned Diana, calmly. “I don’t. Where are my silk stockings? I don’t like faithful hounds. And I don’t like matrimony—for women, you know. It’s all right for men. Fancy having to ‘manage’ them, and to pretend to think such an awful lot of them. It’s *degrading*! I want to show you my sunshade. Isn’t it a sweet color?”

“Oh,” observed Cecily, “is *that* where you are? Is it the higher education of man you demand?”

“No!” returned Diana, airily. “I don’t care twopence about their education, or whether they ever get any. I just don’t consider them at all.”

“What a counsel of perfection!” exclaimed Cecily. “Go on, Diana. I’m interested. You’re a philosopher. What is the conclusion of the whole matter?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” returned Diana, absently wreathing a nightdress round her neck, while she tilted a hat over her eyes at an absurd angle before the glass. “There’s such a lot of things to do. You can play games, and read books, and go about and see jolly things abroad, and watch people, and see how funny they are. They are just *madly* funny, aren’t they? There was a woman in the train who sat and looked like this at her husband because he’d tipped a porter too much.” Her face twisted into a ludicrous expression of contemptuous indignation, and resumed its normal contours in the space of a lightning flash. “Oh! and Uncle Henry gets funnier every day; like an infuriated blue-bottle. ‘Pon my soul, you women! What you’d do without a sensible man in the house! *Pom! pom! pom!*’—you know.” She took two or three steps before the glass, strutting with puffed-out cheeks, and Uncle Henry rose before Cecily’s mental vision. “Well, there are always people, so it’s easy to be amused. Only you

must never care too much about any one, because if you do, you can't be amused at anything any more, and that's silly."

The laughter died out of Cecily's eyes. "Where did you get that, Diana?" she asked. "It isn't bad."

But Diana's versatile mind was off on a fresh tack. "I'm glad Dick's coming," she said. "He seems jolly, and Robert's such a grumpus. Why do you let him grump, Cis? Just fancy, I was only twelve when Dick went away. What ages we've known him, haven't we? How did we get to know him first? I forget."

"Frank brought him to Carmarthen Terrace, you know. He was an Oxford friend of his. Yes, it was ages ago. I was only a little older than you when he first came."

"Was he in love with you?" asked Diana, calmly. She had divested herself of the hat and nightdress by this time, and was beginning to brush her hair.

"Little girls shouldn't ask impertinent questions," returned Cecily, looking out of the window.

"Oh, then he was!" pursued Diana, quite unruffled. "How exciting for you! Of course you'll put on your best frock this evening, won't you? People always do when their lovers come back after many years."

"And what about Robert?" inquired Cecily, with a curious smile.

"Well, what's the good of putting on a pretty frock for him?" Diana retorted. "He's grown exactly like a very old grand-papa." She put on an imaginary pair of spectacles, and peered about in a short-sighted way. "Frocks, my dear, what nonsense! I'm past all that sort of thing."

Cecily winced a little; then she laughed. "Robert will box your ears one of these days."

"I wish he would. It would be a sign of life. What a pity it is," she went on, tying the "cat-bow" reflectively, "that we can't have five or six husbands, isn't it, Cis? Oh, I don't mean all at once, but one after the other, as the old ones get bored."

"Do you scatter these views broadcast, may I ask?" Cecily observed, looking up from her chair near the dressing-table.

"They're not views exactly," returned Diana, airily. "They're facts. The old ones *do* get bored, don't they? I've noticed that no husband goes on being a turtle-dove very long. Gets tired of the same dove, I suppose."

"Our marriage laws make no provision for a change of doves, you see."

"Oh, I know," said Diana, cheerfully. "Men made them, so they're sure to be silly. I wish you'd think of another way of doing my hair, Cis. I look like 'Cheerful Caroline, or Good Temper Rewarded,' with this imbecile bow. Aren't you awfully dull all day, Cis, with Robert away at that stupid old British Museum?" The question, which followed hard on her foregoing remarks, was called forth involuntarily as she glanced at her sister.

"He's not going any more. He's finished all the research part for his novel, and now he's going to work at home."

"Perhaps it's researching that's made him so deadly dull lately," observed Diana, with her habitual candor.

"On the contrary, it has been very interesting work," Cecily returned, with an unmoved expression.

"Who's the girl who's coming to stay in the village?" Diana went on, as she fastened her simple white china silk blouse. "What's her name? Philippa? Edward III, thirteen something or other, married Philippa of some place; she sounds like a history-book."

"She *is* rather like a history-book, now you mention it," returned Cecily, half smiling. "Contemporary history. I used to go to school with her. Robert met her the other day in town."

"Oh, well, if she's like a history-book she'll get on with Robert. And then you and I and Dick can play together and have a good time. *Do* put on a nice frock, Cis, and make yourself look pretty. Your frocks aren't half so nice as they used to be, and I think you ought to go away to the seaside or somewhere. It does one such a lot of good. *I* looked awful till I went to Folkestone this year. And now see how brown I am!"

Cecily rose. Taking Diana's head between her hands, she kissed her babyish forehead with a laugh.

"I must go and change," she said. "They'll be here in a minute. They were to meet at Waterloo and come down together."

Before the glass in her own room Cecily paused. "Make yourself look pretty," Diana had said. She smiled a little bitterly at what the remark implied, and then with a shrug of the shoulders turned to her wardrobe. A gown she had worn at a recent wedding, and since put away, lay folded in its box on one of the shelves. She took it out and laid it on the bed. Dick had always liked her frocks. "He won't think much of me in them nowadays," she reflected, with another glance at the mirror. Nevertheless she dressed carefully, and thanks to that very present help in the concerns of women, Mayne's first thought, as he met her in the hall, was that Lady Wilmot had not increased in good-nature.

"Why, Dick," she laughed, unconsciously echoing the lady who had occurred to his mind, "you've grown!"

She gave him her hand warmly. It was surprising how glad she felt to see Dick again, and quite surprising how the glance he bestowed upon her increased her pleasure in the meeting. The old admiration was in his eyes, and on a sudden some of her old self, the self she had thought long dead, stirred faintly. It was the first tribute of the sort she had received of late, and she was amazed to find it sweet. Dinner, thanks to Diana, was not lacking in sprightliness, and, as far as Cecily was concerned, in incident. As well as resentment for her sister in a situation which she recognized as

unhappy, and for which she not unnaturally attributed the blame to her brother-in-law, Diana cherished against him a personal⁸ grievance. In old childish days she had been a great favorite with Robert, who had teased and petted her in brotherly fashion. Now his “grumpiness,” growing, as Diana sharpened the arrows of her tongue, had extended to her, and her revenge was a perpetual system of teasing which was not without malice.

“Been a busy little lad to-day, Robert, I trust?” she began, as they sat down to table. “I’m told that the British Museum is a splendid schoolroom for little boys. I must say *I* always found it stuffy.”

“I don’t believe you’ve ever been near it,” he returned, with an attempt at lightness.

“How do we know you have, either?” she retorted. “All very well, isn’t it, Cis, to go up to town every day, with his good little earnest face, and his little school-books tucked under his arm? ‘Good-bye, dear wife! Only the desire to improve myself forces me to leave you,’” she mimicked, giving a rapid imitation of Robert’s manner, so apt, in spite of the ludicrous words, that Mayne choked over his soup. “I believe the moment he gets up to town, he takes his marbles out of his pockets, and his little toys and things, and begins to play!” She leaned towards him like a kind and tender parent. “Come, tell mother⁹ all about it,” she coaxed, “and then she won’t be angry with her little boy.”

Mayne and Cecily both laughed. Of the two Cecily seemed the more amused.

“Oh, stop fooling, there’s a good girl,” exclaimed Robert, passing his hand over his forehead. “Any one would think you were seven instead of seventeen. And I’ve got a headache.”

“Nothing but naughty temper because mother found you out!” declared Diana, irrepressibly.

“You’ve brought her up very badly,” said Mayne, turning to Cecily.

“I *gave* her up long ago,” laughed Cecily. She began to talk amusingly, quite in her old fashion. A fantastic sense of the ludicrousness of life, of all situations that seem tragic, excited her to trembling laughter. Her sense of humor had been roused, bitterly roused, but it animated her as nothing else could have done, and for the rest of the evening Cecily was her most brilliant self. That Robert was not listening to her remarks was a circumstance which, at an early stage of the evening, Mayne noticed with some incomprehension and more resentment. As his visit lengthened, the incomprehension vanished.

CHAPTER VIII

A WEEK later Kingslake was sitting in his study, before a table littered with papers, doing nothing. It was nearly twelve o'clock. At half-past one Philippa Burton was coming to lunch.

He had not seen her now for eight days, a period which, he impatiently admitted to himself, had seemed more like eight weeks, and the morning had appeared interminable.

She was to have gone to the rooms his wife had taken for her in the village, the day after Mayne's arrival, but she had written to Cecily that a piece of work—a commission—must keep her longer in town.

He thought of her incessantly—and confusedly. She was the most wonderful woman he had ever met; the cleverest, the most elusive, the purest-minded. That was so touching, so adorable in Philippa, yet at unguarded moments he wondered if it could be cured. Philippa as a friend, an inspirer, a twin soul!8 How exquisite she had been—*would* be. But Philippa as a mistress? The thought would obtrude. He took it from its depths, and caressed it at furtive moments, thinking with rapture of her eyes, her mysterious hair—then thrust it hastily back, piling lilies of thought above its hiding-place. It would have surprised him to know he was thinking at second hand, but Robert seldom dug to the depths. It was characteristic of him that he never saw the roots of his own motives and actions,—it was merely their interlacing leaves and flowers to which he directed his attention.

A voice outside in the garden broke in upon his musing—his wife's voice, followed by a man's laugh. He got up, and glanced under the sun-blind which shielded the window. Cecily was picking the flowers for the lunch-table, and Mayne, seated on a bench before a rustic table, was tying flies for fishing. For a moment Robert experienced a curious, uneasy sensation. It was almost like shame, and he dismissed it with a decided recognition of its idiocy. Mayne had settled down very well. It was a splendid thing for Cecily to have some one fresh to talk to. It was pitiful to think how selfish most men were to their wives—how jealous.... It was only ten minutes8 past twelve. The morning seemed endless, and he was unable to do a stroke of work. It was dreadful to have days like that. Somewhere in the distance he heard Diana calling.

"Coming," answered Cecily in response, and presently he saw her moving towards the house.

Mayne continued to occupy himself with his fishing-tackle, as, during his restless pacing to and fro in his study, Kingslake could see. Presently he opened the French window and stepped out onto the grass. Mayne looked up from his work. The bench on which he was sitting was flanked by a wall of yew, which made part of a formal enclosure framed on three sides by yew hedges, and open, on the fourth, to the rest of the garden only by a narrow archway cut out of the living green. It was a

charming, sheltered little spot, where Cecily's white lilies flourished; a sort of dedication, she said, to the larger garden outside.

"Holloa!" observed Mayne, as Kingslake came nearer. "Knocked off for the day? Is the muse coy?"

"Yes," returned Robert, rather irritably. "I'm not getting on. Change of place, I suppose. Anything like that affects me." He took out his cigarette-case.

"Delicate machinery you writing people must have. Something's always going wrong with the works, isn't it?"

"Oh, more or less," Robert returned, passing his hand through his hair with a gesture habitual to him.

"You've been working in town lately, haven't you?"

"Yes, getting up stuff for this book. But that's finished. Now there's only the writing."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Mayne, with a groan. "Only the writing! The mere thought of it makes me gasp."

Robert smiled. "*I can't tie flies,*" he said, jerking his head in the direction of Mayne's litter of silk and tinsel.

"No, but you land your fish with the best of us.... That last book of yours caught on, didn't it?"

"Oh, it brought me in something, I'm glad to say."

Mayne leaned back against the yew hedge, stretching out his long legs contentedly. He tilted up his face towards the serene blue sky, then glanced round him, his look taking in the flowers, the dancing butterflies above them, the delicate shadows on the grass.

"What do you want money for in Arcadia?" he asked.

"To get out of it," returned Robert, with a sort of impatient bitterness.

Mayne glanced sharply at him as he half turned away to light the cigarette he held.

"You are really going to town in the autumn? But I thought you were so keen on this?" He waved his hand comprehensively.

"Oh, my dear fellow!" exclaimed Kingslake, irritably. "It's all right, but one can't live on lilies and roses, you know." He broke off abruptly. "Listen! Was that the bell?"

"I don't think so," returned Dick, composedly. "Why? Expecting any one?"

"Oh, no—no!" There was quite an elaborate unconcern in his tone. "That is, a friend of Cecily's—a Miss Burton—is coming to lunch, I believe."

Mayne had resumed his work. For the fraction of a second his deft fingers stopped in their movement. Robert was walking backwards and forwards across the little strip of turf in front of the seat. When he spoke again, it was abruptly.

"You don't think Cecily's looking well, do you?"

"Not at all well," returned Mayne, quietly.

8“No—no,” said her husband, the second negation indicating that he was giving the matter his full attention. “I don’t think she is. She took the baby’s death to heart.” He threw a quick glance at his companion. “She—she wants rousing. I think you’ll do her a lot of good, Mayne. I’m glad you’re able to stay a little while; it’s what she wants—an interest for her. An old friend, and that sort of thing. You must come and look us up when we’re in town.”

“Thanks,” returned Mayne, laconically. There was a pause. Robert took out his handkerchief, and wiped his forehead.

“Doesn’t get any cooler, does it?” he remarked.

“I’m glad on your wife’s account that you’re going to live in town,” Mayne said presently.

Robert looked, as he felt, genuinely surprised. “For Cecily? Why?”

“Don’t you think she’s rather thrown away here?” The quietness of his tone irritated Robert. He reminded himself that he had never really liked Mayne. He was rather an unfriendly brute.

“Thrown away?” he repeated; “oh, I don’t know. Why? A woman has her⁸ house—and the neighbors; and she’s very fond of the garden, and that sort of thing.”

“That sort of thing used not to be very much in her line.”

“Oh, yes, I know!” exclaimed Kingslake, impatiently, as he balanced himself on the arm of the bench. “All girls—especially the rather spoilt sort of girl that Cecily was—get ideas into their heads. But, my dear fellow, a woman nearly always settles down after she’s married.”

“Some of your most striking novels are founded on a contrary opinion,” observed Mayne, with a laugh. “You see you are read—even in the wilds.”

“You flatter me,” said Robert, dryly. He moved again, and began his restless pacing. “Cecily, I suppose, has been complaining—telling you that it was my wish to come into the country, and so forth?” he broke out at last with some resentment.

Mayne lifted his head. “She has never mentioned the subject to me,” he answered, shortly. “I was only thinking of her as I knew her, five or six years ago. She was considered—well—rather brilliant, in those days. Does she write now?” The question was put suddenly.

8“Not that I know of,” Kingslake answered, absently. Mayne glanced at him with a curious expression. He wondered whether he was aware of the illuminating quality of his indifferent reply. Did he know what a milestone he had pointed out in the matrimonial road?

“Women don’t really care a snap of the fingers about art,” Robert went on, with confidential fluency. “Matrimony is the goal of their ambition; that once attained, they sit ever afterwards serenely on the shore, watching the struggles of the rest of their sex towards the same haven.”

A magazine was lying on the bench—one of the Quarterlies. Mayne fluttered the leaves with a smile.

“Mrs. Kingslake left this here,” he said. “I envy you your power of detachment when you write articles, Kingslake. *A Vindication of Woman’s Claim in Art*, by Fergus Macdonald. That’s your writing name, isn’t it? I seem to be turning your own weapons against you with horrid frequency. I’m sorry,” he laughed again.

“You misunderstand me!” protested Robert. “Didn’t I say ‘the women who marry’? I meant to. What I said doesn’t apply to the 88 women nowadays who don’t marry—have no wish to marry. That such women may be artists, actual or potential, I have no doubt. When a woman is not preoccupied with the affairs of sex——”

“She’s generally wanting to be.”

Kingslake stopped short in his harangue, and looked at the other man doubtfully. “You take a cynical view,” he said.

“No. Merely a natural one.”

“You don’t believe that some women deliberately put love out of their lives?” asked Robert, tentatively.

“My dear chap, love never gives some women a chance to be so rude.”

“I don’t mean that. I mean the sort of woman who *has* a chance.”

“She’d take it.”

Kingslake regarded him with a curious expression for a moment; there was a look of dawning hope in his face, a half smile of pleased expectancy. Then it faded, and he resumed his former slightly sententious manner. “My dear Mayne,” he replied, “you’ve been out in the wilds for some years. You can’t be expected to know the spirit of the times. You don’t understand the modern woman.”

“My dear Kingslake,” returned Mayne,⁸⁹ with great deliberation, “if I’d been out in the wilds, as you say, for fifty instead of five years, I should still disbelieve in her existence. There’s no such thing as a modern woman. She’s exactly as old as Eve. She doesn’t shake her curls nowadays, nor have hysterics. She writes for the *Daily Mail*, and plays hockey. But do you seriously think these trifling differences affect the eternal feminine? Not a bit of it.”

Robert looked at his watch. “I say, I’ve stopped, surely. It must be more than half-past twelve. What do you make it?”

Dick slowly drew out his watch. “Five-and-twenty past.” Kingslake threw away his half-smoked cigarette, and began to light another one. Mayne watched him.

“Do you know this lady who is coming to lunch?” he asked, carelessly.

The match burnt Kingslake’s fingers as he raised his head, and he uttered a hasty observation.

“I met her the other day in town,” he added, as a pendant.

“Is *she* a modern woman?” asked Mayne. The casualness of his tone reassured Robert.

"Yes," he returned, emphatically. "At least I should imagine so. She's an artist.⁹ Has a studio of her own, and so forth. She's had a hard time of it, poor girl...." He looked meditatively at the glowing end of his cigarette. "*There's* a woman now," he broke out, "who has an absolute, a perfectly disinterested love of art for its own sake. She's a case in point."

"Did she tell you so?"

"Yes," returned Robert, unguardedly, warming to his subject. "She doesn't think of love; she doesn't want it. She looks upon it as unnecessary—a hindrance—a barrier to her intellectual life."

"Rather a communicative young lady, eh?" was Mayne's comment.

Robert flushed. "Oh, in the course of conversation...." he began, hurriedly. He was cut short by Diana, who emerged from the porch with a tray of cut flowers.

"I'm going to do them out here," she began. "It's too boiling for anything in the house. Robert!" as her eyes fell upon him, "why are you idling here? Out for five minutes' play, I suppose. That's right. Get back to your work like a good little fellow, and see what an industrious boy you can be. It's not nearly lunch-time yet."

Robert smiled indulgently. "Quite right.⁹ I'm frightfully slack to-day somehow," he said, as he turned towards the study. "This beastly heat, I suppose."

Diana gave a mischievous chuckle as he disappeared.

"I do love to watch the celebrity at home," she said in a low voice, choked with laughter. "Robert's not done a *stroke* of work this morning. He's been looking out of the window with a yearning gaze, like this." She made one of her inimitable faces.

Mayne grinned. "As a sister-in-law, Diana, you are a treasure."

"There's the bell!" exclaimed the girl. "That means the History-Book, I expect. I wonder whether Cecily's ready. I hope she's putting on her blue muslin. I told her to. Come along! We must go and see her, I suppose."

Within, Cecily was going forward to meet her guest.

The women exchanged a swift glance of mutual interest, while Philippa impulsively put out both hands. Cecily took one of them, and ignored the inclination of Philippa's face towards hers.

"How do you do? I hope you are not very tired?" she began.

"Cecily!" cried Philippa, rapturously. "After all these years!"

"Yes, but they had to pass, did they not?" returned her hostess in a matter-of-fact tone. "I'm so sorry you've been ill. But you are better, surely? If you hate looking ill as much as I do, I'm sure you'll like to be told that it doesn't show."

Philippa smiled, a little sadly. "Oh, it's nothing. I'm not very robust, that's all," she returned, patiently. "Is this Diana—the baby Diana I used to hear about when we were schoolgirls?"

Diana, who had entered the hall with Mayne, shook hands with the brusqueness which characterizes the young girl when she is at the same time shy and aggressive.

“Affected fool,” was her brief mental verdict, as she glared at Philippa’s artless, unfashionable hat and brown sandals.

“Mr. Mayne—Miss Burton,” murmured Cecily.

“We have met before—at Lady Wilmot’s, haven’t we?” smiled Philippa, as they shook hands.

The door opened at the moment to admit Robert.

“Ah, I thought I heard voices!” he9 exclaimed, genially. “How do you do, Miss Burton?”

Diana giggled as she retired with Mayne to the window-seat.

“Robert’s up and down like a dog in a fair,” she whispered, irreverently. “He’ll get on splendidly with the History-Book. What an idiot she looks in that Twopenny Tube dress, doesn’t she? ... and then you and I and Cis can play about and amuse ourselves, and have a lovely time. What are you staring at, Dick? Don’t. She’ll think you’re admiring her; and she’s just as conceited as a peacock already.”

CHAPTER IX

“WHAT a sweet garden you have!” exclaimed Philippa, putting down her coffee-cup. They had returned to the yew enclosure after lunch. She had thrown aside her hat with one of the free sweeping movements which Lady Wilmot characterized as Whitmanesque, and the breeze stirred the ripples of her thick, dark hair.

“This is only a tiny piece of it. Would you like to see the rest?” asked Cecily. “I could take you round before I go to see my dog. He’s ill, and I must make sure that they’re looking after him properly in the village. Will you come with me, or would you rather stay here and rest?”

“May I stay here?” begged Philippa. “You see I’m silly enough not to be very strong, and the walk here has tired me a little.”

“Certainly,” returned Cecily, rising, “if you don’t mind being left for half an hour, perhaps. He’s in one of the cottages in the village, near the vet, and I’m afraid it will take me all that time to get there and back. Robert will look after you. Will you come, Dick?” she added, turning to Mayne. “I’d like you to see how he is.”

He had already risen. “Of course. I meant to go,” he returned.

“Diana is cycling over to Silverleafe for me, if you want any letters taken to the post, Robert,” she turned to say, as she passed through the archway in the yew hedge.

Mayne followed her. She did not speak as they crossed the lawn. Her crisp blue dress rustled softly over the grass. Glancing down at her, he noticed her thin cheeks, the compression of her lips. She looked ill—almost old. A tumult of thoughts and emotions filled his mind, as he walked beside this woman from whom he had parted five years ago, feeling that with her he had lost all that made life worth living; its savour, its keenness, its delight. Five years had shown him that in a man’s life, at least, risks, excitements, hard work, and some hard fighting can so soften a woman’s image as to make it no longer a thing of torture. On his first return to England, two years after his departure, he had not seen Cecily. He could not trust himself to meet her calmly, and he would not meet her otherwise. Ten days ago, after a further absence of three years, he had accepted, with unfeigned pleasure, her husband’s cordial invitation. Though he could think of her now with equanimity as another man’s wife, nothing could alter his affection for Cecily, and he had looked forward to seeing her, undismayed by the prospect of witnessing domestic bliss.

To-day, as he walked in silence at her side, old emotions stirred. He was glad of the safety-valve of anger. That Kingslake had met more than once the woman they had just left with him, he had been pretty well assured, even before he saw them together.

“Emotional fool,” indicated his summing-up of Robert’s attitude in her presence. Did Cecily guess? Had she left them together in bitter acquiescence? He glanced down at her again, but her quiet face baffled him. One other question insistently pursued him. Had Kingslake’s invitation to him been premeditated? Was it

possible that—— A dark flush rose to his face. Then, suddenly, as though recollecting herself, Cecily began to talk. She talked recklessly, gayly, about anything, about nothing. He did not listen; he⁹ was thinking of her as she had appeared ever since he came to the house—desperately anxious to save appearances—never once naturally, quietly happy as he had imagined her, as he had come to be glad to think he would find her.

They went into the cottage and looked at the dog. All the time he was feeling the chest and the limbs of the sick spaniel, Mayne was determining to break down the barrier of convention which she had put up between them. He would at least talk to her. She looked like a woman drowning. He would not allow her to drown without a word. “Better; he’s much better, poor little chap,” he said, getting up from his knees.

Cecily fondled and patted the silken head, which was eagerly stretched out of the basket on her approach. The sound of her caressing voice shook Mayne’s composure. He remembered the baby she had lost, and with the memory came a flood of wild thoughts and wilder regrets. He moved abruptly to the door, where, on escaping from the garrulous old woman who owned the cottage, Cecily presently joined him.

She relapsed into silence again on the homeward way, and it was Mayne who broke it.

98“Let’s sit down here a minute, it’s so jolly!” he suggested, as they came to an easy stile. “We needn’t gallop back for Miss Burton’s sake. She’s a host in herself.”

Cecily laughed shortly. “Don’t you admire her? She’s very handsome.”

Mayne shrugged his shoulders, as he threw himself down on the grass close to the low step on which she was seated. Cecily smiled. She felt childishly comforted by the contemptuous action.

The long meadow-grass was starred with daisies, and jewelled with tall spikes of rose-red sorrel. The field sloped to a full, slow stream, which lazily stirred tufts of forget-me-nots in its passing. On the farther bank, the cattle swished indolent tails as they crowded under the shade of the willows, or stood knee-deep in the water.

“What a peaceful place!” said Mayne, suddenly. “It makes a funny sort of contrast to one or two scenes I remember. May I smoke? It’s pretty,” he went on, beginning to fill his pipe, “but somehow, as a setting, it doesn’t suit you.”

Cecily started a little. There was nothing in the remark, but she knew that Mayne meant to talk, in the sense of the word, and⁹⁹ she did not know whether she was glad or sorry. It was, perhaps, a tribute to his personality that the idea of preventing him did not even occur to her. One did not try to stop Mayne when he expressed the intention of doing anything.

“That doesn’t sound like a compliment,” she returned, smiling. “Why doesn’t a pretty place suit me?”

“No room for your wings.”

"My dear Dick, you're *not* going to tell me I'm an angel!" she exclaimed, still clinging to the fringe of conventional repartee.

"Certainly not," he replied, lighting the pipe, "the wings are not angelic."

"That's right. Where would they carry me—if they had room to move?"

"Out into the wild places at the back of beyond—sometimes."

Cecily dropped her light tone. "That's true," she said, slowly. "And at others?"

"No farther than town. You'd fold them, for a time at least, quite complacently in a London drawing-room, provided the other birds were of the right flock."

"That's also true—or *was* true." The amendment was dreary.

"Sometimes when *I* was at the back of beyond," continued Mayne, smoking stolidly, "I used to picture you as a celebrity, holding a *salon*—like those French women, you know. The charming ones—not the blue stockings. Madame Récamier—Madame de Sévigné—that sort of thing."

"Instead of which I ride down to the village on my bicycle, and order the groceries. It's Robert who's the celebrity, you know." She stooped to pick a long-stalked buttercup as she spoke. Her voice was not bitter, it was quite colorless.

"There was generally room for two in the *salons*, wasn't there?" asked Mayne.

"Possibly. There isn't on the hearth-rug." There was rather a long pause. Mayne took out his pipe, and knocked its bowl against the stile.

"Do you know, I think you ought to have *made* room," he said at last, decisively. Cecily turned her face slowly towards him.

"You are right, Dick," she said. "I ought."

"Why didn't you?"

"Oh, why didn't I? Why didn't I?" she repeated, a little wildly. Her voice shook, and she threw the buttercup aside with a nervous movement. "Why is one always a fool till it's too late to be wise? Life's such a difficult thing to manage."

"I agree."

"Especially with love thrown in as a handicap."

He glanced at her swiftly. "Is it a handicap?"

"For a woman—yes." She was bitter enough now.

"Why?"

"Because the whole thing means so much more to her than it does to a man."

"Not in every case."

She glanced at him hurriedly, and her voice softened. "Generally," she said, "it means so much to a woman that, like a fool, she throws overboard all that reason, common-sense, judgment, urge her to keep. And the ship sails splendidly at first——" She paused.

"And after a time?" suggested Mayne.

"Oh, it still sails splendidly!" she exclaimed, with a laugh. "But it sails on without her. She's left struggling in the sea—or stranded on the first desert island."

“And,” said Mayne in a business-like tone, “with proper management you think there need never have been an island?”

“Not a *desert* island.”

“But the desert island can be cultivated, Cis.”

“Yes—now,” said Cecily, drearily. “There’s no barrier now—except my lack of heart to do it.”

Mayne was glad of the personal pronoun. They were coming to close quarters.

“Was there ever a barrier?” he inquired.

“Yes,” she said, with unexpected suddenness. “Robert didn’t like it.”

Mayne slowly raised his head, and their eyes met. He was silent.

“Oh, I know what you’d like to say!” cried Cecily, hurriedly; “but it’s no use arguing about it. Most men regard their wives, so long as they’re in love with them, in an absolutely primitive way—there’s no getting out of it—they *do*. For every other woman, freedom, individuality, the ‘exercise of her own gifts,’ of course. For a man’s wife, while he loves her, no life but his. She belongs to him, body and soul. He is jealous of every interest in which he is not concerned. And because his love means so much to her, because she *can*’t realize that one day it may go, a woman yields; she lets all her interests go down the wind; she is what he wants her to be.”

She paused a moment in her rapid speech. Mayne made no sign, and she went on in a voice that shook a little.

“And perhaps, if it lasted so, she would be content. But it *doesn’t* last. And it’s the woman who’s shipwrecked. Beautiful new countries, full of interest, for him. For her—nothing but the desert island.”

Mayne was still silent. He was following, with a stalk of grass, the distracted movements of a ladybird.

Cecily laughed nervously. “My dear Dick,” she cried, springing to her feet, “I beg your pardon. What a dose of the woman question I’ve given you! It’s the first offence, kind gentleman. It shall not occur again. Come along.”

Mayne had also risen, but he made no sign of moving. “Cecily,” he said, suddenly, “we’re very good friends, aren’t we?”

She looked at him steadily. “Very good friends, Dick.”

“I want you to promise me something.”

“Yes?”

“Take up your work again. Go on writing.”

She hesitated. “Does it matter?” she asked, with a dreary smile.

“*That* doesn’t matter. I want a definite promise.”

She was silent a moment. “Very well, I’ll try,” she answered at last, steadily.

He nodded satisfaction. “That’s good enough for me. I’m not afraid,” he returned, and moved from the stile.

They began to wade through the sea of grasses towards the garden, whose belt of trees lay at no great distance.

“Look here, Cis!” he began, so suddenly that she started, and, glancing up, saw him squaring his shoulders in the resolute way for which as a girl she had often teased him. “There’s something I want to say to you. All of us—all of us, at least, who *matter*—get a hard knock from life some time or other, and if it’s hard enough most of us go to pieces for a bit. *I* went to pieces once.”

Cecily nervously pulled the rosy beads off a head of sorrel as she passed it, but he went straight on. “*You* have been going to pieces for quite a considerable time. Oh, yes, I know,” as he saw her shrink a little. “But this is a straight talk. Now what’s the good of going to pieces, Cis? It doesn’t alter anything except oneself, and one’s chance of getting *something*, if not the thing we want, out of existence. Life gives hard blows. Very well, then, let us go out to meet it, in armor. I want you to get a suit, Cis.” He paused abruptly.

“The people who wear armor are not, as a rule, engaging,” she said, with an attempt at a smile.

“It depends on the kind they wear.”

“It’s the getting it on, Dick.”

“Yes,” he allowed, “it’s a bit stiff at first; but with perseverance——”

“It’s a dull thing to fight in,” she urged, after a moment apparently given to consideration.

“There are all sorts of suits, you know,” he went on in a lighter tone. “A large assortment always in stock. There’s a neat little thing called hard work, which is not to be despised, to begin with. Then there’s a highly decorated one known in the trade as ambition—and so forth.”

Cecily laughed. “I’ll try some of them on. Do you think I shall ever look as well in them as you do?” she added in a gentle voice.

“Better. There are joints in mine.” There was a touch of grimness in his tone which appealed to her.

“I’m glad you’ve come home, Dick,” she said, gratefully. “You’re a nice, strong person.”

“In spite of the joints?” he asked, with a suspicion of irony.

“Because of them,” she answered, gravely.

He was silent for a moment. When he spoke, it was half banteringly, half in earnest.

“You’re going to be the most brilliant woman in London, Cis; do you know that? In your scintillating *salon*, statesmen shall bow the knee, journalists shall grovel. It shall be chock-full of fair ladies loving you like poison——”

“But I shall only admit *one* distinguished traveller,” said Cecily, gayly.

His face changed. “Really?” he asked, softly, “that will be kind.” All that he had been studiously keeping out of his voice, out of his face, came suddenly to both.

Cecily hesitated. “And he will be in armor,” she said. It was almost an appeal. She had been so glad to find a friend! His words had braced her like strong wine. But

if she must think of him as a would-be lover, if she could not think of him as a friend? The pitiful look which, in her unguarded moments, had often unnerved Mayne, came back, and now it strengthened him.

“All right, Cis,” he said. “Don’t you bother. It’s a tight-fitting suit.”

She smiled at him gratefully, as he held open for her the little gate leading from the fields into the lower garden.

CHAPTER X

THE moment had come for which Robert, on that day at least, had scarcely dared to hope. He was alone with Philippa! He changed his seat for one nearer to her, and looked at her ardently. Philippa returned his gaze with a smile of wistful tenderness. Renunciation, a burning sense of duty, tempered by potential passion, was expressed partly by the smile, partly by the direct gaze of her melancholy eyes.

Robert acknowledged the former emotion with respectful admiration, and derived unacknowledged hope from the latter. Three months ago he had met Philippa Burton in the reading-room of the British Museum, and had made her acquaintance with a degree of unconventionality hereafter so frequently alluded to by Philippa as “our beautiful meeting,” that he had come to attribute to it something of mystic import—an indication of soul affinity.

9Regarded prosaically, the acquaintance had come about, much as very delightful and profitable acquaintances are made in a class of a considerably lower social grade than that to which either of them belonged. Robert had noticed and admired the dark-eyed, mysterious-looking girl who read at the table opposite to his own, had seized the chance of helping her with some heavy books which she was lifting from the reference shelves, and the further opportunity of leaving the reading-room with her at the moment she had chosen for lunch. With that deliberate ignoring of foolish convention, of which sandals and freely exposed necks are the outward and visible sign, she had expressed her thanks with an impressiveness impossible to the silence of the reading-room, and a quarter of an hour later, Robert found himself lunching with her at a vegetarian restaurant, suffering French beans gladly. He had met her at a critical moment, the moment when the last sparks of passion for his wife had died a natural death, and he had begun to crave for “a new interest in life.” It was, so he expressed to himself, the prompting of a very ordinary instinct. Philippa had accepted the paraphrase with melancholy fervor, and had set about ministering to the requirements it indicated, after the manner of a priestess.

She had promptly admitted Robert to her temple,—an austere furnished studio in Fulham,—had given him tea out of cups with no handles, and made the ceremony seem like a sacrificial rite. She had listened to the reading of his manuscripts, and called them blessed; she had discussed his wife, and called her a nice little thing; she had dealt in abstractions such as honor, ennobling influences, the transmutation of passion into a religious flame to illumine and make life holy; and she had hitherto resisted with grieved patience all Robert’s man-like relapses into a somewhat less rarefied atmosphere. Robert was naturally very much in love.

“I thought to-day would never come!” he murmured. “Are you better? You’ve been working far too hard. Ah, you shouldn’t. Another cushion?”

Philippa accepted the cushion, but motioned Robert back to his place with gentle persistence.

“Not work?” she said. “But I must. How else should I live? Though certainly sometimes I wonder why. It’s then that I hear the river flowing. How quiet it would be, wouldn’t it? What a sweet washing away of life’s troubles and wearinesses—and mistakes!” She fixed her swimming eyes upon a leafy branch opposite, and spoke in an infinitely sad, deep voice.

“Don’t, Philippa!” urged Robert, in distress. “I can’t bear it. You know how I want to shield you. You are not strong enough to battle with life. You know how I long to——”

“Ah, my dear friend, don’t!” she cried, smiling at him with trembling lips. “We’ve discussed that—and you know I can’t allow it. Don’t make me regret having taken this beautiful holiday at your hands. I never thought you could persuade me even to that, but you are wonderful when you plead, Fergus.”

He took her hand and kissed it. She gently withdrew it.

“It sounds so strange to hear you called ‘Robert,’” she said. “You are always ‘Fergus’ to me. It’s a beautiful name, associated with beautiful work.” Her eyes dilated, and Robert wondered whether she was thinking of the scene between the lovers in *The Magician*, or of the moonlit terrace scene upon which he prided himself in *The Starry Host*, his last poetical drama,—or perhaps of one of his little prose poems? Her expression called up agreeable reminiscences of nearly all his writing.

“I’ve been watching for you all the morning,” he told her.

“But that was very bad for your work.” She shook her head at him playfully.

“My work is always at a standstill without you.”

She looked at him affectionately. “Do you know, I can’t help being glad of that! It does show, I think, that your work is a bond between us in the highest and best sense.”

He assented absently. “Cecily read me your letter,” he added after a moment’s pause.

She waited for him to comment upon it. “Was it right?” she asked at length, when he was silent. “I kept strictly to the truth. I hate anything that’s not absolutely sincere.”

“Yes,” he replied, dubiously. “It was the truth, of course, but it gave her a wrong impression. She thinks we only met at Lady Wilmot’s.”

“Isn’t that what you intended?” There was a momentary ring of sharpness in her voice.

“Yes,” he returned, uncertainly again. “Yes, I suppose so.” His face clouded for an instant. When he again sought her eyes, she was smiling indulgently.

“Fergus,” she said, “don’t you understand? If women were all fine and noble enough there would be no occasion to withhold anything. We could be quite frank about our friendships, knowing that they would not be misconstrued. But as it is——” She paused.

“Well?”

"As it is, while so many women are still mentally undeveloped, morally childish, truth must come as—well, as a progressive revelation."

Robert laughed a little. "I'm afraid it will always be a revelation," he said, a latent sense of humor for a moment asserting itself, "progressive or otherwise."

Philippa did not encourage humor. "I have greater faith," she returned, with serious eyes. "There are *some* great souls among women, Fergus, after all."

He was scarcely listening. Surely no woman ever had such wonderful hair as Philippa's. His hands ached to touch it, to feel it running through his fingers. He got up abruptly, and began to pace the grass plot as he had paced it that morning when he had been thinking of her. Now she was before him with her big, velvety eyes, her marvellous hair, her long slender limbs. He realized presently that she was still speaking.

"I suppose it is fatally easy," she was saying meditatively, "for a married woman who has led a sheltered life to grow a little petty and narrow. After all, it is the worker, the struggler, who purifies her nature. Don't you think so? But in time, I think, even the married woman may learn."

"Learn what?" he murmured, absently, throwing himself once more into the cane chair beside her.

"To love less selfishly," she returned, looking down at him; "to admit the value of every ennobling friendship—a friendship such as ours, Fergus! What can it mean but good? Good for both of us. Good for *her*, too, if only she would take it so," she added, softly.

Robert made a restless movement. The spell of her presence was somehow broken. He felt worried, exasperated, angry with himself—almost angry with Philippa. She expected too much of human nature. Certainly too much of *his*.

"But, as a matter of fact, you can't get a woman to take it like that!" he exclaimed, in spite of himself. "Consider our case if you like," he added, in an injured tone. "What woman would believe in mere friendship, if she knew we had met—how often? Nearly every day, as a matter of fact, for the last three months. It isn't in human nature!" He spoke almost irritably, prompted by an undefined notion that, having put such a strain upon any woman's credulity, it was ridiculous not to have justified her disbelief. For a moment he wished Philippa had been a less noble woman.

She sighed. "Then I suppose you were quite right not to tell her," she said, descending abruptly upon the personal pronoun. "Your idea is to let her grow used to our friendship, here in the country, under her eyes, so that she may gradually come to believe in its purity?"

Robert felt a little nonplussed. He had thought this particular idea emanated from Philippa herself, but as she spoke of it decidedly as *his*, she must have no doubt that he had suggested it. In any case, it was scarcely chivalrous to undeceive her.

"Perhaps you are right," she murmured, after a moment. Presently, as Robert watched her, she smiled, slowly, indulgently, as a mother smiles at the waywardness

of a little child. "How charming Cecily is!" she said. "She always appealed to me, even as a schoolgirl. I always wanted to *protect* her in some way. She was so fragile—so sweet. She had very little character,—as a child, I mean,—but then she was so graceful, so lovable, one scarcely missed it."

Robert was silent. He felt vaguely uncomfortable.

"Oh, what a pity! What a pity!" she exclaimed, softly, after a pause. There was the tenderest commiseration and regret in her emotional voice. Robert felt his heart stirred painfully. He wanted to kiss her dress, but refrained.

"What is a pity?" he asked, in a low tone.

"That she doesn't understand you, Fergus!"

"She thinks she does."

"Ah, yes!—that is the tragedy."

"Oh, we all have them!" said Robert, lightly.

She leaned a little towards him. "At least I do that, Fergus? Understand you?" Her voice, still low, was tremulous.

He seized her hands. "As no one has ever understood me!" he cried. "Philippa! No! Don't move. Don't! I must tell you—I can't——"

She struggled to loose her hands, and he released them. When she was free she moved a little away from him, to the other end of the bench, and sat motionless, her eyes fixed on the ground.

Robert was abashed. He had angered her—he did not know how deeply! He hesitated.

"Philippa," he whispered at last, "you are angry?"

"Not angry," she returned almost at once, "but disappointed, Fergus. More than once you have promised not to let that kind of thing happen again."

"I know," he began, humbly, "but——"

"What were we talking about?" she asked, in a studiously quiet tone.

"I don't know," admitted Robert, with truth. His head was in a whirl.

"About you, I expect," she returned, with no trace of sarcasm. "Yours is a very finely strung temperament. It requires the sympathy that comes of insight. Now if Cecily would only——" She paused, as though hesitating to criticise.

"Cecily surprised me a good deal the other day," he said, suddenly. "I meant to tell you."

"Oh?" Her voice grew slightly cold. "How? I shouldn't have thought her a woman of many surprises."

Robert broke off a twig from an overhanging hazel, snapped it, and threw it away before he spoke.

"She accused me of being tired of her. Said she had no wish to stand in my way. No," in answer to her sudden inquiring look, "she brought no accusation; she has heard nothing of our—our friendship. It was just a whim, I suppose. But—I've taken her at her word."

Her eyes held his. "You mean?"

"She wished that we should be friends," he returned, with a shrug of the shoulders. "We shall be—friends, henceforth."

Before he could analyze the expression which leaped to her eyes, she had averted her head.

"I am sorry," she whispered, softly.

There was a long pause.

"Is Mr. Mayne an old friend of hers?"

Robert started. "Yes," he returned, reluctantly. "She has known him since she9 was a girl of seventeen or eighteen. I asked him here," he added, with an effort.

Philippa turned an illumined face towards him. "As a lesson in generosity? I see." She regarded him as the angel who holds the palm-branch might regard the soldier-saint who had earned it. "That was splendid of you, Fergus!"

Involuntarily he put out a hand as though to avert her words.

"I thought it was only fair she should have some one to talk to," he said, trying to speak carelessly, and annoyed that the words sounded like a self-justification.

"Oh, I hope she'll see it as you meant it, and be worthy of it!" cried Philippa, almost as though it were a prayer. "But, Fergus, you mustn't be surprised if she doesn't," she added, with regret. "Cecily, you know, is vain. I remember that of her as a striking characteristic from our schooldays. She's so charming, so lovable, but she's weak, Fergus.... Poor Fergus!" she murmured, "I wish I had the right to comfort you!" The breeze fluttered her mysterious hair. In the soft green gloom flung by the trees, her eyes looked like forest pools for depth. She sighed, and the roses on her breast rose and sank, wafting an intoxicating perfume. Robert's heart beat so quickly that he could scarcely speak. He flung himself onto the grass, and leaned against her knees.

"You have! You must! I don't want comfort—I want *you*!" he whispered, incoherently. "Philippa, it's ended between me and Cecily! She doesn't love me now. I don't love her. I can only think of you. Listen! Listen, darling, I can't go on talking about friendship any more. I love you!" He put both arms round her, and held her—held her while at first she resisted. But only for a moment. She grew suddenly, rigidly, still.

He threw back his head, still holding her, to look into her face. She was pale, but she gazed at him mysteriously, with a sort of religious ardor.

"Speak to me, Philippa!" he begged.

"Is it really, really so, Fergus?" she whispered. "The great love? the perfect union?"

"You know I love you," he said, beginning to realize that this was surrender, but that Philippa must do it in her own way.

"I think it would be right for us, Fergus. I *feel* it would be right!" she added, with the conviction of a mystic who has received a sign from Heaven. "Conventions, laws—they are for little people. Great love is its own justification."

The phrase struck Robert as familiar. But what did phrases matter? She was yielding.

“You love me, then?” he urged, trembling.

“Yes, Fergus,” she said in her low, vibrating voice. “Yes, it *is* love—and I didn’t know it. You have revealed me to myself.”

He kissed her passionately. “Call me by my own name,” he said, rising, still with his arm about her, and drawing her to her feet.

“*Dear Robert!*” she murmured as he rained kisses on her hair. He was standing with his back to the narrow archway cut in the hedge, and her face was hidden against his shoulder.

It was at that moment that Cecily and Mayne reached the entrance to the yew garden. For one second Cecily stood motionless, then without a word she moved on past the narrow archway, and continued walking parallel to the hedge on the outward side. Mayne followed her, embarrassment for the moment so strong within him that there was no room for any other emotion.

Cecily did not speak. She and Robert had loved the yew enclosure better than any other part of the garden. All the times they had sat there together came before her now. She saw them as a drowning person is said to review the scenes in his past life. She saw the sunshine on the grass on hot summer afternoons. She smelled the roses. She thought of moonlit nights. She remembered one night,—soon after their marriage,—moonless, but full of stars, when she had sat with Robert on the bench under the hazels.... All at once she turned to Mayne.

“I shall find my armor useful,” she said, in a clear, steady voice. “Thank you so much for recommending it. We can get into the house at the other door.”

CHAPTER XI

THE Kingslakes had been in town nearly eight months. They had taken a flat in Westminster, and Cecily had been thankful for the work entailed by the move. She was thankful to leave the Priory; thankful even to part from her beloved garden. The whole place seemed to her desecrated, besmirched. That for the heights, as for the depths, of human happiness and human woe the same scene should be set, may be sport for the gods. For the actors in the drama it is agony, and it was with relief unspeakable that Cecily set her face towards London and a different existence.

It was only when the flat was in order, and life began to run smoothly, that she realized how much easier, as far as outward circumstances were concerned, existence had become. It was, as she had suggested to Robert, very simple to see little of one another. When her husband was indoors he was always in his study. But Robert was very little at home in those days.

Cecily asked no questions. He went his way; she hers. London seized them both, and whirled them, for the most part, in opposite directions. When they met, it was with friendliness, tempered on Robert's side with an implied, perfunctory reproach. "Remember this is your doing. This state of things is the outcome of your wish," was what his manner expressed, while with visible relief he accepted his freedom. Cecily sometimes smiled when, directly after one of their infrequent lunches together, she heard the front door bang, and listened to her husband's impatient summons for the lift. The smile was still bitter, but, as time went on, it hurt less.

In those early days in town, Cecily saw her husband very mercilessly. The scales had so completely dropped from her eyes that her clearness of vision startled even herself. There were times when, heightened by fierce jealousy, her old passion for him revived so strongly that she could scarcely restrain herself from the madness of throwing herself into his arms, appealing to him, begging him to come back to her—to love her. At such moments she always had the sensation of being held tight by some one who laughed, some one who said coldly, "You fool! When he's hurrying to another woman, to whom, if you are lucky, he will speak of you 'quite nicely.'" And when she had raged, and fought, and struggled till she had exhausted herself, she was always thankful for the iron arms that had held her, and the icy voice that had checked her passion.

It was after the subsidence of such an outbreak of emotion, that she generally saw Robert dispassionately, as an outsider might have seen him, or rather with an amount of penetration which no outsider, however dispassionate, could have attained. She acquired an almost preternatural insight, a sort of projection of her mind into his, so that she actually witnessed his self-deception, saw the clouds which he purposely, yet almost without his own volition, raised between his own consciousness and naked truth. She realized, with something that was almost scornful amusement, how the idea of inviting Mayne, with all that such an invitation might imply, had first struck him.

How he had thrust the thought from him as a poisonous snake,—and invited Mayne. She saw how, by this time, he had allowed himself to acquire merit by encouraging Mayne's visit. His wife was unreasonable (because she didn't know anything)—this, in his mind also, appeared in parenthesis, and was so lightly skimmed in thought that it scarcely counted. Besides, when she had expressed her wish for their practical separation, there *had* been nothing, and that made all the difference, and brought him on happily to the contemplation of his own generosity in welcoming a friend of hers, at a time when she was not even aware that there was also a friend of *his* for whom the same cordiality might be expected.

It was with a shock sometimes that she found herself making a minute analysis of her husband's mental condition with a degree of calmness, of interest even, at which she could only wonder. In the meantime, as far as outward interests and preoccupations were concerned, she made haste to fill her life. In her determination to do this she had never wavered since her talk with Mayne. The hours *must* be filled. So far as occupation went, she could and would "pull herself together." She began to look up her old friends, and found them more than willing to receive her. Cecily had always been popular, and her husband was beginning to be well known, and probably, also, beginning to grow rich. Whether she owed her immediate acceptance to the memory of her own former charm, or to the more tangible advantages she now offered as the wife of a popular novelist, Cecily wisely did not inquire. She wanted acquaintances. She could have them for the asking. And she was grateful for one friend.

Mayne was living at his club while he considered at his leisure a fresh campaign of exploration. He and Cecily saw one another frequently. But it was not till she took his incessantly urged advice and began to write, that she felt that any of her methods of filling the hours were more than husks which she ate for lack of good bread. Often on looking back to the day when she first took up her work again, she thought with wonder of the occasion. It was the day Robert had expressed his desire to employ the services of Philippa Burton as secretary. Rather to Cecily's surprise he had been in to lunch. It was nearly a month, she reflected, since such a thing had happened, and her surprise deepened when, instead of going directly the meal was at an end, he asked for coffee, and lighted a cigarette. For a time he talked disjointedly on indifferent topics, bringing the conversation round at last to his work and its many vexations.

"I've got more than I can do," he declared, with a worried frown. "Brough is bothering for those short stories, and there's my new novel, and the play, and half my time's taken up with business letters and all the machinery of the thing." He paused as if in thought. "I really think a secretary would pay me," he exclaimed presently.

"Why not have one, then?" asked Cecily, taking a cigarette from the box between them.

"I don't know how to—— What about Miss Burton?" he suggested, concluding the hesitating sentence sharply, as though the idea had just occurred to him. "She does shorthand, and she's very hard up, poor girl. She was at Lady Wilmot's yesterday when I called."

Cecily lighted her cigarette, and walked with it to the window-seat, where she sat down with her back to the light.

"And you suggested it to her?" she asked.

"No. I had no opportunity of speaking to her."

A hysterical desire to laugh seized her. She controlled it, grasping with her left hand the corner of the cushion on which she sat, and was silent.

"I should only want her—and indeed she⁹ could only come—for an hour or two in the morning," Robert went on, quite fluently now. "She has her own work—enamelling, isn't it? And of course she wouldn't want to give that up entirely. But she can't make a living at it; and I thought, as she's a friend of yours, if I could do her a good turn——"

Cecily rose. "By all means do her a good turn," she said. "But what has that to do with it? The question is, will she make a good secretary? If you think she will, I should engage her. I must go and get ready. I promised to meet Mrs. Carrington at three o'clock."

As she closed the door after her, Robert shrugged his shoulders. He was honestly reflecting that it was the unreasoning prejudice of women that made marriage slavery. Dispassionately he reviewed his own case. Granted that if she knew of his relations with Philippa, it would be impossible to make his wife view them from any but the vulgar standpoint; granted this, the point at issue was that she did *not* know. From her point of view, therefore, he was the conventionally faithful husband, and, this notwithstanding, it was *she* who had annulled their married life. So far as her knowledge went, Philippa was a mere acquaintance of his, a woman with whom, during her stay at Sheepcote, he had been moderately friendly; a woman to whom, because she was poor and comparatively friendless, he wished to extend a helping hand. Immediately, her attitude, if not hostile, had been at least uncordial. He began to rage at its obvious injustice. Regarded from Cecily's standpoint it was monstrous. On no stronger ground than that of a frivolous accusation of lack of affection on his part, to insist on a practical separation, and then to be jealous of his women friends!

He rose from the table with an exclamation of impatience. It was amazing that no later than yesterday he should have dreaded making this proposition to Cecily, that he should have shrunk from it as something in bad taste, something forced upon him only by the pressing necessity of helping a proud woman, who would be helped in no other way. His scruples had been needless, and even ridiculous. By her own action Cecily had set him free to do what he would with his life. He took his hat, and later a hansom, and drove to Fulham.

Cecily sat in her bedroom on the edge of her bed, her hands folded in her lap. Mechanically she had taken her hat and veil from the wardrobe, and as mechanically laid them aside, forgetting she was going out. Presently she wandered into the drawing-room, and began to walk up and down. Misery, jealousy, loneliness, had shrunk away before a sort of cold anger and contempt; a longing to be free, to shake off forever a yoke that had become hateful; to have the power to become *herself* once more. Should she tell Robert she knew? Should she demand her freedom, and go? Part of her nature leaped at the thought. It would so simplify the struggle. She could go away, immerse herself in work, force herself to forget. Thus she would so easily spare herself humiliation, the sight of the woman she hated in her own house, at her husband's side. "And why should I stay? Why should I?" she clamored to one of the other women within her. "He doesn't love me. He doesn't want me.... Not now." "But some day he will want you," another voice unexpectedly returned. "What then? Am I to wait meekly till he's tired of her? Am I to be at hand to console him in the intervals of his love affairs?"

She heard herself break into a short, scornful laugh, and almost before it ceased the other self had spoken. "Think of him wanting you—and suppose you were not there? You know how he would look. Picture it. Could you bear it? *Can* you go?" All at once the room swam before her in a mist of tears, and she knew she could not.

She went to the window and pushed it wider open. Before her, springing like a long-stemmed flower towards the blue of the sky, was the campanile of Westminster Cathedral. Behind its rose-pink summit white clouds drifted, and round it circled white pigeons. It was a tower that Cecily had learned to love, its very incongruity in the midst of London roofs appealing to her imagination. It was an exotic flower, blossoming radiantly above the gray heart of London. She looked at it to-day with a fresh sense of its beauty. It affected her like the glamour of an Eastern story. With a keen sense of gratitude she realized that beauty once more had power to thrill her. She remembered how at the Priory last year the blue sky had been hateful, the sunshine vain. "I'm getting better," she half whispered. "When it doesn't matter at all, any more, I shall be well. Perhaps some day I shall be well." The thought brought a great wave of consolation. She went quickly into her bedroom, put on her hat and gloves, and without waiting for the lift, walked downstairs.

As she turned the corner of the street, the *façade* of the cathedral came into sight. Cecily let her eyes wander over its galleries, its recesses, its stone carvings, its mysterious little staircases, its strange domes, and pillared loggias. She loved it all, curious and fantastic as it was. She had not meant to go in, but as she passed, she saw that the unfinished doors of the great entrance were open, and far away in the recesses of what looked like a shadowy cave, the candles burned like a row of stars. Cecily paused. A palm-branch laid between two chairs served as a barricade to the scarcely completed entrance, and she went in at the side door, and sat down just within. She knew the interior of the cathedral well, but to-day its likeness to some gigantic work

of nature—a great branching sea-cave perhaps—struck her more forcibly than ever. The uncovered brickwork in its ruggedness and simplicity heightened this effect. It was wonderful now with a mosaic of sunshine which, filtering through the small panes of the west windows, covered the brickwork between the mighty arches with a design in gold. Far beneath, the choir itself was in shadow. In shadow also was the great red cross, with the pallid Christ, suspended, as it seemed, in mid-air.

A service was going on, and from behind curtains, at the back of the altar, came the sound of singing. The sweet boys' voices filled the vaulted spaces above the altar as though clouds of incense had melted into song. An unfinished chapel on the right, near the door, was almost concealed by scaffolding, over which hung cloths of sacking, but between the folds of this screen Cecily caught a glimpse of one of the mosaic workers—a girl, evidently mounted upon an improvised platform, for Cecily saw only her dark head high up against an already completed background of mosaic. The chapel was flooded with dusty golden sunlight, in the brightness of which her young face looked vague and indistinct. Her right hand moved swiftly as she worked at the halo round the head of a saint. Through a veil of golden haze, Cecily had a vision of burnished silver and gold, of peacock color and rose, lining the walls of the chapel, and her thoughts were carried back to the mediæval artisans in cathedrals now hoary with age; to the workers of long ago whose busy hands are dust. She thought of possible years to come, when the golden halo of that saint should be dim with age, and, like the myriads of artisans before her, the girl-worker should have passed into oblivion.

The service had ceased, but Cecily still sat on, in a sort of dream. She saw in the distance a procession of dim purple-robed figures with white cassocks come down from the choir-loft and disappear. The space before the altar was empty. Silence had fallen, but she did not move.

The cathedral had laid its spell upon her. She felt it like a quiet hand upon her heart. By its actual religious significance, in a narrow sense at least, she was not affected. But in so far as it stood for something detached from the fever and the fret of human existence, it began to assume a great meaning. For the first time in her life she longed for a serenity which should lift her above the storms of passion; for interests independent of the love of man. It was characteristic of Cecily, that, desiring a thing strongly, she should definitely try to gain it.

What was the first step for her, individually, towards spiritual freedom? Surely to create. It was the craving of her whole nature. She longed for freedom; so only could she be free. Then and there she began to think out and plan in detail an idea which long ago she had been too happy, and lately too wretched, to translate into writing. The mosaic of sunshine faded from the walls, the great church grew dim while she sat, still thinking. When at last she rose, and, a little dazed, stepped from the twilight of the nave into the street, the sun had sunk below the opposite houses, and the saffron-colored sky told of evening. Cecily put back her head, and with her eyes

followed the soaring campanile till they rested on the cross which at its summit pierced the quiet sky.

With no sense of incongruity, but with a curious feeling of gratitude, she reflected upon the nature of her meditation within the building to which that tower belonged. A few moments later she reached her own doorstep, and that same evening she began to write.

CHAPTER XII

"MY dear!" said Lady Wilmot, as her motor-car stopped in Dover Street before her club. "Who'd have thought of seeing you?" The man opened the door, and she descended with a rustle of silks to shake hands with Rose Summers, who was passing. "What are you doing away from your country cottage? I thought you never left off holding your children's hands for a minute. Come in and have some tea," she exclaimed in one breath.

Rose hesitated. "I succumb to tea," she said, after a second's pause, "though I've enough shopping to do to last a week."

They entered the club, and Lady Wilmot bore down upon the tea-room like a ship in full sail, Rose following in her wake with an expression of anticipated amusement. It was to the prospect of gossip she had succumbed, rather than to the offer of tea, with the prescience that to one who had fallen a little behind the times, half an hour with Lady Wilmot would be a godsend. "I shall learn more than I could pick up in three months, otherwise," was her smiling reflection as she settled herself opposite her hostess at one of the tables of colored marble, in the embrasure of a window.

"We're early, or we shouldn't get a table," pursued Lady Wilmot. "Always a hideous crush here. Well, my dear, I hope the babies are better? What an untold nuisance children must be! Measles is part of them, I suppose? How do you like your cottage? And when is Jack coming home? Tea and cake and muffins"—this to the waiter, in parenthesis. "Do you see that woman coming in? The one with the painted gauze scarf—not the only paint about her, by the way. Well, remind me to tell you something in connection with her, presently. Quite amusing. And how long are you going to be in town, my dear? And where are you staying?"

Rose selected the last two questions to answer.

"I'm only up for the day," she said. "I'm afraid to leave the children longer. They develop a fresh infectious disease the moment my eye is not upon them." She laughed, drawing off her gloves. It was the laugh of a woman contented with life, as for her it had resolved itself into the normal fate of motherhood, with its anxieties, its pleasures, its anticipations.

Seated in the angle of the window, the light falling on her sunburnt face, her erect figure well suited by a successfully cut cloth gown, she was not only pleasant to look at, but she struck a curiously different note from the majority of the other women who now began to crowd the tea-room—women whose distinctive feature was their aimlessness.

"You've improved a great deal, my dear!" remarked Lady Wilmot, after a critical stare. "I always said you were the type that improved with age. You'll be a good-looking woman at forty, when all this sort of thing"—she included the room with a sweep of her hand—"is done for."

Mrs. Summers laughed again. "How encouraging of you!"

"You've seen the Kingslakes, I suppose?" was Lady Wilmot's next query.

"No, scarcely once since they got into their flat last November. Just as they came to town, I moved out, and the children have kept me bound hand and foot ever since. I'm going to rush in between five and six on my way to Victoria."

"My dear, you won't know Cecily!"

"Why not?" asked Rose, almost sharply.

"So pretty. So well dressed. Curious what a man can do, isn't it? No wonder they're vain." Lady Wilmot smiled broadly as she raised a superfluously buttered muffin to her lips.

"What man?" asked Rose, brusquely.

"Mayne, my dear; Dick Mayne, The Uncommercial Traveller, or Patience Rewarded. It would make a nice little modern tract. But the result is admirable as far as Cecily is concerned. I saw her about eighteen months ago. She came up to a lunch-party with Robert. She was positively dowdy, and like the lady—who was it?—who had no more spirit in her. Never saw such a collapse in my life, and every one agreed with me. But now! As pretty as ever—prettier. There's something different about her, too. I don't know what it is. Perhaps it's a touch of dignity about my lady. No, it's more than that. It's something a little sphinx-like. Anyhow, it's a most effective pose. Every one's talking, of course; but, as I tell them, when the result is so admirable why inquire too closely about the means?" She chuckled a little. Rose looked at her calmly.

"Every one's talking?" she said. "That means what you so aptly describe as 'this sort of thing.'" She let her eyes wander round the room, which was now filled with chattering women. "Does it matter? Cecily's friends know as well as you do that what you insinuate is a—is not true."

Lady Wilmot's expression wavered. She had crossed swords with Rose Summers before, and always found the exercise a little exhausting. Reluctantly she determined to be amicable, so with a laugh she shrugged her shoulders. "Of course, my dear. What a literal mind you have! You know Robert's got a secretary?" she added, with apparent innocence.

"So I hear. Philippa Burton," returned Rose, with composure.

Lady Wilmot's eyes lit up. "Do you know her?"

"I met her long ago in Germany. She was a school-fellow of Cecily's. I dare say you know that."

There was a pause. Lady Wilmot determined on a new move.

"Cecily's a fool," she said, gravely,—“that is, if she wants to keep her husband.” She glanced sharply at Rose, who was sipping her tea with exasperating indifference. "She had driven Robert to try reprisals, I suppose." There was a slight pause, during which Rose took some more tea-cake. "That's what every one imagines, anyhow," continued Lady Wilmot, with a distinct access of sharpness. "It's a dangerous game." She shook her head as a virtuous matron might have done, and

Rose struggled with a smile. "I've no patience with wives who allow attractive women to enter their homes under the pretext of work which they ought to be doing themselves," she concluded, in an exasperated tone, as she glanced at her neighbor's blank face. "Why on earth doesn't Cecily act as secretary to her own husband?"

"Because she's writing a novel of her own, and hasn't time," said Rose, speaking at last, to give, from Lady Wilmot's point of view, an utterly valueless piece of information.

"Ridiculous!" she ejaculated. "I should have thought there was enough scribbling in the family. Why doesn't she look after her husband, and be a companion and helpmeet to him, instead of allowing another woman to come in and give the sympathy which only a wife—and all that kind of thing?" she concluded, hastily, becoming suddenly conscious of her companion's amused eyes. It was a triumph for Rose. She had actually driven Lady Wilmot, of all people, into the ridiculous position of defending the domestic hearth, and she had the satisfaction of knowing that no one felt her position more keenly.

She rose from the table, extending her hand with great cordiality.

"Thank you so much for your delicious tea," she said. "And I'm sure you'll forgive me for rushing off in this unceremonious way. My train goes at half-past seven, and I *must* get Cecily in, as well as socks and shoes and sashes and things. No, *don't* move. There's such a crush to get through, and I can find my way out—truly. Good-bye." She was gone, threading her way between the tea-tables, and smiling back at Lady Wilmot, who instantly summoned a bewildered waiter, upon whom she made a vague attack for indefinite shortcomings.

Rose stepped into a hansom with a smile which already contained more bitterness than amusement. She was reviewing facts as interpreted by Lady Wilmot and company.

CHAPTER XIII

PHILIPPA'S "studio" was a somewhat uncomfortable apartment with a north light. Its walls were covered with brown paper, upon which were pinned hasty little sketches by the latest geniuses. One recognized the *latest* genius by the newness of the drawing-pins; the genius before last had generally lost one or even two of these aids to stability, and hung at a neglected angle. Above the mantelpiece there was a framed photograph of Rossetti's *Proserpine*, whom Philippa was often thought to resemble. The floor of the room was stained, and over it at intervals were laid pieces of striped material of pseudo-Eastern manufacture, fringed and flimsy. The furniture was scanty, but high-principled in tone. It was that sort of uncomfortable furniture which has "exquisite simplicity of line," and is affected by people who are more used to sitting on boards than sofas. There was an easel in a prominent position, and a cupboard with a glass front in a corner of the room, revealing various cups and bowls of coarse earthenware and foreign peasant manufacture. These were the cooking and eating utensils considered proper to the Simple Life.

It was the expense of the Simple Life which Philippa was at the moment considering, as she sat curled up on the hearth-rug before the fire, a heap of bills and other annoying documents in her lap. It was half-past three in the afternoon, but she wore a dressing-gown of rather doubtful cleanliness, and her hair was bunched up as she had twisted and pinned it when she got out of bed.

Philippa belonged to the eternal art student class; that class which subsists on very little talent and no income; the class which includes girls who would be better employed in domestic service, as well as those whom a genuine "feeling" for art has rendered unfit for any other occupation than that of painfully striving to express themselves—generally in vain. Though a member of this great sisterhood, by the possession of various rather exceptional gifts, Philippa had managed to deviate from its normal routine of monotony. She had beauty, and a mind wide enough to hold vague aspirations, as well as a useful shrewdness. Long ago she had made two discoveries. First, that seventy pounds a year is a totally inadequate income. Secondly, that infrequent work is not the best means of supplementing it. There are other ways, and Philippa had tried most of them.

There had been romantic friendships with women of property. Philippa had always been drawn to these ladies by soul-affinity—it was here that the vagueness of her mind stood her in good stead—but that fact did not lessen their balance at the bank, nor the tangible advantage which it bestowed on Philippa. With one lady, she had travelled in Italy and Greece. Another had paid for her course of instruction in enamelling, and considered herself blest in being allowed the privilege. A third had, till lately, paid the rent of her studio. Philippa accepted these benefits with a beautiful simplicity. No one better than she could gracefully bear an obligation. She had the rare art not only of making the benefactor feel privileged but of herself believing it to

be the case. With such a mixture of approbation and transient tenderness for the giver, might an angel regard the devotee who has shielded him from “beating in the void his luminous wings in vain.”

But feminine friendships are proverbially evanescent, and though the proverb may contain as much truth as other conventional maxims, Philippa had certainly found them “disappointing.” She had frequently to lament the jealousy of one, the pettiness of another, the terrible coarseness of fibre of a third. And though women are numerous, their incomes are usually small, and to be disappointed in one dear friend with money is a calamity. She is not easily replaced.

Philippa was not only deeply disappointed in Miss Wetherby, the lady who for two years previous had ensured the rent of her studio; she was also considerably worried. Their quarrel had been upon a very delicate matter—a matter of money; and Miss Wetherby had taken a low but decided view upon a transaction which Philippa was accustomed to slur over in thought. An episode followed upon which, again, she refused to dwell, except at intervals when she received a little note which she hastened to put into the fire. She had that very morning burned one of these letters, but, however unwillingly, she was now obliged to consider its contents.

Bohemia is a wide country, and some of its inhabitants are unsavory. Eighteen months⁸ previous, at a moment when a cheque was imperatively necessary, Philippa had allowed one of them to come to her assistance. She had not subsequently treated him very well, and his letters began to threaten her peace of mind. They hinted at danger. It was then that she first met Robert. Hitherto, in spite of her beauty, her relations with men, with one very dubious exception, had not from any material point of view been satisfactory. She had met few—of the right sort. There had been the men at the art schools, of course, mostly penniless, who had raved about her. Philippa had not encouraged them, further than Artemis might have encouraged the worshippers at her shrine. They were practically useless, except as rather shabby burners of incense. Poverty and dependence upon feminine caprice is not the best *milieu* for making the acquaintance of rich men, added to which there was the undoubted fact that the average man of the world had a tendency to regard Philippa as Mayne had regarded her. He did not care for “that kind of thing.” Accustomed to “smartness” in women, Philippa’s robes made him feel as vaguely uncomfortable as her intense style of conversation abashed and disconcerted him.⁹ Certainly it required a man who at least dabbled in art, who at least had some sympathy with the Quartier Latin, to appreciate Philippa.

For some time before she and Robert had become friends she had known him by sight. He had been pointed out to her once at the Museum as Fergus Macdonald, the novelist who was becoming well known, and bade fair presently to coin money. Before very long it was obvious that he admired her, and with no definite idea as to the result, yet with a sure instinct that it was the wise course to adopt, Philippa had extended her period of reading. The outcome had been satisfactory, though it was a

blow to learn that he was married, and a blow that was not softened by the discovery that she knew his wife. In the early days of their acquaintance, Philippa read much literature which dealt with the possibility of friendship between man and woman. At a later date, when Robert was getting a little out of hand, and her own thoughts began to stray towards putting their sacred friendship upon a different plane, she discovered many treatises upon the doctrine of free love. She began to study the subject, and found it quite engrossing. It seemed to her a very beautiful and noble attitude towards a great aspect of human life. Robert and she often discussed it together earnestly. In the meantime, the Simple Life, which, at the recommendation of Tolstoi, Miles, and others, she had adopted since the defection of Miss Wetherby, had not proved so economical as she had hoped. Besides, she was getting tired of it.

Robert frequently took her out to lunch, and the frailty of the natural man prevailing over the submission of the lover, he had, at an early date, abandoned the vegetarian restaurant for Prince's or the Carlton. Resigning her principles, as a tender concession to Robert's weakness, Philippa had become reconciled to six-course meals, and began to hate plasmon and suspect the efficacy of vegetables as an incentive to exalted thought.

She began to yearn, like the rich man, to fare sumptuously every day. Yet what was the use of such a desire as that when not only was she hard pressed to live at all, but also more deeply in debt than she cared to own even to herself? In old days, living in the sunshine of the smiles and the blank cheques of her dearest friends, Philippa had run up bills with alarming celerity. The "simple" dress was not cheap. Neither were the ornaments for which she had an unfortunate weakness; clasps and pendants of enamel and uncut gems of chaste and simple workmanship—but quite expensive. The bills began to come in with alarming frequency, and a growing tendency to unpleasant remark. She grew depressed. Robert, who raged over the injustice of a callous world which imposed poverty on beauty, constantly implored to be allowed to lighten the load. Philippa, smiling through her tears, as constantly refused.

It was she who had at last suggested the secretaryship. Robert had at first demurred, and seeing this she had pressed the point, had made it a test of his love for her. In no other way would she take from him so much as a farthing. He yielded, and under cover of her value to him as secretary Robert paid her an absurdly generous salary.

But even with Robert to the rescue matters were bad enough. Philippa fingered disgustedly the last bill she had received, and finally threw it into the fire. She sat gazing at the flame it made, the furrow between her eyes deepening as she thought. And in the background there was something worse. Characteristically she did not face it. She thought of it hazily, indeed, but it was inexorably there. She had put a weapon into the hands of a man who, if he used it at all, would not use it like a gentleman.

A neighboring church clock struck, and she started up. Quarter to four!—and she was not dressed.

She hastened into her bedroom, which opened out of the studio, and began to make a hasty toilet. The room was untidy and not very clean, and if to the garments revealed when the dressing-gown was thrown aside the same remark applied, it must in justice be remembered that even perfect cleanliness is dependent upon the amount of living wage. By the time the downstairs bell rang at a few minutes past four, Philippa looked like the Blessed Damosel, and Mr. Nevern, as he followed her up the studio stairs, felt what it was to be on the right side of the gold bar of heaven.

“Can’t I help?” he begged, as she began to make preparations for tea. It seemed a profanation that she should stoop to put the kettle on the fire. Yet how wonderfully it became her to bend her long, graceful body, and how she seemed to dignify and make mysterious the simplest actions! By the time he received a cup from her hands, Mr. Nevern was in a state bordering on spiritual exaltation.

“I have had a holiday to-day,” she told him, leaning back in the one comfortable chair the room contained. “Mr. Kingslake is out of town on business till to-morrow.”

Her companion’s face darkened with envy of the man with whom she spent half of every day.

“How long have you—had this work?” he inquired, trying to speak naturally.

“I’ve only just begun. It’s interesting, of course. But I can’t say I’m not glad of a long day to myself sometimes. It’s good in this hurried age to have time to possess one’s soul, isn’t it?”

“It was very good of you to let me come this afternoon,—to let me disturb you,” murmured Nevern.

“On the contrary, I wanted to make my holiday complete,” she returned, with a smile which set the young man’s heart beating. “How is the book going?” she pursued, placing her left hand tenderly on a slim volume of verse which lay on the table beside her.

Nevern, following the motion of her hand, glowed with joy.

“Not well,” was all he could find to say, however, and that gloomily.

“Are you surprised?” asked Philippa, with tender raillery. “Does delicate, beautiful work like this appeal to the multitude?”

Nevern smiled deprecatingly, but his heart bounded.

“You mustn’t say such charming things,” he stammered. “You make me——” He checked himself and hurriedly drank his tea.

“I don’t know which is my favorite,” she went on, thoughtfully, turning the leaves of the book. “This, perhaps, with its beautiful refrain.” She read the lines softly, while Nevern trembled with happiness. “Or this. But they are all exquisite.” She continued to turn the leaves with her long, delicate fingers, with a touch like a caress, while she talked. The sound of her voice was music in the young man’s ears, the flattery of her words an intoxication. He was sometimes conscious that he spoke at random, while his eyes were on her face, and then he flushed and pulled himself

together, but she did not seem to notice his temporary lapses; her eyes met his, limpid, full of sympathy, deeper than the depths of waters stilled at even. He found himself repeating the lines to himself while she was giving him a second cup of tea. His hand touched hers as she passed it, and his own shook so that some of the tea was spilled. A drop or two splashed onto Philippa's velveteen gown. With an exclamation of impatience for his clumsiness, Nevern fell on his knees and, snatching out his handkerchief, wiped away the stain.

"Your beautiful dress!" he murmured. Suddenly he stooped lower and kissed it. She did not move, and, emboldened, he touched her hand with his lips, tremblingly at first, and then passionately.

When he raised his head she was looking at him with an adorable expression of compassion and tenderness.

"Philippa!" he stammered; "I love you. Will you—will you marry me? Oh, you don't know how I——"

For a moment she continued to look at him with an expression he found hard to read, then she rose abruptly, and moving to the mantelpiece, stood leaning against it with averted face.

Nevern also rose. For a moment he hesitated, then drawing himself up he followed her.

"Philippa," he said again very simply, "I know I'm not worthy of you. But no one will ever love you better than I love you. Will you marry me?" His boyishness dropped from him as he spoke. Of his customary rather foolish affectation of voice and manner, there was not a trace. A real emotion had given him dignity.

Philippa turned. She glanced hurriedly at his face, and paused a moment before she said pleadingly, "Dear Nigel, don't disturb our friendship—yet. It has been such happiness. I don't want things altered—at any rate yet awhile."

Nevern hesitated, disappointment struggling with hope. "But later?" he begged at last. "May I some time later——"

She smiled. "We shall see. Let us leave things as they are indefinitely—well, for the present at all events. And now, dear friend, I think you must go." She put out her hand, smiling her rare, elusive smile.

Nevern seized it and covered it with kisses before she gently withdrew it.

"I may come again? Soon?" he whispered, hoarsely.

"Yes; but not till I write." She watched him, still smiling, as he went to the door, and turned for a last look at her.

When the hall door slammed, she drew herself up with a long, weary sigh. How badly everything was arranged! Why could she not have met Nigel Nevern a year ago instead of——

She went slowly into her bedroom, and returned with a photograph at which she gazed long and earnestly, and finally put down with a sigh.

Robert was very attractive. And she was in love with him, of course. She was almost angry to remember that Nigel Nevern had two thousand a year.

CHAPTER XIV

BY the time November came round again, Cecily's life had settled down to a more or less steady routine. She gave the mornings to her work, and her book was growing. Her afternoons, and many evenings, were taken up by social duties and occasional pleasures. With the persistence of a patient going through a prescribed cure, she contrived that no hour of her time should be unoccupied. She cultivated her natural gifts as a clever hostess, and began to entertain. Her little parties were popular, for like her father, who in his time had been a famous host, she possessed an instinct for the right people, and it began to be assumed that at Mrs. Kingslake's one would at least escape a dull evening. Sometimes her husband was present; more often he was away; but he encouraged the parties, and gradually Cecily grew accustomed to knowing as little of his engagements as if he were a stranger.

9Philippa had not taken up her duties as secretary until their return to town in the autumn after a holiday which Cecily had spent with Diana by the sea, and Robert abroad, whence he had written occasional letters, vague in tone as well as address.

The two women scarcely ever met. At ten o'clock, when Philippa went to Robert's study, Cecily was at work in her own room, whence she did not emerge till after the secretary's hour for departure. With all her strength she strove to forget her presence in the house, and the effort, at first apparently impossible, became at last no effort at all. Gradually her work absorbed her; gradually she began to live in another world of her own creating, often so completely that she woke with a start to the consciousness of her outward existence, in so far as it was connected at all with her husband.

It was of the strangeness of this she had been thinking one afternoon as she walked through St. James's Park on her way home.

It was the hour of twilight, that hour which, in the autumn and in London, has a magic past the power of words. The dusky red of sunset lingered, and burned solemnly through that swimming purple haze which London draws like a veil softly over its parks, its squares, its ugliest streets, turning to velvet softness the outlines of church, palace, or factory.

On her left, rendered more gigantic by the effect of the haze, the huge block of Queen Anne's Mansions loomed like a mediæval fortress on the farther side of a mist-filled valley, from which slender poplars sprang. Everywhere points of flame ringed the gathering darkness—flames of trembling amber, specks of crimson and emerald where the hansoms were moving—and before her, at the end of the broad avenue, silver globes burned before the great vague pile of masonry which was Buckingham Palace.

Cecily walked slowly, aware of the mysterious beauty of that brief moment when night touches departing day. There was a wisp of silver moon in the deep blue overhead, and near it one star trembled.

Involuntarily she smiled, and started to realize that it was for happiness. What had become of the torment, the unrest, of even a year ago? It was gone. She had peace. She was out of bondage. She felt the beauty of the world almost as an intoxication; with the keenness, the freshness of perception that seems granted to human faculties after pain. The thought of her nearly completed book thrilled her with pleasurable excitement. She remembered that Mayne was coming to dinner, and that she had promised to read him the last completed chapter. They would have a nice little time together by the fire, before the theatre to which he was going to take her. Robert was to be out. She did not know where, though she guessed—and it didn't matter. She drew herself up with a thrill of thankfulness that it did not matter. It was wonderful to be out of pain. The realization that she had refused to be crushed by circumstances, that she had mastered her life and turned it at her will, filled her with a sense of triumph, of exultation.

Involuntarily she quickened her pace, as though to make her steps keep time to her eager thoughts. As she crossed Victoria Street, the great campanile of the Cathedral drew her eyes upwards towards the stars, and her heart towards it in gratitude. At this hour it was more wonderful than ever, its outline, faint and purple, melting like a dream into the purple sky. With it she always associated her liberty, her present peace, her recovered energy, all that had brought her out of hell into the light of day.

When she entered the flat and opened the drawing-room door, it was to think how pretty, how cosy it looked in the firelight. Tea was ready on a low table near the hearth. The firelight danced over the dainty flowered cups, and darting about the room fell now upon a bowl of roses, now on the emerald silk of a cushion, bringing its color out in strong relief against the pale-tinted walls. A maid came in with a tea-pot and a plate of hot cakes, and long after she had put down her cup Cecily sat dreaming over the fire. She roused presently, with a glance at the clock, to find it was time to change her dress. All the while she moved about in her bedroom, taking off her walking-gown, doing her hair, fastening the bodice of her evening dress, her mind was pleasantly preoccupied. She was thinking of the people in her book, people who were flesh and blood to her. They would be discussed to-night, and Dick was no lenient critic. She wondered what he would think of her last chapter.

All at once, with a curious sense of having failed to realize something, she began to wonder what she should do without Dick. Suppose he were to start now on another expedition—next week, perhaps? She was fastening a chain round her neck when the possibility occurred to her, and all at once her hands dropped down into her lap and she stared blankly into the glass. The thought startled her. It was a little like having the solid ground upon which she walked, and which she accepted without consideration as part of the recognized order of things, cut from under her feet. So confused and absorbed was she at first, that not for some time did she become conscious of her own reflection in the mirror. When her mind was awake to it, that too

came as a surprise. She was almost pretty again. There was clear color in her cheeks; her eyes were bright.

"I suppose this frock is becoming," she told herself as she turned away.

Dick was waiting for her when she re-entered the drawing-room. He was standing near the fire, holding one hand to the blaze, and as he turned, she thought how big he looked, how reliable, and she smiled. It was surprising how glad she always was to see Dick. He never bored her.

"You're looking very pleased with things in general," he observed as he took her hand. "Is it because you've got on a new dress? I agree with you. It's charming."

Cecily laughed. "Shall I turn round slowly, to give you the full effect? Observe the lining of its sleeves and its dear little crystal clasps!"

"I have observed them," he said, "and their effect on you. It's all that could be wished." He spoke lightly, but his tone did not tend to diminish her light-hearted mood.

"Now come!" she exclaimed. "Sit there! Did you think you were here to enjoy yourself? You've got to listen to this chapter before dinner, and listen *hard*, and think how you can put severe criticism into a palatable form for me. I insist on the criticism, but I won't take it neat!"

She went to her writing-table, and returned with the written chapter, while Dick obediently settled himself into a comfortable chair.

"Go ahead!" he remarked. "May I smoke?"

The fire clicked a pleasant accompaniment to Cecily's voice. The lamplight streamed down upon her soft, thick hair. One of her hands hung over the arm of the chair, white and slender against the folds of her dress. It was her left hand, and the firelight fell on the gold of her wedding-ring. Mayne looked at it once, and averted his gaze with a half frown. At first it was altogether of her he was thinking, his pulses still beating rather quickly, as they always beat when he first saw her, at every one of their meetings. At the beginning of their intimacy he had been terribly afraid of betraying himself, of making their friendship impossible, but he had long ago learned to trust his own power of self-control, and his manner to Cecily had been the perfection of that affectionate friendliness whose justification is long acquaintance.

Gradually his attention began to be held by what she was reading. It seemed to him to be very good. This impression increased as she went on, till he grew absorbed, almost breathless. When finally she put down the last sheet and looked up at him, rather nervously, he was silent.

"Well?" she demanded, her voice shaken in a tremulous laugh.

Mayne got up and put his back against the mantelpiece. "Bravo!" he said, deliberately. "It's good, Cis—jolly good."

There was a moment's pause, during which the color rushed into her face, and her hands began to tremble. The particular scene she had read had meant a great deal

to her, how much she had not realized till she heard his evidently deeply felt words of praise.

“You think so?” she forced herself to say.

“I know it,” he returned, in the decisive voice which had often comforted her. He looked down at her, smiling. “Didn’t I always say you could do it? I don’t care what the public verdict is—and it’s quite likely to be slighting. You’ve done a splendid piece of work, and, by Jove! if you’re half as proud of it as I am——” He paused, and they both laughed.

“Dick,” she said gently after a moment, “I shouldn’t have done it at all if it hadn’t been for you.”

The door opened at the moment, and the parlor-maid came in to announce dinner.

Cecily sprang up. “Come along!” she said, gayly. “We must gallop through the courses—there are scarcely any, by the way—or else we shall be late, and I hate being late.”

Mayne followed her into the dining-room, glad and sorry for the interruption; and through dinner, and afterwards in the cab on their way to the Haymarket, they talked on indifferent topics.

“It’s going to rain,” said Cecily, as they drew up before the door, and, indeed, when they came out after the play, the streets were all wet and shining.

“Isn’t it beautiful and wonderful!” she exclaimed, as they drove home. “It’s Aladdin’s palace!” The streets were like long rivers of silver, in which were reflected trembling shafts of gold and ruby and amber. Overhead the moon sailed clear of clouds in an enormous gulf of star-sown sky. “How can any one say that London isn’t wonderful?” she went on. “To me it’s a magic city. Look at those great swinging globes. They’re shooting out starry spikes of enchantment all the time. And see those trees against the sky!”

They had turned into the Mall by this time, and Dick glanced at her. Her eyes were shining, her lips a little parted with eagerness. Suddenly he thought of the woman with whom he had walked across the meadows at Sheepcote. He recalled her drawn face and faded eyes, and something that was almost like an instinct of cruelty prompted his next words.

“How does Miss Burton do as secretary?” he asked. He had never before alluded to her daily presence in the house.

She glanced at him a moment, in her turn.

“Oh, I believe very well,” she returned, quietly, with no trace of confusion. “Robert hopes to get his new book out in the spring.”

“And yours?”

“It’s got to be accepted first,” she returned, with a laugh. “But I shall finish it in a week, I think.” She sighed. “How I shall miss it!”

“Begin something else at once,” he advised. “You have ideas?”

“Thousands!” she said, gayly.

They were near home by this time, and Mayne put out his hand. “I congratulate you.”

Cecily looked at him. “On the book, you mean?”

“On everything,” he returned, gravely.

There was a moment’s silence.

“Good-night,” said Cecily as he took her latch-key and opened the hall door for her. “Thank you so much.”

CHAPTER XV

ONE day early in April, Kingslake, who was walking towards the district station at Victoria, was stopped by a man he knew slightly and would like to have known better; a man justly celebrated in the world of science and letters.

"How are you, Kingslake?" he said.

"Where are you going? I'm just on my way to you."

Robert shook hands cordially, but looked mystified.

"On your way to me?" he began.

"Calling on your wife. Bless the man, he doesn't know his wife's at-home day, I believe!" Powis laughed good-temperedly as he spoke. "I expect you hate that kind of thing. Well, so do I, as a rule. It takes as charming a woman as Mrs. Kingslake to get an old fellow like me out calling nowadays, I can tell you."

Robert smiled. He had no idea that Cecily knew Powis at all.

"I see her book's coming out on Monday," the elder man went on. "Great excitement for you both, eh? Well, I hope it'll be a great success. She deserves it. Clever girl! I always thought, even when she was a little thing at home, she'd astonish us all some day. You kept her in the country too long, Kingslake. We're all glad to see her back."

Robert murmured a fairly appropriate reply. He felt rather dazed and confused.

"When are we to have your new novel?" was the next question. "Mustn't lag behind your wife, you know. Why don't you collaborate? But I expect you do. Well, we're impeding the traffic here. Sorry I sha'n't see you at the flat this afternoon. Good-bye." He hurried off, leaving Robert to ponder his voluble words.

Cecily's book out on Monday? He didn't even know she was writing a book. He walked on to the station, and mechanically took a ticket for South Kensington. "Great excitement for you both." The genial words fell again on his ear with ironical effect, while he was at the same moment conscious of one more stab to his vanity—an important personal equipment, which, of late, had been wounded more than a little. His own new book had been out quite six weeks, and it had fallen absolutely flat. This fact, a not uncommon check to the rising novelist, had depressed him considerably. Cecily had been very sympathetic about it. He remembered this still, with gratitude. Cecily, he reflected, was one of the few people who could be sorry for one without wounding.

So she had been writing a book! It seemed strange to think of it. He remembered how, in the early years of their marriage, he had sometimes found her "scribbling." He remembered how he had at first laughed and teased her, and afterwards, when she had shown symptoms of "taking it seriously," how he had shown his disapproval. He thought of this now, and it seemed to him rather a contemptible attitude to have adopted. He felt vaguely ashamed. But he had been jealous, really jealous; he recalled the sensation now with a curious stirring of a

forgotten emotion with regard to his wife—jealous that she should be absorbed in anything that did not concern him. How long ago it all seemed! And now she had written a novel, and he did not even know who was her publisher. He supposed she had placed it the more easily because of his name, which was also hers. There was comfort in that reflection. He was glad to have been of use to her. He hoped she would get some encouragement; he hoped——

And then he shook himself impatiently, conscious that he was not really thinking any of these things. All that was vividly present in his mind was a touch of resentment, a curious sense of bitterness that he knew so little about her; that he did not even know the men who went to the house. Except Mayne. He frowned involuntarily. Mayne was there a good deal. Well, he himself had often impressively invited him. With some haste he dismissed this reflection. At the moment it was one he did not feel disposed to investigate. It was unfortunate that he could not feel cordial towards Mayne. But after all, one's likes and dislikes were not within one's control, and Mayne was Cecily's friend, and so—— He banished the subject with an impatient shrug.

On emerging from the station at South Kensington, he heard his name uttered somewhat piercingly, and in response to a peremptory order, a motor-car drew up smoothly beside the curb.

"How are you, Robin?" Lady Wilmot exclaimed, extending a hand. "And why are you in this direction on your wife's at-home day? I'm on my way to her. How is she? As pretty as ever? I met her at the Duquesne's last week, and thought her looking charming. The country and your exclusive society, my dear, evidently disagreed with her."

"You are always kind," returned Robert.

"And what is this I hear about a book of hers?" she pursued.

"It's coming out on Monday," said Robert, thankful to be able to supply the information.

"You'll have a rival near home!" chuckled his companion. "That last book of yours isn't doing much, is it? Knights and castles and things are off for the moment, I think. Why don't you write a society novel? They always take, if you make the women spiteful enough; but I admit the difficulty of that. Well, I must be off. Your wife's a good hostess. I never miss her parties. Good-bye, my dear. When will you come and dine?" The last question was put in a shrill voice over her shoulder, as the car glided off.

Robert walked on. The little interview had not raised his spirits, and as he turned into the quiet, rather shabby little road which contained Philippa's studio, it was with a shock the reverse of pleasant that he saw Nevern coming down the steps of her house. He knew the young man slightly, and nodded to him as he passed. Before the door opened, he noticed that Nevern turned and watched his admittance with what his imagination, at least, construed into an angry frown.

Philippa opened the door—she kept no servant—and he followed her upstairs without speaking.

When the studio door closed she turned round and looked at him, inquiry in her eyes.

“Well?” she said, tenderly, in her deepest voice as she held out both hands.

Robert ignored them, and walked moodily towards the fire.

“Robert!” murmured Philippa.

He was silent.

Philippa hesitated a moment, then, as though taking a sudden determination, she followed him to the fire, and resting one elbow on the mantelpiece, looked at him haughtily.

“Will you explain?” she demanded.

“What was Nevern doing here?” asked Robert, abruptly.

Philippa raised her eyebrows.

“He was calling on me.”

“Does he often call? Do you often have men here—to see you?” He spoke in a voice of suppressed anger.

“Quite often,” returned Philippa, firmly; “why not?”

Robert was silent. Presently he turned sharply towards the window, and stood looking out upon the roof-tops opposite.

Philippa remained standing by the mantelpiece. There was impatience in her face, and a certain indecision. Once she opened her lips to speak, and refrained. Finally, with a shrug of the shoulders, she went to him and laid her hand gently on his arm.

“Surely this is not jealousy, Robert?” she said, plaintively. “After all our talks? After our mutual agreement upon that subject?”

“It’s all very well!” exclaimed Robert; “but if, under—our circumstances, a woman doesn’t know what is due to the man she professes to love, would you have him say nothing?”

“I would have him so trust the woman he professes to love that he should feel jealousy an insult to her,” she returned, with lowered eyelids.

Robert did not answer for a moment; when he spoke his voice was husky.

“You don’t understand,” he began, “how a man feels when——”

“When a woman spends half an hour in giving good advice to a boy?” smiled Philippa. “Oh, Robert, don’t let us profane our love. Do let us keep vulgar jealousy out of it. I want so much to make it a real inspiration, an ennobling influence in our lives. Come, Robert! Be good.”

The last words were uttered pleadingly, and he turned. She looked very beautiful, with her face upraised to his, and moved by a sudden gust of passion, Robert flung his arms round her and kissed her white throat.

An hour later, however, in spite of their reconciliation, Robert was again moody and depressed. He pushed his tea-cup away from him, and began to wander restlessly about the room, a sure sign with him of mental perturbation. Philippa lay back in her low chair, and watched him furtively. There was a certain exasperation in her face which, if he had not been too preoccupied, Robert would have found easily discernible.

"I don't know what's the matter with my work," he was saying, irritably. "The book's not going a bit."

"Not a bit," agreed Philippa, with somewhat exasperating calm.

"What's the reason?" demanded Robert, coming to an abrupt pause before her chair.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Your dear public's tired of that particular mild blend, I suppose. You must mix something else. Give it them stronger."

Robert glanced at her. It struck him that her tone was not quite sympathetic. Philippa had an occasional odd trick of dropping the mystic for the pronouncedly colloquial turn of speech. "You speak as though I were a tea merchant or a tobacconist," he exclaimed.

"Don't you wish you were?" she asked, stretching out her hand for a cigarette.

"No," returned Robert, shortly.

At times, also, Philippa was quite disconcertingly materialistic. He never quite knew what to make of her at such moments. It was such a curious lapse from her usual lofty standpoint. She saw his bewilderment, and after a moment put out her hand to him.

"Dear, I know how it frets you as an artist, but, after all, even artists must live. And to do that they must condescend to the stupid multitude. Why not write a society novel, Robert?" She sat upright in her chair. "With lots of titles, you know——"

"And the women spiteful enough," put in Robert, with a short laugh. "I've had that advice once to-day—from Lady Wilmot. I scarcely expected it from you, Philippa."

She rose, and began to put the tea-things together.

"You are unreasonable," she began, coldly, after a slight pause. "First you grumble because your book doesn't suit the public, and then when I suggest something that probably will, you turn upon me."

He did not immediately reply, and when he spoke, Philippa recognized with a flash of anger that he had not been attending to her words.

"Do you know that Cecily's been writing a book?" he asked, suddenly. "It's to be out to-morrow."

"Oh?" she returned, coldly. "What a lot of scribblers there are in the world, to be sure."

Robert felt annoyed. He parted coldly from Philippa, and taking a hansom in the Brompton road, drove to his club. On the stairs he met Travers, a friend of his. Travers looked perturbed and angry.

“Women are the very deuce!” he exclaimed, in reply to an interrogation.

“I agree,” said Robert, with fervor.

CHAPTER XVI

LATE in the afternoon of the following Tuesday, Robert sat over the fire in his study, reading his wife's book.

He had found it on his writing-table, when he returned to the flat soon after three o'clock, after lunching with Travers at his club.

The sight of the green-covered volume with Cecily's name in gilt letters upon it affected him with an odd, unclassified, but very strong emotion. It was a moment before he could touch it. Then he turned to the title-page. It was empty of any dedication, but his initials and Cecily's, in her handwriting, stood in the right-hand corner. He took up the book hurriedly, possessed with a sudden burning curiosity, and throwing himself into a chair, began to read. He read straight on, and now he had almost reached the last page. A few moments later he closed the book, and sat looking down at the cover, with unseeing eyes. It had been a curious experience. To a stranger the book would probably seem impersonal, if anything; rather unusually impersonal for a woman, perhaps. To Robert it was full of Cecily; full of her personality; full of the self which, in the first months of their marriage, she had revealed to him, and, as he divined, to him alone. It was like something lost and remembered in a dream; something so beautiful and intimate that only in a dream could its memory be recaptured. Very gently, as though fearing to break the spell, he laid the closed book upon the table. In the background of consciousness his critical faculty was awake, slightly amazed, and more than slightly approving.

The book was immature, but it had power, it had distinction, it was moving. The artist in him rejoiced; the man was troubled by conflicting emotions. There was latent pride, there was more than a twinge of jealousy, to name only two of them.

He rose abruptly and stood leaning against the mantelpiece. It was odd that for the last three hours he had completely lost sight of Philippa. She had had no existence beside that fleeting vision of his wife. He thought of her now with a sort of shock, as though she were a stranger. Only yesterday he had been torturing himself about the state of her feelings towards him. Did she care for him as much as ever? Now, for the moment, at least, it seemed not to matter.

He wanted to go and speak to Cecily, and remembered with an inexplicable pang how long it was since they had exchanged more than a few conventional words. Sometimes he wondered whether she suspected his relations with Philippa; but long ago he had persuaded himself that, even if she did, it was no matter, since she had ceased to care about him. She was in the drawing-room, but, as he expressed it to himself, in the company of "a whole crowd of people." This he gathered from the faint murmur of talk which reached his study. He wondered whether Mayne was there. He wondered whether—— But this was a speculation which had been more or less present to his mind in a scarcely acknowledged form for more than a year, though

never till to-day had it made his face change as it changed now. He began to pace the room.

Would those chattering fools never go? Cecily was always surrounded by them! And he wanted to tell her that he liked her book.

He had worked himself into a fever of impatience before the hall door closed for the last time. Then, at last, hearing no sound from the next room, he went in.

The door was a little ajar and Cecily, who was sitting in a low chair by the fire, did not notice his entrance. It had grown dusk, but the lamps were not yet brought in, and the firelight fell full upon her face as she leaned back in her chair. Robert remembered Lady Wilmot's remark—"She's looking quite pretty again." It was long since he had noticed Cecily's looks, and it was with a sense of surprise that he admitted the justice of his godmother's remark. He had thought Cecily had grown faded. She did not look faded now; and she was charmingly dressed. Standing in the shadow of the door, Robert watched her a moment. Her eyes were fixed on the fire, and a little smile played about her lips. He wondered what she was thinking about, and an unexpected stab of jealousy smote him, to realize that he didn't know, that he might not ask.

He moved forward and Cecily, rather startled, raised her head. She rose with a kind of embarrassment at the sight of him and stood waiting by the mantelpiece as he came near.

"I've read your book," he began.

She flushed nervously.

"Already?" she asked, with a laugh.

"Yes. I read it at a sitting." He paused. "I wanted to tell you that I like it. I like it more than I can—" Again he stopped, and Cecily looked at him, surprised and touched. Robert, who was always so fluent! That Robert should stammer and hesitate meant much.

Impulsively she put out her hand. "Really? I'm so glad," she began, softly.

"Mr. Mayne," said the maid's voice suddenly, and Robert dropped the hand he had the previous moment eagerly taken.

"That you, Mayne? You'll excuse me—I must get to work," he said, making towards the door at which Mayne had just entered.

He had seen his wife's eyes go past him and brighten as they fell upon her visitor, and he closed his study door with a bang.

CHAPTER XVII

THE weeks that followed were difficult weeks for Robert. Cecily's book was a success in so far that from the artist's standpoint it attracted just the right sort of attention. It was praised by just the half-dozen critics whose opinion Robert held to be valuable; the critics whose good opinion he had secretly never ceased to covet, even while he consciously strayed into the broad path which leads to popular success and literary destruction.

But in her own immediate circle, comprising as it did many people whose chief interests were connected with the world of books, Cecily's success was immediate and strikingly apparent. Already popular as a charming as well as a pretty woman, it needed only the added distinction of having written a novel that was discussed at length in the Quarterlies to make her openly courted. Robert never saw her nowadays. It had come to be tacitly understood that "the Kingslakes went their separate ways," and invitations in which he was not included were showered upon his wife. The first party for several weeks to which they went together was one given in June by Lady Wilmot.

At half-past nine, Robert stood waiting in the hall for his wife. In a few minutes her bedroom door opened and she came out, followed by a maid who held her evening cloak ready.

Robert regarded her critically. She wore a white gown, which he, a connoisseur of women's dress, thoroughly approved. Moreover, as he could not fail to see, it was extraordinarily becoming. Her dark hair looked very soft and cloudy, the color in her cheeks was faint and delicate as a wild rose. He looked at her, and saw she was a beautiful woman.

"Do I look nice?" she asked, smiling. Oddly enough Robert felt depressed that the smile was so cordial.

"Very," he returned, and did not speak again till they were in the hansom that the hall porter had called. Even then it was she who broke the silence.

"You look rather tired," she said, glancing at him. "Are you?"

"Not tired. Beastly depressed." He spoke in the tone of a child who needs comfort, a tone which Cecily knew well. It never failed to move her.

"Things aren't going very well just now?" she asked, gently. "It's frightfully worrying while it lasts, isn't it? But it won't last. Nothing lasts. Why, next year, I shall be down *there*"—she indicated infinite depth,—“and you, towering on pinnacles above me!”

"Oh, no!" returned Robert, bitterly. "You've come to stay."

Cecily shrank back a little into the corner of the cab. When she replied, her voice trembled.

"You speak almost as though you were sorry," she said. "And that makes me miserable. There's no comparison between your best work and mine, Robert—but there's also no accounting for what will succeed."

Robert felt a violent increase of the irritation that possessed him—an irritation which had its source in many complex, undefined emotions.

"Oh, as to that," he began, with a contemptuous laugh, "that's quite immaterial. Surely, my dear Cecily, you can't imagine that I'm jealous of this little boom of yours? I don't take *that* seriously."

She was stung by his tone. "Am I to understand that there's something you *do*?"

"Yes," returned Robert, suddenly. "I object to your intimacy with Mayne." The words broke from him, apparently without his own volition. He was startled at their sound.

For a long moment there was silence.

"On what grounds?" inquired Cecily at last, in the same icy tone.

"On the grounds that people are talking—and that you are my wife."

She looked full at him and he felt, rather than saw, the scorn in her face. "Do you remember," she said at last, "my surprise when, without consulting me, you asked Dick Mayne to the house?"

"When I trusted my wife," he began, feeling that the confidence was fading out of his voice. "I thought she would have sufficient regard for my——"

His words were cut short by her bitter laugh.

"Oh, Robert! Are you really going to talk about your honor? That will be very funny."

A fury, fanned to white heat by the mockery of her tone, seized Robert. While he was struggling for words the hansom drew up before Lady Wilmot's door, and without his aid Cecily alighted and moved before him up the steps and into the house.

Lady Wilmot's big drawing-room was filled to overflowing when the Kingslakes entered. Their hostess pounced at once upon Cecily, and extended a casual hand to her husband.

"Here you are, my dear! I thought you were never coming! There are a hundred people languishing for a sight of you. Here's Mr. Fairholt-Graeme. I introduce him first, because his is a bad case, but he mustn't monopolize you long."

Cecily smiled as a tall, grave-looking man took her hand with an air of homage, and in a few moments she was surrounded by a little knot of men and women, all eager for a word with her.

Robert glanced round the room in search of Philippa. He caught a glimpse of her at last, on the broad landing outside the drawing-room. Some man was bending over her. Impatiently Robert struggled towards the door to see who it was, and presently discovered, as he suspected, Nevern.

He clenched his hands. How he hated⁸⁹ this kind of thing; hated the glaring lights, the parrot chatter, the crush, the heat, the sight of familiar faces. Some of them were smiling invitations, and he had to go and exchange *badinage*; to listen to repeated congratulations on Cecily's success; to invent fresh sentences to express his rapture. Above the heads of the crowd, presently, he saw Mayne, and with the recognition of his face, came an intolerable stab of anger, of jealousy. He watched; saw him steadily draw near to Cecily, saw him wait quietly, without impatience, till he could speak to her; saw him move aside with her to an open window, where they stood together talking.

In the meantime, unnoticed by him, Philippa was casting uneasy glances in his direction. From her seat on the landing, she could watch his face as he leaned in the doorway of the drawing-room, carrying on a desultory conversation with a pretty, fluffy-haired woman, who looked more than a little bored.

Robert's moods, as indicated by his expression, were too well known to Philippa to prevent her from misreading danger signals. She knew that she must get rid of Nevern.

"I think you ought to go, Nigel," she murmured, caressingly. "Yes, dear, please,⁹ I wish it. You have been talking to me too long."

Nevern was restive. "Why?" he whispered. "Why shouldn't every one know? I'm so tired of all this——"

"I do so want to keep our exquisite secret a little longer," she interrupted, hurriedly. "It's always a profanation when it is shared by the vulgar world. Besides, you promised, Nigel!"

He drew himself up with a sigh. "Yes, I know. But how long is it to go on like this?"

She smiled at him. "Be patient a little longer. Now let's go into the room, then I'll stop and speak to some one I know, and you can leave me."

"When may I come?" urged Nevern in the same low tone as she rose.

"I don't know. I'll write," she told him, hurriedly, with Robert's eyes upon her.

They took the few steps towards the drawing-room together, and taking care to make her dismissal of Nevern as casual as possible, as well as to be in full view of Robert when it was achieved, she gave both hands to Mrs. Stanley Garth, the distinguished theosophist. Philippa's attitude, as⁹ well as her rapid glance in passing, suggested that his moment had come. Robert allowed it to pass. Five minutes later she saw him shake hands with their hostess, and overheard the beginning of his excuses for leavetaking.

"But you *can't* go!" exclaimed Lady Wilmot. "All nonsense about a sick friend. I don't believe in him. Besides, you're not going to desert your wife?"

"Lady Luton has very kindly offered to drive her home," said Robert. "She lives almost next door, you know."

"I believe it's nothing but temper!" declared his hostess, jovially. "You're rather out of it nowadays, aren't you? When a man has a brilliant wife he must look to his laurels, eh? 'Pon my word, Robert, she's quite cut you out. Every one's talking about her book. Look at them now," she jerked her head back towards the room—"all swinging incense. Why, you wicked creature, you never even told me she wrote. I believe you were jealous!"

She was walking with him towards the head of the stairs while she chattered. She was hitting a little at random, but it amused her to discover when the blows were felt. To do Lady Wilmot justice, her malice was not exclusively directed against her own sex. To exasperate a man afforded her on the whole more entertainment than she would have derived had her victim been feminine. "A man's colossal vanity is so tempting," she frequently observed. "I long to overthrow it. But then, I always had a taste for the impossible."

Despite his utmost endeavors Robert could not make his rejoinders sound other than a trifle constrained.

"I admit I never took Cecily's work very seriously," he said. "That was my mistake. She never talked about it much herself, and—well, somehow one never thinks of one's wife as a literary woman. But, my dear lady! jealous of her? What an idea!"

"Rather a good idea, eh? I didn't know her well before she married, and you managed to give me quite a wrong impression of her, anyhow. I always pictured her a demure little country mouse, with scarcely a squeak in her. Look at her now!"

She put up her lorgnette. The rooms had thinned a little, and through the archway of the door they could both see Cecily, who, in the midst of a group of people, was talking animatedly.

"That's La Roche leaning over the sofa," said Lady Wilmot. "You know La Roche? He's the latest dramatic critic in Paris. Supposed to be very brilliant, I hear. Graeme introduced him, I imagine. Graeme's a tremendous admirer. You see he doesn't leave the field to La Roche, in spite of the introduction. And there's Mayne, of course."

"Why 'of course'?" inquired Robert, quickly. Lady Wilmot assumed an innocent expression.

"Why not? Isn't he your great friend, as well as Cecily's?"

"Certainly," was Robert's immediate reply.

"He seems to be exploring London drawing-rooms instead of jungles, nowadays," she continued. "Well, it's a fine field, and the animals are even more dangerous!"

"Good-bye, I must really go," said Robert again, putting out his hand.

"Must you? Nonsense," she returned, ignoring it. "I'm so enjoying this little chat. I scarcely ever see you now. How does Philippa Burton answer as a secretary?" There was a gleam of interested amusement in her eyes as she put the question.

“Excellently, thank you.”

Lady Wilmot put her head on one side and levelled her lorgnette at Philippa. “Doesn’t look much like a secretary, does she? Her hair always reminds me of a crimped hearth-rug. And how on earth does she manage never to forget that stricken-deer expression about the eyes? It’s very effective, though. I don’t wonder that when she thinks of her son poor old Mrs——” She checked herself abruptly. “Oh, I forgot. I promised not to say a word about that.”

“About what?” asked Robert, trying to conceal his anxiety.

“Never mind, my dear. Sometimes I think I talk too much. But Philippa’s a precious little humbug, you know. Only you men are such gabies.” Her bright eyes sought his face inquisitively. “Did you see her doing the high and noble with Sam Nevern to-night? I didn’t know how to contain myself!”

“I thought his name was Nigel?”

“Samuel, my dear. Nigel for poetic purposes. I’ve known his family for years. Most respectable. Old Nevern made a lot of money in soap or candles, I forget which—both, perhaps. Sammy will come in for a nice little fortune, so he can afford to write bad poetry. Not really going? How tiresome of you.”

Robert escaped into the sweet night air with a sense of unutterable relief. The Park gates were still open, and he turned into the broad walk, and, lighting a cigarette, walked on between the trees which hung motionless above his head. His brain was whirling, but by an effort of will he retraced the events of the evening, beginning with his drive to Lancaster Gate with Cecily. His pride shrank from admitting that he had been wrong, while his sense of justice accused him. Cecily’s words came back to him.

“Do you remember my surprise when you asked Dick Mayne to the house?”

It was true,—that, and more than that. He winced as he thought of all that had been at least tacitly included in his invitation to the man whose presence he now resented. He looked back upon it as one recalls a fit of half-remembered delirium.

How madly, in those days, he had loved Philippa! How she had filled for him heaven and earth, so that he would have risked anything, stooped to any baseness, to make her as fully his as he longed to make her! And now? He scarcely knew whether he loved her at all. He had been enraged at the sight of Nevern, certainly, but was it because he loved her? Wasn’t it rather blind resentment against the suspicion of betrayal, by Philippa at least, since Cecily no longer cared; a mad determination not to be abandoned, cast off by both women? He felt like a gambler who always loses, while his fellow-gamblers have all the luck. Lady Wilmot’s chatter beat through his brain incessantly. “Mayne, of course.” So people were really talking! He raged to know with how much truth. Then came the remembrance of her incessant harping upon his wife’s success, and its effect upon his vanity. Shame at his own lack of generosity struggled in vain with the knowledge that Lady Wilmot was right. With whatever injustice, with whatever lack of generosity, he *did* resent it, even though the resentment was touched with admiration and an odd sort of pride. Robert had never

achieved self-analysis quite so free from self-deception, as during that short walk under the dreaming trees.

The keeper on the other side of the Park was waiting to shut the gate as he reached Hyde Park Corner, and a glance at the clock showed him that it wanted a minute to twelve. Mechanically, seeing nothing, he walked down Grosvenor Road, and on into Victoria Street,⁹ where, though the omnibuses had ceased to run, cabs still wandered, or passed one another at full speed, while an occasional motor-car shot amongst them. As he turned out of the street into the stillness of Carlisle Place, his eyes fell upon the Cathedral tower, majestic against the night sky sown with stars. Like Cecily, he felt its quietude, but only as something which accentuated the restless, uneasy tumult of his thoughts. Upstairs, when he reached the flat, the light was burning in the hall. Cecily had not returned. He felt vaguely relieved as he went straight to his room and shut the door.

CHAPTER XVIII

BY the next morning Robert had determined to leave town for a week or two, and take a holiday. He felt ill and nervous; his work was suffering; he would take advantage of a standing invitation from some friends at Maidenhead. A fortnight's idling on the river would do him no harm, and relieve him from the necessity of meeting either his wife or Philippa. Quite early, he despatched two telegrams, and leaving a note for Cecily, he was on his way to Paddington before eleven o'clock. Cecily received the curt intimation of his departure with a sense of great relief. She was bitterly angry. Through a sleepless night she had followed again and again, with growing contempt, all the links in the chain of events which had preceded Robert's outburst of the previous evening. Her anger burned the more fiercely with the memory of the impulse of tenderness which her husband's words had quenched. She had thought herself so indifferent, she had so trained herself to forget, to ignore him, that it was with a sort of wonder she had felt her heart stirred lately by the sight of his obvious depression. Often she had longed to try to comfort him, and had found herself scornfully wondering what Philippa was about, to be unable to render this first aid to the wounded. She had been by no means displeased to find that Philippa did not understand him.

Now all her pity for him was forgotten in indignation. All night she had been anticipating their meeting and the inevitable renewal of their broken conversation. What would be its result? And now, for the present at least, she might leave that consideration. Rose Summers was coming for a fortnight's visit. There was comfort in the thought that she should have her to herself.

"Well, lioness!" was her friend's greeting when she arrived at the well-chosen tea-hour. She kissed Cecily and held her at arm's length, nodding approval. "A very well-favored animal," she remarked. "I congratulate you, my dear."

Cecily laughed. "I've taken great pains with the grooming," she said. "Do you groom lionesses, by the way?"

"For drawing-room use, certainly. In your case with admirable result. Now, for heaven's sake, give me some tea and tell me things."

Cecily complied with both requests, though to the latter she did not respond as thoroughly as her cousin wished. Except for an occasional half-hour now and then, they had not met for a year, and Rose was amazed at the change in Cecily. She struck her as looking prettier than she had been even in her early girlhood, but so different from that girlish Cecily that it was difficult to think of the two individuals as in any way related. Cecily was one of those women who develop late, in intellect, in all that makes personality, even, under favorable circumstances, in beauty. At twenty-five she had been still immature. Now, at thirty-two, she gave the impression of a woman self-possessed, if gracious and charming in manner; a woman who had looked close at life, and was under no illusions with regard to it.

As Rose listened to her, she gained the impression of a full and varied existence, full of interest, at least, if not of happiness. Of Mayne, Cecily spoke quite frankly. She saw much of him. She owed him much—"almost everything, in fact." Of her husband, though Rose waited, she spoke not at all, beyond a mention of the fact that he had gone into the country for a week or two.

"I didn't ask any one to dinner," Cecily said. "I thought we'd be alone the first evening—and not go out anywhere."

"It's a change for you to be quiet, I see," remarked Rose.

Cecily laughed. "Yes," she admitted. "There's always some one here—or else I'm out."

"A great change from Sheepcote?"

"Thank God! yes—in every way."

The immediate reply was fervent, and Rose wondered, though at the time she said nothing. It was only after dinner, when they sat by the open window in the drawing-room, that she deliberately introduced the subject of her speculations.

"Do you remember the last time we sat by the window and talked?" she said.

Cecily was smoking. She broke off the ash of her cigarette against the window-sill before she replied.

"Yes," she said. "I was in hell then."

"And now?"

"Now I'm out of it."

Rose paused a moment. There was no mistaking the quiet thankfulness of the tone.

"And Robert?" she ventured.

"I know nothing about Robert—or rather, to be strictly truthful, I didn't till last night." She laughed a little. "And then I made a discovery."

"Yes?"

"I find that Robert is, or pretends to be, jealous of Dick Mayne."

Almost imperceptibly, Rose started.

"Does that mean that——?"

Cecily shrugged her shoulders.

"Is she still his secretary?"

"Oh, yes."

"But——?"

"I don't know," returned Cecily. "I don't think it matters."

Mrs. Summers waited a few moments.

"Cecily," she said at last, "are you sincere? Are you as indifferent as that?"

"If you mean with regard to that, or any other woman—yes."

"You don't care for him? not any more at all?"

Cecily hesitated, then sighed rather wearily. "Oh, I don't know. I thought not—but—I don't know. He's made me despise him; he's robbed me of every illusion

about him; I see him, and have long seen him—just as he is. Now he has insulted me in a way that’s so ludicrously unjust that I——” She laughed again. “That’s all one can do—laugh. And yet——” She stopped.

“Yes?” said Rose again.

“Yet I feel bound to him,” declared Cecily, slowly. “Not in any sort of legal way, of course, but just so that I can’t help myself. When he looks tired, or worried, or disappointed—and he so often looks all of them—my heart aches. I want to comfort him. It’s just as though he were my child, you know, my silly, naughty little boy.” She smiled to herself, quietly.

“Cis!” exclaimed Rose, involuntarily. “How you have grown up!”

“Grown up? I have grown old. Hundreds of years old.” The last words were uttered as though to herself. For some time neither of them spoke.

“What are you going to do about Dick?” asked Rose at last.

Cecily turned her head in surprise. “Do about him?”

“People are talking, you know. I heard it last year when I was in town, and, indirectly, once or twice since.”

“Are you thinking of Robert?” There was a note of contemptuous amusement in her voice.

“Not at all. Of you.”

“Then don’t trouble, dear. People will continue to talk. But as long as I don’t fizzle out, they’ll also continue to ask me to their parties.”

“And is there no danger—of anything else?” persisted Rose.

“Of my falling in love with Dick, you mean? Not the slightest.”

“Then you wouldn’t mind if he went off exploring again?”

Cecily started. “Yes, I should,” she returned, quickly. “I couldn’t *bear* it.”

“Why?”

“Why?” She looked at her friend in bewilderment. “Because of everything. Because of—— Why, he’s made everything possible. My book—all the people I’ve got to know. I was all to pieces when Dick came home. He put me together again, and stood me on my two feet, and——”

“And yet you are in no danger.”

Cecily looked at her a full moment without speaking, and it was Rose who again broke the silence.

“My dear, when a woman relies on a man like that, when she can’t picture life without him, there is always danger.”

“If you only knew,” began Cecily, leaning forward and speaking impressively, “if you only knew how thankful I am to be *out* of love. To have peace, to have freedom, to have found myself again. It’s just what I said. It’s just as though I had stepped out of hell, to find the blue sky over my head, and the grass underfoot, and the flowers everywhere, all the dear, beautiful, natural things—that never hurt one.”

“I know,” said Rose. “But that’s just a phase, Cis—a reaction. Don’t think you’re done with love because you dread it. You’re young. You have tremendous vitality. Look at yourself now in the glass, and think what you were two years ago. You’re not the sort of woman for whom things are very easily over.”

“And even so,” interrupted Cecily, passionately, “granted that what you say is true, would you have me give up Dick’s friendship?—a friendship which was forced upon me by my husband, for a reason which he has since made sufficiently obvious?”

“I would have you completely realize the situation, that’s all,” returned Rose, calmly. “After that, I’m quite content to leave it with you. What I can’t stand, is the silly way in which people deceive themselves, and then stand in amazement, or rend heaven with their cries, when their celestial palaces, whose foundation a fool might have seen to be rotten, come tumbling about their ears. Do what you choose as long as you know you’re doing it, is what I would say to any but the congenital idiot.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then Cecily laughed.

“I like you when you turn on the vinegar and vitriol,” she said. “Have another cigarette?”

CHAPTER XIX

FOR some considerable time past, the plastic heart of Philippa had been undergoing its periodical regeneration. It now yearned in all sincerity for the domestic life. Nigel's devotion was so beautiful; his attitude of reverential adoration was so supremely right and touching. It was the forever profoundly necessary and inevitable attitude of the eternal man towards the eternal woman. At this time she thought and talked much about the sacred name of "wife." So intense was her conviction that the true meaning of life lay in the sacramental view of marriage, that Robert and his claims sank into the background of her consciousness. In her heart, which she pictured as a sort of solemn temple of purity, Nigel was radiantly enthroned. Robert and his salary were but the steps to the altar, necessary steps, for her eager feet were still shackled by the weight of debts; by still more embarrassing encumbrances belonging to the old life, when she still sat in darkness, and knew not the light. For this reason, though Philippa strove to look upon her obligation as a penitential discipline, it was still necessary to be "nice to Robert." As yet she could not afford to break to him, however sorrowfully, that their paths must in future diverge; hers towards the stars, and his—well, in fact, wherever he pleased. She was no longer particularly interested in Robert's path. It had ceased to concern her. It was, however, of him she was thinking as she walked towards Westminster one morning, on her way to her secretarial duties.

Poor Robert! But he had been very disappointing. In him she had not found the satisfaction of those higher intellectual and spiritual needs for which chiefly, of course, she had joined her life—for a certain time—with his. In brooding over this regrettable fact, Philippa honestly lost sight, for the moment, of any tangible advantage which her friendship with him continued to involve. Her impulse was to sever the connection at once. Then the memory of pressing money difficulties brought her back with a shock to actualities, and the realization that with however generous a sum coming in every quarter, it would take many months of plain living and rigorous saving to free herself—for Nigel. There was nothing for it, then. She must stifle aspirations, quiet the beating of her wings, and continue to draw her salary. She sighed. Robert was becoming very trying. His fortnight's holiday had been a great relief to her. It had enabled her, for one thing, to see a great deal of Nigel, and thus to strengthen and confirm her new attitude towards "life at its worthiest," as she now expressed her emotions concerning her future union with the poet.

This was the first morning after Robert's return; it was in obedience to a note received from him the preceding evening that she was now on her way to Westminster to resume duties and to assume emotions which had become alike distasteful. She wondered why she had ever thought Robert charming. He bored her terribly now. She did not know which bored her most, his fits of gloomy depression about his work, or his increasingly rare fits of devotion to herself. That she welcomed even while she

dreaded, the knowledge that Robert's passion for her was decreasing, was a significant measure of her boredom. His infatuation was passing; and she rejoiced, for this would make the break with him easier. But it must not go too soon—not till, well—not till she was free—for Nigel.

A church clock struck half-past ten, and she quickened her pace. She was late, and it would not do to put Robert into a bad temper. His note had been more affectionate than usual, the effect of absence, she supposed, and she resigned herself to the thought of a love scene. She wondered whether he would talk about Cecily. Lately he had begun to talk about his wife, whose name had at first never been mentioned between them. From his irritable remarks Philippa had for some time gathered that, as with unaccustomed bluntness she put it to herself, he was beginning to be jealous, and she wondered a little idly if, "when things were over," he and Cecily would be reunited. The matter did not interest her greatly. Women were not very interesting to Philippa, and her thoughts soon diverged to the consideration that she had a trying morning before her, and that it was above all things necessary to keep her temper. Naturally, Philippa's temper was not very good, but in proud humility she had often controlled it lately "for Nigel's sake." The thought was a great stay and consolation. She was glad to discover what might be endured with the sustaining inspiration of a really noble love.

Robert was pacing the study when she entered, and she went towards him with outstretched hands. He glanced at the clock.

"You were in no great hurry," he said, coldly.

"Robert!" There was hurt, but tender reproach in her voice. "Your clock is fast. I didn't like to come before the time. I thought it might seem——" She hesitated, as though confused.

"You've been quite on the safe side."

"Robert, dear!"—she put her hands on his shoulders, and looked into his eyes—"aren't you going to kiss me?"

He put his lips to hers, and Philippa reflected that she might have been married five or six years. She felt at the same time relieved and impatient.

"Did you have a nice holiday?" she asked, taking off her hat. "It doesn't seem to have done you much good." The last words were tinged with a shade of acrimony as she glanced at him.

There were ugly lines about his face, and Philippa recalled with satisfaction Nevern's handsome profile. Robert was growing very unattractive.

"I've been sleeping so badly," he complained.

"Well, what shall I do first?" was Philippa's comment as she seated herself at her own writing-table in the window.

Robert moved to his desk, and stood fidgeting with a paper-knife before he answered.

“So you don’t want to know anything about it?” he burst out at last. “What I’ve been doing? Who was there? Anything, in fact.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “My dear Robert, any one would think you’d been round the world, instead of a fortnight on the river.”

“You’d have been anxious enough a year ago,” he returned, bitterly.

She made an impatient exclamation. “How unreasonable you are! I come in, longing to see you, and hear all about it, and you’re as cross as two sticks. And now—”

In moments of irritation Philippa evinced a growing tendency to drop into the colloquial, but the obvious justice of her remark appealed to Robert.

“You’re quite right,” he said, penitently. “I’m unbearable.” He leaned over the back of her chair, and drawing her head to him kissed her on the forehead.

Philippa pulled herself together mentally and smiled.

“Give me the letters to write first,” she said, “and then you can dictate.”

Robert went back to his desk and the morning’s work began. For some time the click of the typewriter went on without interruption. Then Philippa turned.

“What am I to say about this letter of Mr. Nevern’s?” she asked in a casual tone.

Robert frowned at the name.

“What’s it about? I forget.”

“He encloses a poem, and asks your opinion upon it.”

“He’d be sorry if I gave it,” returned Robert, with a laugh.

Philippa waited in silence.

“Is that what I’m to say?” she inquired at last in a voice that expressed nothing.

“Don’t be silly. Just write the usual note, of course. I’m much struck by the grace and charm of his verses, and so forth. And don’t mention the *Literary Review*, which is, of course, what he wants mentioned. That’s the worst of having influence. One’s badgered incessantly by a lot of incompetent fools.”

Philippa’s machine was at once set in motion. In a few minutes she had written two notes. Two or three minutes later the postman’s knock was heard, and Robert went out into the hall to get the letters. He returned with two or three, and stood opening them by the chimney-piece.

Presently he gave a short, angry laugh.

“What’s that?” asked Philippa, without turning.

“Oh, nothing. Only a letter from Barker. He’s returning that last story.” He crumpled up the envelope and threw it savagely into the fire.

“*The Survivor*?” asked Philippa, without much enthusiasm.

“Yes.” Robert was still glancing through the letter with worried, angry eyes; presently he began to read snatches from it. “‘Too thin! ... interest not maintained ... scarcely up to the standard’—Rot!” He dashed the letter down onto his desk. “What *do* they want?”

"I've finished the letter," remarked Philippa, after a silence.

For a moment Robert regarded the back of her head without speaking.

"You should try not to be so effusively sympathetic, Philippa," he said at last, sarcastically.

She turned her head and looked at him with a calmly provoking gaze.

"My dear Robert, if I were effusive over every one of your returned manuscripts, I should be a wreck by this time. I thought you didn't care for popular success?"

"It isn't that," he ejaculated, too worried and depressed to heed her tone. "I'm doing bad work. It's no use to pretend I'm not." He threw himself moodily into a chair as he spoke.

"Then how do you account for the returned manuscripts?"

"Not the right sort of badness, I suppose," he answered, with an attempt at a laugh.

"Can't you ask your wife for the recipe?" she inquired, letting herself go now, with a sort of savage pleasure in her own foolishness.

Robert threw up his head sharply. "I thought we'd agreed to leave my wife's name out of our discussions." And then, as though the words were wrung from him, "What you say hasn't even the merit of being true," he added. "Her work is good."

Philippa's eyes grew even colder.

"What a pity I'm deficient in the literary sense," she remarked.

"I begin to think it's not the only sense in which you are deficient, Philippa," he returned, with growing anger.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Really? Is politeness one of them, by any chance? If so, we ought to exercise mutual forbearance."

"I was not thinking of politeness. Decency was what I meant."

She looked at him stonily. "Please explain yourself."

"You seem to take a great pleasure in this man Nevern's society. At Lady Wilmot's party, the evening before I went away——"

"Is that why you went away?" she asked.

There was a moment's pause. "No," said Robert, and knew he spoke the truth.

She glanced at him inquiringly, but the moment's check to the conversation sobered her. Counsels of prudence began to prevail.

"Oh, Robert!" she sighed. "You don't know how it hurts and surprises me to find this in you. When you talk so, you put yourself on a level with vulgar, chattering women like Lady Wilmot and Mrs. Carruthers, who are always discussing your matrimonial affairs."

Despite her effort at conciliation, the last remark was forced from Philippa almost despite herself. She flung the missile, scarcely knowing whether it would prove explosive, and with some curiosity awaited results.

"What do they say?" demanded Robert, breathlessly.

For a moment she hesitated. "Mr. Mayne's name is always mentioned, of course," she said at last, with a swift glance. "But what *does* it matter, Robert?"

"Damned lot of gossips!" he exclaimed, below his breath.

Instantly Philippa became a prey to conflicting emotions. "My dear Robert! You are surely not jealous of both of us? Or are you, perhaps?"

"Who spoke of being jealous?" demanded Robert.

"You did," she retorted.

"Merely because I object to your making these very pronounced friendships?"

"Aren't you confusing me with your wife?" observed Philippa, with icy incisiveness. "Your tone is quite marital."

There was a moment's electric silence. Then, with a sudden movement, Philippa rose from the writing-table and came impulsively towards him.

"Robert, dear," she begged, in her tenderest voice, "this is absurd. Let us continue to trust each other, and not be vulgar about our love." She lifted her face pleadingly to his. It was an attitude which she was conscious became her wonderfully. The long curve of her throat never showed to better advantage than when her head was thrown back to look into her lover's eyes.

Insensibly Robert's face softened. He kissed her, this time warmly. Half an hour later, as she was putting on her hat to go, he said, in a tone purposely gentle and conciliatory:

"You'd better show me that note to Nevern. It won't do to offend him. He's a good fellow, though he *does* write rot. Perhaps I could get Field to look at some of his stuff—or Ridgway, possibly."

Philippa turned over the pile of letters she had written, and found what she was seeking.

"I want some long envelopes," she remarked, handing the note to him as she passed. "No, don't trouble, dear, I'll get them. They're in the cupboard in the hall."

She went out, and Robert carelessly opened the letter she had left. He glanced at the first word, and dropped the paper as though it burned him. A dark flush began to spread slowly over his face as he stood looking at it a moment, before he again snatched it up. He had the letter in his hand when Philippa entered, standing with his back to the door, and an elbow on the mantelpiece.

She put the envelopes in the table drawer, gathered up the pile of notes, then turned and stood waiting.

"Will it do, dear?" she asked.

"Admirably," said Robert, without moving.

She started.

"I have to apologize for opening the wrong letter," he went on, almost in the same breath. "Your official communication to Nevern is probably among the letters in your hand."

His cold, clear voice reached her senses like a voice in a dream.

Mechanically she glanced down at the envelopes she held, then back at Robert's immovable face. She grew slowly white to the lips. They were stiff when she tried to move them. At last the words came.

"Robert," she began in a whisper, "don't think too badly of me. Let me explain." She paused, watching in a fascinated way his slow smile, as he continued to look at her. Presently she could bear it no longer, and dropped her eyes.

"Mr. Nevern has asked me to be his wife," she said, desperately.

"Poor devil!" was Robert's comment on the information.

There was another silence.

"Robert!" she implored, still in a whisper, dragging herself closer to him. "Won't you let me explain?"

He retreated a step.

"My dear Philippa," he returned, with a laugh, "why explain the obvious? It is all quite simple. I am a fool, and you are—a woman." He glanced at the clock. "It's one o'clock. Don't let me keep you. Good-bye." The quiet finality of his tone overwhelmed her. She turned at once to go.

"One moment," he said. "Your letter." He folded it with precision, replaced it in its envelope, and handed it to her politely.

Philippa took it silently, opened the door, and went out without a backward glance.

CHAPTER XX

CECILY and Mrs. Summers had arrived at the coffee stage of lunch. They were alone, Robert having left a message that he was going out.

Cecily had received the intimation with secret resentment. It struck her as discourteous to their guest, that her husband, who had only just returned, should not have arranged on that first day, which was also the last of Rose's visit, to spend some of his hours at home. As the result of long reflection, she had met him cheerfully the previous evening, and had been relieved to find that he showed no inclination to allude again to the interrupted subject of their difference. She determined to ignore the matter; to behave as though the discussion had never arisen.

Rose glanced at her once or twice as she sat absently stirring her coffee.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked at length, breaking the silence abruptly.

The depth of Cecily's reflection was indicated by her start.

"Robert," she answered, laconically.

"What about him?"

"Lots of things. But chiefly how ill he looks."

"He can't have heard anything, can he?" suggested Rose after a moment.

Cecily made a little movement expressing ignorance. "She was here this morning as usual," she said.

"Yes," Rose agreed. "It can't be that. And," she added, suddenly, "I don't believe he cares any more about her."

"Some one else?" suggested Cecily, with a little laugh.

"Yes—you."

Cecily raised her head, and looked full at her friend. There was in her face a curious mixture of expression; a sort of pitying consternation and a faint gleam of amusement. It was the glance with which a mother might have heard of some unreasonable and rather troublesome caprice on the part of her son. Rueful annoyance was coupled with a slight admixture of tenderness.

"It would be so like Robert," was all she said in reply to Rose.

"And if it's true," pursued Rose after a moment, "would you——?" She paused.

"Oh, Rose!" said Cecily. "Rose——?" She drew her breath in suddenly. "If you hit a live thing on the head often enough, you make it insensible. What's the good of caressing it then?"

Mrs. Summers was silent.

"Robert ought to go away," Cecily continued, rising from the table. "He'll be ill if he doesn't. I'd like him to go yachting with the Daintons," she went on, meditatively. "They are always asking him. I wonder if it could be managed?"

"No doubt," Rose assured her.

"If only he could get away before he hears anything—and stay away till that young woman is safely married!"

Despite herself, Rose laughed. "That young woman" as designated by Cecily was irresistible.

"You'll never be a saint, my dear!"

"A saint?" she repeated, absently, her mind evidently still preoccupied. "Why should I be? I'm only worried about Robert." She continued to discuss in detail plans for persuading her husband to take a long holiday, and only roused from her musings upon the subject to glance hurriedly at the clock.

"Dick will be here in a minute!" she exclaimed. "You're sure you don't mind my leaving you? You know I wouldn't under ordinary circumstances, but business is business, and I must see Coombs to-day." She hurried away, and live minutes later looked in, putting on her gloves as she spoke.

"You're all ready except your hat, aren't you, Rose? You needn't start before a quarter to three. It's at the Court theatre, you know—quite close. Good-bye; I dare say I sha'n't be very much later than you. I'd like to get a little rest before dinner to-night."

She went out with a smiling nod, and left Rose meditating upon her prettiness, till a ring at the bell startled her, and Mayne was announced.

"You know Cecily's not coming?" was her greeting as they shook hands.

"So she told me. Has to see her agent, or something."

"Yes, a business matter. Sit down and have a cigarette; we've got half an hour before the matinee."

Mayne complied. As he settled himself in the easy-chair opposite to her, Rose was conscious of very mixed emotions. She liked Mayne. She had always liked him, even in his hobbledehoy stage, when she had first discerned his boyish admiration for Cecily. She looked at him now, and sighed at the perversity of fate. This man, with his unobtrusive air of determination and quiet strength, was the man Cecily should have married. Why could she not have cared for him?

Her heart misgave her, and the half-formed determination in her mind for a moment melted. It was after all possibly a dangerous, certainly a thankless, task to interfere. She found herself wishing, wishing with all her strength, that she did not know Cecily so well; that she might at least have the excuse that it was not for an outsider to forecast the future. And in the midst of chaotic reflections, she found herself speaking.

"Do you know," she said, suddenly, "that Philippa Burton is going to marry that young Nevern?"

Mayne started. It was the first time that Philippa's name had been mentioned between them with significance.

"No," he said. "Who told you?"

"That queen of gossips, Lady Wilmot, of course."

"Is she sure?"

"Yes. They're keeping the engagement secret, but Nevern's mother discovered it, and went to Lady Wilmot in tears."

Mayne inquiringly raised his head.

"Oh, merely because he's the only son, and she's jealous at the thought of any daughter-in-law, I believe," returned Mrs. Summers in reply to his look. "Of course," she added, with a shrug, "it would be interesting to know what hints Lady Wilmot dropped during the interview. She knows nothing actually, but she's very curious about the situation here."

Mayne did not speak for a moment. "And—Kingslake?" he asked, presently.

"Doesn't know—yet."

Dick lifted his eyebrows. "Cecily?" he said, with some difficulty.

"Yes. Lady Wilmot called yesterday, and told both of us—in strict confidence."

Mayne's rather set face relaxed into a quizzical smile. Rose answered it calmly.

"Oh, yes!" she said. "But quite apart from the fact that by this time she's told half London, I meant you in any case to know."

Mayne looked at her. "Why?" he asked.

"I leave that to your intelligence," said Rose, meeting his eyes steadily.

There was a long pause.

"How well Cecily looks!" she remarked presently in an ordinary tone. "She's wildly busy, but it seems to suit her."

"It suits most of us, I imagine," returned Mayne, slowly.

"Are you carrying out the doctrine?"

"No."

"No? What are you doing, then?"

"Idling."

"That's unusual, isn't it?"

Mayne threw his cigarette end out of the window.

"You think I ought to be moving on?"

"Yes," said Rose, abruptly, as though moved by a sudden determination. "Why don't you?"

He again met her eyes, this time doggedly.

"Why should I?"

Rose took her courage in both hands. There was something in the man's face which showed her she had need of it.

"Dick," she said, quietly, "it hasn't taken me long to discover that people are talking."

He smiled grimly. "But that is perennial."

"And," continued Rose, undaunted, "her husband is jealous."

This time he laughed unpleasantly. "Of what? Her success?"

"Partly. But not only that. Of her—of you." It was out now, and she took breath a little uneasily.

He rose, and stood leaning against the window-frame.

"In the face of *that*?" he jerked his head in the direction of Robert's study, and laughed again. There was something in his tone, a savage irony, mingled with a kind of appeal, that made it very difficult for Rose to keep her head. Yet she managed to answer coolly.

"Oh, yes—quite. But, as I've often found, it takes one man to expect logic from another."

"There's something more important than logic that the average man surely *may* expect," returned Mayne. He had thrown off all attempt at lightness of tone by now.

"What's that?"

"Common decency."

They looked at one another. "My dear Dick," said Rose, slowly, "when one comes down to the primitive emotions, one mustn't expect even that. Put love, jealousy, or hatred in one scale—and civilization will be a feather in the other."

He continued to look down at her. When he spoke it was under his breath.

"I agree. Hatred, you say? By God——" He checked himself, and turned abruptly towards the window.

Rose watched him a moment. "Dick," she said, "you have only one person to consider—Cecily."

He wheeled round. "And I *have* considered her. Kingslake overreached himself there. He knew I cared for her. What he *didn't* know, was how much I cared."

Rose hesitated before she made her appeal. "Listen to me, Dick," she began, very gently. "I see what you've done for Cecily. You've restored her confidence in herself for one thing. You've given her back her youth—even her beauty; all she was losing, in short. She herself says so. She would never have had the courage to take up life again if it hadn't been for you." She paused, and then said suddenly, "Now there's only one more thing you can do for her—go."

She saw she had struck the right note, but she saw, too, the struggle in his face before he broke out into speech.

"But why?" he urged. "Why, in heaven's name? It isn't as though there had ever been a word—Cecily only wants my friendship. I know that well enough, worse luck," he added, with a hopeless want of logic which Rose found pathetic. "I've never troubled her with anything else. Gossip, you say? Very well. I'll see less of her. But to go away——"

"It isn't only that," interrupted Rose, stemming his torrent of words.

"What, then?"

She lay back in her chair, and her eyes travelled to the blue sky, and to the tall shaft of the campanile. "All sorts of things," she answered, slowly. "What an

abominably penetrating book the Bible is, when one doesn't read it too often," she added, after a moment, with apparent irrelevance. "'The heart is deceitful above all things'—Robert has discovered that, if I mistake not."

Mayne was silent.

"I believe he used to think himself rather a noble fellow at one time," she went on, "with his higher love and so forth—whatever that may mean."

Mayne uttered a contemptuous exclamation. "Well?" he demanded, "but how does that illustrate my case?"

"You talk about Cecily's friendship," she returned, "but aren't you, unconsciously, perhaps, relying a little, just a very little, on that patience from which you hoped so much before she married?"

Mayne said nothing. He had seated himself once more in the arm-chair, and Rose was aware of the rigidity of his attitude. It was as though his body had become suddenly frozen.

She went on, not quite steadily. "You hate me for saying it, of course. So should I, if I were you. But, Dick—you and I are not by nature self-deceivers. We think straight. And when one person loves, even though the other does not, is it quite safe? There comes a weak moment—a sense of the dreariness of life—gratitude on one side; on the other a strong emotion. Oh, Dick, *you* know as well as I do."

Mayne raised himself slowly, and bent towards her. When he began to speak it was slowly, also, as though he were feeling for the words.

"So now," he said, "when I've helped her to be self-reliant; when she's found a life of her own, apart from his; now, when he's thrown over by the woman who has fooled him, *now* I'm to disappear in order that he may enslave her again!" He rose swiftly, with a bitter laugh, and stood before her. "Oh, you good women! you good women!"

Rose watched him as he walked blindly towards the mantelpiece and stood leaning his elbow upon it.

"You misunderstand me," she said, at last; "I am not arguing from the standpoint of the conventional 'good woman' at all. I—well, I have no rigid views on the subject. I look upon each case as something to be considered on its own merits, or demerits."

"And on which side would you put mine?" He asked the question with mockery.

"Viewed from the outside," returned Rose, judicially, "I should say it has merits. Cecily has been badly treated. You are a decent man, and there are no children to be considered. But there are two drawbacks. One is that she doesn't love you—yet, at least. The other—and it is the most important—is Cecily's own nature."

Mayne turned round. "Yes?" he said. "What about that?"

"You spoke of her husband enslaving her again," she answered. "He will never do so. All that made that possible is over. But Cecily happens to be a very faithful

woman. I've sometimes thought," observed Mrs. Summers, reflectively, "that to bestow this characteristic upon a woman is the last refinement of cruelty on the part of the gods." She paused a moment, and shrugged her shoulders. "I may be wrong. In any case Cecily *has* the faithful temperament. She has loved her husband. She will never really love again. But that is not saying there's no danger if you stay. Let us imagine that you stay. Cecily is a woman—therefore all things are possible. But, Dick, can you look me in the face and tell me that you don't know the disaster of—of such a possibility? Even now, though she doesn't love him, she's worrying about Robert because he looks ill, because he's unhappy,—heaven knows what. Just the maternal instinct, you know. She will never cease to worry about him. Suppose you gained your point; would you keep her friendship? Would you get anything worth having in its place? Dick, you *know* you wouldn't!"

He was silent, and after a moment she went on in a low tone.

"It's because the really good things in life are so few, that I want you not to run the risk of losing——"

Mayne faced her. "The best I've had?" he suggested, finishing the sentence slowly.

Mrs. Summers nodded, and was annoyed to find her eyes filled with tears.

The room was quite still for what seemed a long time, and when a clock struck they both started.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mayne, with a glance at it. "We've missed that show."

"It doesn't matter," she said, mechanically.

He drew himself up as though with a sudden resolve. "Do you mind if I go? I—I feel rather as though I'd like to walk a thousand miles or so," he added, with a forced laugh.

She put out her hand. "Yes, go," she said, very kindly. "You don't forget you're dining here to-night? Cecily told me to remind you that dinner is at half-past eight."

He nodded. "All right." He was still holding her hand, and suddenly he raised it to his lips, dropped it hurriedly, and went out without a word.

Mrs. Summers stood looking at the back of her hand. "If I'd been in his place, I should have cut you off instead," she said, savagely under her breath—"with a blunt knife, too!"

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN Cecily returned, it was about six o'clock. She was tired, and after asking for Rose, and hearing that she was in her room, she decided to dress at once, and afterwards rest on the sofa in the drawing-room, till the arrival of her guests.

As she walked into the room some time later, the surface of her mind was full of little preoccupations and interests. She had invited pleasant people for Rose's farewell dinner, and she hoped the evening was going to be a success.

She had already been into the dining-room to see and approve the table decoration, and she now looked critically about the drawing-room, altering the position now of a bowl of roses, now of one of the lights. It all looked very charming, she thought, as she arranged a cushion behind her head on the pale-colored empire sofa, and lay back watching the fire with wide, preoccupied eyes.

Beneath the trivialities were stirring graver thoughts, deeper speculations. They were insistent, if scarcely defined, and when she heard behind her the sound of an opening door, and her husband entered, the sight of him brought them into sudden definite form.

As she looked up, she was shocked by the strained, nervous expression of his face. He came forward with a sort of groping movement, regarding first the lighted room, and then his wife's evening gown, with irritable surprise.

"Is any one coming?" he began.

"We have a dinner to-night, you know," she answered, surprised, for earlier in the day he had discussed the subject.

He uttered an impatient exclamation. "The house is always full of people," he declared. "It's sickening! Can't you have a quiet evening now and then? Who's coming?"

Cecily glanced at him, and controlling herself with an effort, spoke gently.

"We talked about all of them only this morning," she said. "The Eversleighs, Lady Ashford, Colonel Ferguson, Miss Devereux, Dick Mayne——"

"Oh—naturally!" he interrupted, with a sneer.

The color rushed to her cheeks. There was a little pause.

"Why do you say that?" she asked, looking at him steadily.

"My reasons must be fairly obvious."

"They escape me," returned Cecily. "Surely, Robert," she added, after a breathless pause, "we need not continue the conversation you began the other evening?"

"There is every need," he declared. "The last time we discussed this subject, you thought my attitude towards it 'very funny,' I remember. I'm sorry I haven't your sense of humor. Funny as you may consider it, I intend to talk about what you find so ridiculous—my honor. It's time, I think, since you seem to have forgotten yours."

Cecily got up slowly from the sofa, and leaning against the mantelpiece, faced him with dangerously bright eyes.

"That is not true," she said, deliberately. "But that it doesn't happen to be true is no thanks to you."

Kingslake, his nerves strained to the uttermost, had lost all self-control, and was letting himself go, but he recoiled a step before his wife's gaze.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"You really want me to tell you?" Her voice came to him icily. "Very well, then, I will. Two years ago, I was a wretched, unhappy woman because you had ceased to care for me, and I had therefore ceased to care for—anything. But I never suspected there was a reason—I thought it had just happened so—I thought I had somehow failed to keep your love. Then, quite by chance, I heard of Philippa Burton."

Robert's face changed. "But till that day at the Priory——" he began.

Cecily's eyes suddenly fell. She turned her head aside, with a sort of unbearable shame. "Robert!" she urged in a low voice, "don't try to deceive me any more. Before that day at the Priory you had seen her constantly—every day, in fact, for months."

He looked at her uncertainly. "And you knew this—all the time?"

"Not all the time. Not till a few days before you took rooms for her in the village, and then only by the strangest chance."

There was a silence. Robert broke it in a curious, shamed voice.

"Cecily, I swear to you that Miss Burton and I were only friends."

She stood tracing figures on the shelf of the mantelpiece with her forefinger. When she spoke it was very quietly.

"You should be careful where you make love to your friends, Robert. The garden is a more or less public place."

He started, then began to pace the room.

"Cecily!" he urged. "Listen——"

She interrupted him with a sound that was half a sob.

"Ah, Robert!—please don't. What does it matter now? It hurts me so to hear you—and you see I *know*.... What does it matter when it first——" Her voice sank almost to a whisper, but she recovered herself. "Under the circumstances," she added, "what was I to think of your invitation to Dick?"

There was another silence.

"Cecily," he began again at last, clearing his throat, "do you—do you really imagine——?"

She turned once more and looked him full in the face, and again his eyes fell before hers. "What I try to imagine, is that you *didn't* think," she said, slowly. "You were so engrossed that you had forgotten—much. But sometimes, Robert—to be truthful—I find it hard to accept even that explanation."

He continued to walk restlessly about the room. "So you—you impute to me vile motives like that?" he asked, uneasily.

"You *do* think them vile? I'm glad of that," she answered, slowly. "In any case you didn't know Dick. He loves me as you have never loved me."

He turned sharply and gazed at her. "You dare to tell me that!"

"Yes," said Cecily, quietly, "I dare. I owe it to Dick that I'm no longer the miserable, helpless woman I was when he came home. *Then*, I was dependent for all that makes life upon the love of one man—who had failed me. Now, I have a life of my own, friends of my own, work of my own. And it was Dick who showed me how to trust myself, and shake myself free!"

He stood looking at her. In the midst of the whirl of emotions within him, jealousy, resentment, humiliation, and a childish longing for comfort, he thought how beautiful she was. He realized every detail of her gleaming dress; he saw the whiteness of her breast, the curve of her lips, the droop of her cloudy hair.

"In the intervals of love-making, no doubt?" he suggested.

Her eyes grew hard. "Is it necessary to be insulting? Dick has never made love to me since I have been your wife."

For a long moment he looked at her. He believed what she said. Cecily had never lied to him. If she said so, he told himself, it was true, and with the assurance came an almost terrible sense of relief. He was still thinking chaotically; the wound inflicted by Philippa to his pride still rankled with an intolerable smart. Cecily's attitude towards him was a further humiliation—but the last evil had not descended. His wife was still his.

He paused in his restless pacing and stood before her.

"Cecily," he exclaimed, suddenly, "won't you be friends? I have behaved badly. I admit it." He felt a sort of pleasure in this self-abasement, but Cecily did not move. "I give you my word it's all over," he went on, desperately. "Miss Burton will never come here again. I shall never see her again. I love you. Really, I love you. I can't see you drifting away from me——"

She did not speak, and with her silence waves of growing resentment, of unreasonable anger, began to gather. "But you must give up this intimacy with Mayne," he added, with a change of voice. He waited. "After all, you are my wife. I have a right to demand that." He took an impatient step towards her and put out his hand to draw her to him. Suddenly she recoiled from him and began to speak in a low, rapid voice, vehemently, passionately.

"Did you love me when I was wretched—longing for you—eating my heart out with misery? No! You never even noticed that I was miserable. But now—*now*, when I've got back my looks, when I'm rather admired, rather sought after—now, when your love affair is over because the woman has deceived you—now you come to me and profess love! To me such love is an insult, whether it's offered by a woman's husband or any other man!" She paused and with a great effort added, with quiet

deliberation, "I refuse to give up my friendship with Dick. It's no more, it will never be anything more than a friendship, but"—she paused—"it's the best thing I've had in my life."

For a second's space they looked at each other silently.

"Mr. Mayne," said the maid at the door.

Mayne entered. There was a moment's embarrassing silence while his look travelled, scarcely perceptibly, from one to the other. Then he spoke coolly, without haste, as usual.

"I'm at least half an hour too early. I don't deserve my hostess to be ready."

Robert glanced at his watch. "You *are* very early," he said, significantly, "but I will go and dress."

His face was white with anger as he passed Mayne on the way to the door.

When it closed upon him, Mayne went up to the mantelpiece and stood opposite Cecily.

"What's wrong?" he asked, gravely.

She tried to keep her voice steady, and smiled. "Nothing—nothing that matters. A silly little argument, that's all."

"Your husband is suspicious of our friendship?"

Cecily glanced at him appealingly, then suddenly dropped her head on her clasped hands.

"Oh, don't, Dick! Don't!" she whispered. "I can't go through it all again."

Mayne stood looking at her down-bent head. All at once he leaned over her.

"I wish to God you loved me," he said, in a low, passionate voice.

She raised her face and looked at him steadily.

"I wish to God I did," she answered, very slowly.

He made a sudden movement towards her and checked himself.

"Could you—?... No! That isn't what I've got to say." He passed his hand over his face and went on, doggedly, "Cis, I'm going away."

Cecily started.

"That's why I came early," he went on, in the same unemotional tone. "I hoped to find you alone.... I must go, Cis. For a long time I've known it, but I've kept it at the back of my mind and wouldn't look. And now, at last, Mrs. Summers has made me drag it out, and so——" He finished the sentence with a gesture.

"Rose?" repeated Cecily, vaguely.

"She's quite right," he said. "It's not fair to you——" She made a protesting movement, but he intercepted it and drew himself up. "It's not fair to *me* to stay," he added, firmly.

Her hand dropped at her side. "Not fair to you?" she echoed, as if a new light had broken. "No; it isn't—it isn't." She moved to the sofa and let herself drop against the cushions as though exhausted. "I've been selfish, Dick," she went on, still in the same dazed voice. "I've been so thankful for your help. So glad of you—you can't

think how glad. And all the time I never realized what it must have meant to you.” She put up her hand to her head with a touchingly childish gesture. “I’ve been horribly selfish.”

He stood looking at her—looking as though by his intense gaze he would print her face upon his memory forever. Only vaguely he heard what she was saying. His senses were too full of her to heed. The faint fragrance of her dress, the sweet blue of her troubled eyes, the quivering of her lips, were making his heart beat to suffocation.

“No, dear,” he murmured, absently, “no.”

“Yes,” she insisted. “Oh, Dick! it has been hateful of me, but do you know what helped me to pull myself together? It was knowing you—you loved me ... and admired me. It was such a long time since I had known that any man felt that.... It was mean of me, contemptible—but somehow it helped me awfully. It gave me back my self-esteem. It flattered my vanity.... Dick, don’t you *hate* me?”

He laughed gently. “Did you think I didn’t know it?” he said. “Did you think I wasn’t glad?”

With a sudden movement she rose, and, facing him, spoke urgently, almost imperatively.

“Dick,” she said, “I’m going to say to you what you said to me two years ago. Don’t waste your life over one human being. The world is wide, and it’s before you. And you’re a strong man. Go, and forget me.”

“I shall go,” said Mayne, briefly.

“When?” She faltered a little over the word.

“To-morrow.”

She was silent, looking at him; trying to realize life without him.

“The sooner the better,” he said, at last, drawing a long breath. “I’m used to setting out for nowhere at a moment’s notice, you see. So this will be our farewell feast, Cis. You’ll drink to my—to my success?”

“To your happiness, Dick,” she whispered, in a shaking voice.

Mayne looked at her again with such a long gaze that her eyes sank.

“Cecily,” he said at last, huskily, “we’ve known each other for a long time. Do you know the years I’ve loved you?... And perhaps I shall not come back.... May I kiss you once—just to remember all my life?”

She looked at him gravely. “Yes, Dick,” she answered.

With a half cry, Mayne drew her into his arms, and put his lips to hers. It was the kiss he had dreamed of for years; a kiss that in a rapture of mingled torture and delight expressed all that for years he had felt for the woman he held for one brief moment like a lover. A colored mist swam before him as he raised his head. He felt Cecily gently disengage herself, and it was the silence in the room that cleared his brain, and then his sight.

Kingslake was standing just inside the door.

For a moment the stillness seemed to press upon the air like a visible, tangible weight before it was broken by Robert's savage laugh.

"What liars you women are," he said, slowly, under his breath, his eyes upon his wife. "Aren't you? All of you! All alike!"

Mayne made a menacing step towards him.

"Be careful what you say!" he began, in as low a voice. "We'd better be alone. Cecily,"—he turned to her—"will you go?"

"No," she said, quietly. "I prefer to stay." She looked past Mayne at her husband.

"All I said to you just now is true——"

He laughed again.

"You take a low view of my intelligence, my dear child."

"If it were only your intelligence!" broke in Mayne in a tone low still, but vibrating with passion scarcely controlled, "that wouldn't matter." Suddenly he went towards him, standing close, and speaking in a rapid tone, almost in his ear. "Listen!" he said. "This once, at least, you shall see yourself as I see you—as any fairly decent man sees you. You knew all about me. You knew how for years—ever since I was a boy at Oxford—I loved her and hoped to make her love me—till *you* came on the scene. Then I saw it was all up. Well, I took it pretty decently, didn't I? I went away. I stayed away. I didn't come home till I felt myself cured of all but affection for your wife. Then I met you, and you pressed me—*begged* me to come to your house. And I came to you—in all good faith, God knows—as your friend, as well as your wife's. Before I'd been in the house an hour I saw you were neglecting her. Then you brought that woman down, and I wondered.⁹ It was only by degrees that I saw what you wanted, you——" He checked himself before the word was out. "How does it strike you?" he went on, falling back a step. "Tell me! You knew I *had* loved her. In the old days you were jealous enough of our friendship. What do you think of a husband who neglects his wife, insults her by bringing his mistress to her house, and then calls an old lover upon the scene? That I cared for her too much to insult her—that she is the woman you know her to be, is no thanks to you. If——"

Robert's face was white, but he broke in upon the other man's torrent of words with a voice of ice.

"And you really expect me to believe this—this eloquent—what shall I call it? It is certainly no explanation."

Cecily, who had been standing motionless at the head of the sofa, now came swiftly to her husband.

"Please listen to me," she said, breathlessly. "You have lived seven years with me. You know whether I speak the truth. Do you or do you not believe me when I tell you that Dick has never kissed me before? He is going away at once—to-morrow, and——" She hesitated a moment. Before she could recover, Robert spoke.

“Very ingenious,” he said. “Do I believe you? With my experience of your sex, my dear Cecily—certainly not.”

There was a silence. Then, as though coming to a decision, Mayne turned deliberately towards Cecily.

“I shall not go to-morrow,” he said. “You know you can rely upon me.”

“Yes,” returned Cecily, slowly, “I will remember it.”

He took her hand a moment, then released it, and went to the door. When it closed after him, Cecily found herself wondering whether she had or had not heard the hall door-bell a few moments before. She glanced at Robert, who was moving with slow, blind steps towards the window.

It was then that a sudden vision of the rose-garden at the Priory flashed upon her mental sight. Once more she saw Philippa in her husband’s arms. History, she reflected, with an impulse to break into dreadful laughter—history had repeated itself, with a slight difference. How ludicrous, how futile, how *awful*, life was with its senseless blending of the grotesque and tragic; materials for a heartrending farce, to be played before what monstrous spectators!

She stood in the middle of the room, her hands clenched and clasped tightly to her breast, in an agonized struggle with her laughter and her tears.

Had she really heard the hall bell or not?

The question, a vital one, as for some reason it seemed to her, was answered a moment later, when the door opened, and the maid announced, “Lady Ashford and Miss Devereux.”

They came in smiling, suave, unconscious, with outstretched hands. Cecily, smiling also, went forward with composure to receive her guests.

CHAPTER XXII

AFTER wandering for two or three months abroad, Cecily and Diana discovered that all roads lead to Rome. In Rome, therefore, they had been established for a week, when Cecily strolled one day alone, towards the garden of the Villa Medici.

It was Rose Summers, with whom, after the night of the dinner-party, Cecily had spent some weeks, who had urged upon Cecily this plan of travel. For some time previous to the break between Cecily and her husband, Diana had not been strong; she was made the excuse for the closing of the Westminster flat in the following autumn. Rose arranged the explanation. For the sake of her sister's health, Cecily must at once take her abroad, while her husband, who, for business reasons connected with his work, could not go so far afield, had decided to divide the period of her absence between the country and a stay in Paris.

It was thus that Mrs. Summers strove to put a screen between an inquisitive public and the ruins of one more domestic hearth.

"They'll talk, of course," she observed, "and try to look through the chinks in the boarding; but as long as they don't see too plainly, their talk doesn't matter much."

Cecily had acquiesced indifferently. "Just as you please," she said. "All I want is to get away—and I shall not come back. But I quite agree that there's no need to provide entertainment for literary tea-parties by saying so."

"All I ask," returned Rose, "is that you shall give yourself time; that you shall take no irrevocable step." To which Cecily had responded by a smile and a shrug of the shoulders.

She had Mayne's letter. He had seen Mrs. Summers. He intended to be ostensibly busied in getting together funds and volunteers for a new exploring expedition, the progress of which was to be extensively paragraphed. In the meantime, he told her, he simply waited. He was in her hands. At any moment a summons would bring him to her. It was a characteristic letter—terse, restrained, almost laconic in tone. The letter of a man who would not plead, because, under the circumstances, pleading seemed unfair; yet, after reading it, Cecily had never so fully realized the strength and abidingness of his love for her. She took the letter with her on her journeyings, and carried it about with her. It was never absent from her thoughts. It was in the background of her consciousness on the quay at Genoa, while she watched the teams of white horses in their scarlet coats pulling lumbering wagons. In thought she considered it, while with Diana she admired the picturesqueness of the shuttered houses, festooned with fluttering washing, or stooped to look inside the cave-like, fourteenth-century shops, or climbed the many steep flights of steps to the upper town, whence they looked upon an enchanting sea of roofs; roofs the color of faded carnations, of orange lichen, of mushroom brown, each with its tiny pergola of vines,

its tub of oleander, or its orange tree. It was with her in Florence, when she stood before the great pictures in gallery or palace, when, at the sunset hour, the cathedral and the exquisite campanile were suddenly turned to mother-of-pearl and roses against the violet sky. It was with her here in Rome. To think of it, to ponder over all that it implied, to force herself to come to some decision, she had wandered to-day into the garden of the villa, glad to be alone.

Diana, who had made friends with a lively party of American girls at the hotel, had joined one of their excursions to Tivoli, and would not be back till the evening. Cecily crossed the Piazza di Spagna, and paused to look at the banks of flowers which, piled up at the foot of the stately sweep of steps, make an exquisite foreground to one of the most charming pictures in Rome. Like bees, the flower-sellers instantly surrounded her, offering seashell-tinted and scarlet anemones, branches of deep orange-colored roses, sprays of feathery mimosa, violets, and quaint, flat little bouquets of pink rosebuds. She bought a bunch of the latter, and freeing herself from the buzzing crowd, began to mount the shallow, moss-grown steps, shaking her head smilingly at the little *contadini* models, with their elaborately picturesque rags, and their proffered nosegays. At the top, she paused as usual to glance over the beautiful ribbed roofs of the city, roofs which always made her think of brown shells cast up by the sea of time; shells that had suffered a sea-change.

Overhead in its blueness, was spread wide the “unattainable flower of the sky,” that Roman sky which blossoms like a flower of Paradise; and away to the right, as though floating in a blue ocean, stone pines lifted their islands of green, soft as velvet, into the clear air.

Cecily was aware of all the beauty; she missed none of the thousand appeals to the senses; the warmth, the fragrance of growing flowers, the color, the richness. But her response was on the surface only. Beneath it, her whole mind was a prey to doubt and indecision; that state of consciousness which, out of the hundreds that can make of life a hell for damned souls, is as capable as any of inflicting torture. As Cecily passed through the iron gate leading into the garden of the villa, and mounted the upward sloping path between the ilexes, she would gladly have exchanged their mysterious darkness, the blue of the sky, the pathetic beauty of the moss-grown statue at the end of the path, the delicious sound of falling water, the flecks of sunshine on the gravelled walk, for a back street in Clapham—and peace of mind.

At the top of the sharply zigzag path she paused by the barricade of monthly roses on the brow of the hill to take breath and gaze once more over the city at her feet.

It was all inexpressibly beautiful, but she turned away, blinded with tears. She crossed the sunny square of garden in front of the villa and sat down on a marble seat, behind which a rose tree clambered. There were very few people about. One or two appeared from time to time behind the parapet of the terrace leading to the upper garden, and she could hear the voices of children in the ilex thickets below. But

practically she was alone in the sunshine, and her thoughts were, as ever, busy with Mayne's letter.

What should she do? For the thousandth weary time she asked herself the same question. Did she, or did she not, love him? Passion for him she had none. Not for the first time she found herself wishing ardently that she had. At least it would simplify things; it would bring her to a decision. Then, she told herself, she would not hesitate. She reviewed the possible outcome of the situation. A legal separation—and Dick banished to Africa? She had seen enough of the life of a young woman living apart from her husband to make her view this consummation⁸ with disfavor. And in her case there was the added disadvantage of being to some extent a celebrity. She knew the sort of man she would constantly be obliged to repel, and the necessity for such a task sickened her. And life without Dick? Without his advice? Without the comforting sense of his protection and care? An empty life, childless, loveless, with none but intellectual needs to work for and gratify?

Her whole nature shrank from this. She had come to realize intensely how to a woman the needs of the heart must ever stand first; how success, fame, intellectual achievements are mere stop-gaps, anaesthetics from which she is ever in danger of waking to a horrible, dreary reality—a sense that she is indispensable to no one, that no human being views her existence as the one supremely important fact in life.

“Oh, we're handicapped!—how we're handicapped!” she cried to herself, as she sat motionless in the sunshine. “Physically, through our emotions—every way.... Wouldn't it be better, saner, to spend the rest of my life with Dick, even though I *don't* feel for him anything of what I felt for Robert? At least he feels it for me.⁹ That's something. At least I could make one creature happy.” Some one had come along the gravelled walk in front of the seat. She had not noticed his approach till she became conscious of a shadow between her and the sun, and saw with a vague astonishment its cause. A man was standing quite close in front of her, looking down upon her. Raising her eyes, she met Mayne's.

She struggled to her feet, feeling curiously as though lead weights were dragging her back.

He held out his hand. “I didn't know you were in Rome,” he said, briefly.

“But you? I thought you were in town?”...

“Yes. My old godfather is here. He's dying, poor old chap, and he thought I was going to Africa. He begged me to come and say good-bye. He practically brought me up, you know, so I couldn't——” He did not finish the sentence; his eyes were straying hungrily over her face. “Come! Let's go up there,” he said, abruptly, nodding towards the upper terrace.

Mechanically Cecily turned and walked at his side. They passed through the gate and up the steps, to that terrace which gives upon the beautiful avenue of ilexes leading to a further flight of moss-grown steps.

The avenue was deserted. The rays of sunshine that pierced its roof fell in tiny flecks upon the path. But for these specks of brightness, the alley was a tunnel of cool green gloom. They entered it in silence.

"Mrs. Summers said you were in Florence," began Mayne, at last.

"Yes, we've only been here a week. I haven't written to Rose since we left."

He looked down at her. She was in white, as he liked best to see her. All the long months she had been away, he remembered, he had always pictured her in white. Her arm brushed his sleeve as they walked, and he trembled from head to foot.

"Cecily," he said, suddenly, and his voice trembled also, "what are you going to do?"

She was silent, and he saw the color go from her face. They had reached the foot of the crumbling steps by this time. Cecily noticed minutely the ferns—hart's-tongue and maiden-hair—that sprang in chink and crevice, and, as she passed it, looked curiously at the pattern of spotted white lichen with which each broken step was adorned. Now they had emerged from the gloom of the roof of trees, into the blinding sunshine in which the little sham-classic temple at the top was bathed. There was no one in the walled-in enclosure. Cecily moved to the side overlooking the Borghese Gardens, and sat down on the rough, sun-warmed wall.

Mayne stood behind her. "Cecily," he urged once more, "you mustn't keep me in suspense much longer." There was a dangerous note in his voice.

She turned to him. "Oh, Dick!" she said in a voice that was almost a cry; "I am so worried. If only I knew what to do!"

He stooped swiftly, and gathering her up in his arms, held her close, while he kissed first her lips, then her throat, with an intensity of passion which thrilled and communicated itself to her. When at last he let her go, she too was trembling. After all, it was sweet to be loved like this. She felt awakening in her the woman's pride and triumph in her power to rouse strong emotion in a man. And Dick loved her in all the other ways, too. She could rely on him. He would never fail her.

Her lips moved. She meant to yield at once—to give him his answer now, irrevocably.

Instead, she said, faintly, "I'll write—to-night. Where are you staying?"

He looked at her entreatingly a moment; then, feeling in his pocket for a notebook, he scribbled an address on a leaf torn from it.

"Cecily!" he whispered as he gave it to her. "Cecily!"

Mechanically, as though urged by some force outside herself, Cecily got up, and began to descend the steps. He followed her. They walked back through the gloomy avenue in silence. Just before they reached the terrace, he took her ungloved hand and put it to his lips.

"Will you let me go back alone?" she asked, under her breath.

"You wish it?"

"Yes, dear."

He stepped back to let her pass, and as she did so, she looked up at him with appealing eyes.

"I will write to-night, Dick," she said, very gently.

She left him standing on the terrace, and found her way back through the lower garden, down the Scala di Spagna, across the Piazza to the hotel. Everything stood bathed in sunshine as in a dream. She had a sense that all the people she passed were dream-figures. Everything had become all at once unsubstantial, unreal, shadows of something else.

When she reached the hotel the hall porter put a packet of letters into her hand. Most of them had been forwarded from Florence, as she noticed in turning them over on her way up to her room. One of them was from Rose.

Her bedroom, which looked south, was flooded with sunshine when she entered. She lifted a basket-chair into the balcony, and sinking into it, sat for some time with the letters in her lap. She felt no inclination to open them. She did not want to break the sensation of dreaming which lulled her senses, and banished all the care and worry of the past months. It would be pleasant to sit like this in the sunshine all the rest of her life; never to think, just to know that she was being cared for, that her presence made the joy of another's life. And why not? Why not an easy, dreamy life in sunny lands, with Dick?

Opposite to her, the old walls and roof of a monastery cut with its irregular lines the brilliant sky. The gay, striped awning above a vine-wreathed terrace at a lower level flapped gently in the breeze. Beneath, the little courtyard garden was a tangle of oleanders in tubs, of orange and lemon trees. And over all lay the sunshine. Cecily, stretching her body lazily in the long wicker chair, instinctively raised her arms towards the sky, as though to clasp its warmth, its deliciousness. It was a long time before she thought of her letters, and then she began to open the envelopes with indifference. None of them were of any importance. She had left Rose's till the last.

It began with news of the children, of herself, and went on to information about various acquaintances. Then all at once, and quite abruptly, it spoke of Robert. Cecily started when she read his name. She had agreed with Rose that it should not be mentioned in their correspondence. "Robert is back," the letter ran. "He wrote to me a day or two ago from the flat, and asked if he might come down for the day. He came, and he looked shockingly ill and hopelessly miserable. He came for news of you. I didn't mention your name at first, till I couldn't stand it any longer. He followed me about with his eyes like a dog, begging. Then at last we spoke of you. I don't know what you said before you went, but evidently he has no hope. He looked like my Jim when he's been naughty and thinks I'm not going to say good-night to him. He was back at the flat, but I persuaded him to go away again for a few days at least. He says he hates the sight of London. I hope you still like Florence. How does Diana enjoy everything?..." Cecily dropped the letter, leaving the latter pages unread.

Mechanically she turned her eyes towards the garden. All the dream-feeling was gone. She was Robert's wife. She knew the look that Rose meant; she could see his face before her. Everything but that was blotted out. Bending her head down upon her knees, she broke into a passion of tears.

For hours she sat in her room, forgetting the time, forgetting everything but the urgent need of getting home,—home to comfort some one who had need of her.

Presently she rose, and, fetching her writing case, wrote two letters. It was strange to feel no uncertainty, to be no longer racked with doubt, to have no more vacillations. Her course now was plain; she felt no more hesitation than a mother feels when she hears her child is ill.

Hours afterwards, when Diana came in, eager to recount the affairs of the day, Cecily was still in her room.

The girl started as she opened the door, and her sister rose to meet her.

"Diana," Cecily began, "I'm going home to-morrow. If you like to stay I think the Armstrongs would look after you——"

Diana sprang towards her as she staggered a little against the table. "I suppose you've had nothing to eat!" she exclaimed practically. She pushed her sister back into the chair, and rang the bell violently.

"We'll have dinner up here," she announced, taking the lead with characteristic determination, "and then you can tell me all about it. If you go to-morrow, I shall go too. Auntie says that wretched Brown girl is making a dead set at Archie—she began directly he came home. I shall go and stop it."

CHAPTER XXIII

ROSE was a little startled, but, on the whole, scarcely surprised by Cecily's telegram. It was like her to act impulsively, and Rose had never been in doubt as to the right note to strike, if she should ever wish to strike it. That she *did* wish it, was only made clear to her by the sight of Robert's unmistakable misery. "If he really wants her it will be all right, or at least right enough," she had argued, and she had been justified. Cecily was coming back. She had meant to be at the flat to receive her, but a feverish attack developed by the baby kept her at home till after her cousin had been a day in town.

When, early in the afternoon of the next day, she reached the flat, Diana came flying out to meet her. "Cis is shopping. She'll be back in a minute," she assured her, vigorously embracing her meanwhile.

Rose looked at the girl with laughing approval. Diana would never be a beauty,⁸ but she had learned how to dress; her figure was excellent, and her alert, humorous face very attractive.

"Is Robert home?" Mrs. Summers inquired, rather anxiously.

Diana made a little grimace. "No," she said. "He doesn't know we're here. Doesn't deserve to, either," she added. Diana was whole-hearted in her dislikes.

Rose laughed. "And Cis?" she asked. "How is Cecily?"

Diana's face clouded a little. "Oh!—she's well. But——" She paused abruptly.

"Yes?" asked Rose, divining something of what was stirring in the girl's mind.

"Oh—nothing," returned Diana, hastily. "I've seen Archie," she added, with an abrupt change of subject.

Mrs. Summers, who knew the faithful admirer, and Diana's casual attitude, looked amused.

"You needn't laugh!" Diana exclaimed, with solemnity. "It's awfully serious—he is, I mean."

"And you?" inquired Rose, stifling her mirth.

"I don't know," sighed Diana, sitting in an easy attitude on the arm of a chair.⁹ "He's much better looking," she added, confidentially; "not a boy any more, you see. So somehow you can't laugh."

"Did you want to?"

"N—no—that was the annoying part." Mrs. Summers again repressed a smile.

"He didn't lose much time in coming to see you," she remarked.

"No—did he?" replied Diana, briskly. "So the beastly Brown girl didn't make much impression, anyway."

"Well? What are you going to do about it?" Rose inquired.

Diana sighed again. "I don't know!" she exclaimed, impatiently. "I do *hate* to be grown up—it's such a bother." Despite the childishness of the words, Rose was struck by the ring of real dismay in the girl's voice.

“Why, dear?” she said.

For a moment Diana did not answer, then she said, suddenly, “Because I see what life is like. It’s just like one of those days that are so brilliant at first, and then cloud over and get all gray. Not stormy or anything, you know,—just gray.”

There was a tremble in her voice which touched the elder woman. She recalled the chilling breath from real life which had first crept into the paradise of her own youthful imagination. She remembered how, before it, the flowers drooped, and the sunshine faded. It was a searching, unpleasant wind.

“Never glad, confident morning again?” she said, softly, after a moment. “But, my dear, the sun comes out again sometimes, even on a gray day.”

“Yes,” Diana reluctantly agreed; “but then it’s afternoon—perhaps evening.”

“Wait till you get a little more grown up,” returned Rose, smiling. “You’ll think better of afternoon. In the meantime, cheer up; there’s still all the morning for *you*.”

Diana shook her head. “I think I’ve had my morning,” she answered, slowly. “It was when I *couldn’t* understand why people let—love and things count.”

“And now you begin to see?”

She nodded. “Well, at least I see that perhaps they can’t help it.” She looked wistfully at Mrs. Summers, her face, still babyish and immature, full of a painful foreboding. “But I dread it,” she added, almost in a whisper. “Look at Cecily. Think how much in love she was. Do you remember Robert, too?... And what has come of it all? What has been the good of it?”

“Perhaps more than you think,” Rose answered, quickly. “Love is not a thing which demands payment by result. And besides, my dear, in any case, what has that to do with you? Each of us must travel our own road, take our own risks, meet our own fate. No one else’s experience is any guide.”

Diana looked at her with big eyes, increasingly hopeful, but said nothing.

“You are sad to lose your childhood?” Rose went on after a moment, patting the girl’s arm affectionately. “I know. So was I. But it’s all in the day’s journey, Diana. Dawn is a lovely thing—but suppose one never saw the sunrise?”

“Oh!” exclaimed Diana, and two suns rose simultaneously in her eyes and set them dancing. “That would be *awful*, wouldn’t it?”

Rose laughed. “When is Mr. Archie Carew coming again?”

“Whenever I like,” said Diana, a little self-consciously. “Ah!” at the sound of a ring, “there’s Cis! She’ll be so glad you’re here.”

“Rose has come,” she announced before rushing into her bedroom, where she first looked into the glass with some anxiety, then rearranged the curls on her forehead, and subsequently, for no better reason than that she felt excited and not altogether unhappy, burst into tears.

Diana was not given to emotional display, so, after a moment’s indulgence in a weakness she despised, she bathed her eyes with scornful roughness, powdered them severely, and sat down to ask Mr. Carew to lunch the following day.

In the meantime Rose and Cecily had met. Cecily's first question was for Robert. It was asked with anxious eyes, and Rose felt enormously relieved. She had not after all done wrong in assuming responsibility.

"I haven't seen him since the day he came down to the Cottage," she returned, "when, as I tell you, he was looking ill enough—even to please me. I sent him to play golf at Aldeburgh, but he may be back any day. And you, Cis?" She inspected her friend critically. Cecily looked very pretty, very dainty, but frailer than when she went away.

"Oh," she said, "I'm all right. It seems—odd to be"—she hesitated a moment, and then went on quietly—"home again." She looked round the room with a half-humorous smile. "How angry I was the last time I stood here," she said. "And now *that* doesn't matter either."

Rose looked troubled. "Cecily," she said, doubtfully, "you don't regret this? I haven't done wrong?"

"Regret?" repeated Cecily, slowly. "No. It was inevitable. I couldn't help myself." She paused a moment. "There are certain things I can't tell even *you*. But when your letter came, I thought I had decided to take a great step—to alter my whole life. Then your letter came, and I knew I had been absurd. There was no question about it—if Robert wanted me. He *does* want me, Rose?"

"I wish you had seen him."

"Then, don't you see, that settles it? There are some things one can't argue about. I think," she added, slowly, "one doesn't argue about *any* of the important things in life. It's strange, but when you've lived with some one—some one you *have* once loved—above everything,"—her voice trembled a little,—“you grow bound to them with thousands and thousands of little chains which seem as light as air and are really strong as steel. So you see you don't argue. It's foolish, when you're bound and know you can't get away without tearing up your whole nature by its roots.” There was a silence.

"I knew you would come to that," said Rose at last in a quiet voice. "I was waiting for it. But you're not unhappy, Cis?" she added, wistfully.

"Unhappy?" she echoed. "No. When one has learned at last that life is a constant scraping of the gilt, and being thankful for the gingerbread, one is not unhappy. I have my friends." She touched Rose's hand. "I have my work. There are beautiful things in the world—and I have time for them now. 'Sun, moon, and stars, brother,'" she quoted, smiling—"all sweet things.' No, I'm not unhappy, except—"

She broke off abruptly. Rose did not speak, but she looked an interrogation.

"Dick is coming this afternoon—to say good-bye. He's going away."

Mrs. Summers raised her head.

"Really away?"

“To Central Africa—if that’s far enough,” returned her friend, with a curious inflection in her voice. She got up, and replaced some Roman hyacinths which had fallen from a glass on a table near the window. “I’m—I’m sorry he’s coming,” she added, speaking with her back to Rose.

“Why? You think——?”

“We’ve said good-bye. I met him in Rome.”

She felt rather than saw Rose’s start of reproachful amazement.

“Don’t say anything. Don’t ask,” she exclaimed, hurriedly. “It was by accident.” She put back the last flower, and returned to the sofa, where her friend was sitting. Rose saw that her hands were trembling.

“If I might have one prayer granted now,” she said in a low voice, “it would be that he might forget me utterly. Forget he’d ever seen me. I’ve got to get through life without him, but that’s nothing compared to what he——”

She did not finish the sentence, but Rose understood.

CHAPTER XXIV

“COME and take off your things,” suggested Cecily. Her tone indicated that conversation henceforward was to be of a surface nature, and again Rose understood.

While she took toilet things from her travelling-bag, and straightened her hair, they talked of Cecily’s journeyings, of travelling adventures, of the places she had visited—and later of Diana and her love affairs.

“It will be all right, I think,” Cecily said, laughing a little. “Isn’t she quaint about it, though? But he’s a nice boy.”

When they returned to the drawing-room, and Cecily had settled herself into her favorite chair, she said, comfortably:

“There’s one good thing, we sha’n’t be disturbed this afternoon. No one knows I’m home yet.”

“I’m sorry to have to break it to you, but every one knows!” exclaimed Rose, laughing. “The day I had your telegram I happened to be in town in the afternoon, and I met Lady Wilmot.” She paused dramatically.

Cecily groaned. “You told her, of course?”

“Yes. She came sailing across the road, panting for gossip, and immediately asked after you, hoping for the worst in every feature. I couldn’t resist disappointing her. Then she put on her face of mystery—you know it, and began, ‘My dear, we must have a talk——’ Of course I found I had to catch a train, and rushed off in the middle of a sentence, leaving her palpitating like her own motor-car. She doesn’t know the exact moment of your arrival, but you may be very sure she’ll be round before long.”

“To see whether the situation lends itself to elaborate or simple embroidery? She’s a real artist. *Have* people been talking much?” she added, after a moment. “But of course they have.”

“Privately, no doubt. That doesn’t matter. But, as far as I can discover, there’s been quite a successful conspiracy of mutual acceptance of Diana’s illness. The paragraphs about Dick have been useful, too.”

“What sort of paragraphs?” asked Cecily, slowly.

“Oh, things like, ‘We learn that Mr.8 Richard Mayne, the distinguished traveller and explorer, is engaged in active preparations for another expedition into the interior of Central Africa,’ and so on.”

“Is Philippa married?” asked Cecily, suddenly.

“No—apparently not, though why she should hesitate to make a good fellow unhappy, I don’t——”

Her words were cut short by the maid’s announcement of Lady Wilmot. Rose and Cecily had barely time to exchange glances before she was upon them, in emerald green brocade and feather trimming.

Like a Meredithian heroine she “swam” towards Cecily, whom she voluminously embraced.

“Welcome home, my dear,” she cried, and added in a gloomy whisper, “but why didn’t you come before? And where is Diana? And how, I should ask, *is* Diana?”

This, while she shook hands with Rose, was delivered with the air of one who, while allowing herself for philanthropic purposes to have the appearance of being deceived, wishes to remind the deceiver that she possesses intelligence.

“Diana has just gone out. She is splendidly well now, I’m thankful to say,” answered Cecily, smiling. “That’s why I was able to come home. And I was so glad it was possible, when I heard from Rose last week that it was poor Robert’s turn to look ill.”

Lady Wilmot looked at her fixedly before she dropped, with an undeniable thud, into a neighboring chair.

Her expression demanded imperatively whether ignorance or duplicity accounted for the remarks of her hostess.

Cecily was faintly amused. She found herself a little curious as to the meaning of her guest’s portentous behavior, though her wonder was only slightly stirred, after all. Her mind was full of other matters.

She put her hand on the bell.

“We’ll have tea at once,” she said.

Lady Wilmot stopped her with a commanding gesture.

“Where is Robert?” she demanded.

“At Aldeburgh,” returned Cecily. “He may be back to-day, though. He doesn’t expect me quite so soon. I’m to be a surprise for him.” Her smile this time was tinged with impatience. Lady Wilmot’s stare annoyed her.

“Are you sure he’s at Aldeburgh?” she now inquired in a deep voice.

“Certainly,” said Cecily, rather stiffly.

Lady Wilmot settled her back more comfortably into the sofa cushions, and metaphorically untied her bonnet-strings.

“My dear Cecily,” she began, “I know I may speak before Rose, and you mustn’t be upset by anything I am going to say. Now Robert *has* been in town lately, I hear.”

Cecily had risen, and was standing leaning against the mantelpiece, looking down at her guest with a grave face, touched with involuntary displeasure.

“Robert was here a week ago, I believe,” she said, coldly. “He came to see to the opening of the flat, when the servants came back.”

“Precisely,” nodded Lady Wilmot. “Now, my dear Cecily, if you will allow me to say so, you have made several grave mistakes in your dealings with Robert. Oh, yes! I was prepared for a dignified expression, and all that sort of thing. It’s just what a woman honestly endeavoring to do her duty must of necessity expect.” At this point in the monologue Rose somewhat hurriedly changed her seat to a position from which her face was not visible to Lady Wilmot. “In the first place,” pursued that lady, “what, in the name of foolishness,⁸ induced you, as a married woman of some years’

standing, to allow Philippa Burton to act as your husband's secretary? In the second, how could you have the stupidity to leave a man like Robert—or for that matter, *any* man—for three months? Men will be men, and we can't stop them. We can only be drags on the wheel. You should have stopped at home, my dear, and been a drag. In the third——”

Cecily made an impatient movement. “I shall feel much obliged, Lady Wilmot, if you will at once tell me why you have called this afternoon,” she said, very coldly.

Lady Wilmot bridled.

“With pleasure,” she returned, quite truthfully. “This day week I was driving past these flats on my way home from a bridge party. It was twelve o'clock at night. Twelve o'clock, I know, because——” For a moment or two Cecily lost the thread of Lady Wilmot's recital. Her attention was fixed upon something else. From her position by the fireplace she commanded the room. Both the other women had their backs turned towards the door; it was, therefore, only she who saw it quietly open, and Philippa Burton appear on the threshold. As she entered, Lady Wilmot was speaking her name....

8“Twelve o'clock, when the hall door opened and Philippa Burton came out. I watched her down the road from my carriage window. And now,” she continued, half rising, “having done my duty by you, for which I shall get, as I expected, little thanks, I shall go straight to the Neverns. Gaby and fool as God knows Sammy Nevern to be, I have a respect for his parents, and therefore——”

Again Cecily lost the thread of Lady Wilmot's remarks, continued during the occupation of hunting for a feather boa. Above the heads of the two unconscious women in the room, the eyes of the other two met. In Philippa's there was agonized supplication.

Cecily never knew what prompted her next words. They rose to her lips fluently, and apparently without volition. She was even startled as she heard herself give them utterance.

“I have let you go on, Lady Wilmot,” she said in a voice drained of all expression, “though you did not see that Miss Burton was in the room.”

Lady Wilmot turned as though a fog-signal had gone off under her chair. Rose sprang to her feet, and moved nearer to Cecily.

8“When I tell you that Miss Burton was here the other night at my request,” Cecily went on in the same tone, “you will understand that you have made a grave mistake.”

The faintest flicker of eyelashes was the only sign of surprise which Rose allowed herself. She stood and waited, with an impassive countenance, while Lady Wilmot gasped.

“At your request?” she stammered.

“Yes. Why not?” returned Cecily, her mind still working, as it seemed, independently of her. “Miss Burton, as you know, was my husband's secretary up to

the time we closed the flat. A few days ago he wrote to me from Aldeburgh about a manuscript which he thought I had taken abroad with me. I happened to know it was here. Naturally, as Miss Burton knew all about his papers, I wrote to her to come and find it. I don't know why she should have chosen the late hour you mention, certainly. That is her own affair. Probably she was busy earlier. In any case, my husband was not in the flat at the time. As I tell you, he wrote to me from Aldeburgh."

Lady Wilmot finished patting her boa, and readjusted her veil, with an assumption of calmness which Rose secretly admired.

"I'm sure I'm very sorry. Philippa, my dear, I must apologize." She held out her hand to Cecily. "And I'm quite sure neither of you young people will bear me any malice," she added, looking from one to another. "You, my dear Cecily, will certainly appreciate the motive."

"Perfectly," said Cecily, gravely. "Rose, do you mind going to the door with Lady Wilmot?"

CHAPTER XXV

WHEN the door closed, Cecily, without a glance at Philippa, who stood motionless just within the room, crossed blindly to the window, and stood looking out. Half consciously she noticed the cathedral tower against the sky. The sight of it reminded her of her struggles for peace and freedom, their slow attainment, her hardly won serenity. Disgust filled her mind. It was for this, then, that she had abandoned Dick, and hurried back hundreds of miles to a man who was ready to subject her once more to insult. She smiled to herself disdainfully at the thought of Rose's credulity, of her own emotional tenderness. The door-bell rang suddenly. A moment, and she heard a man's footstep, and a man's voice. It was Dick! Rose was asking him into the dining-room, where she herself was sitting.

Involuntarily Cecily turned—her one instinct to go to him. Through her mind darted possibilities. She had taken no irrevocable⁸ step—nothing was yet too late. As she turned, her eyes fell upon Philippa, whose presence she had forgotten. She was still standing, waiting till Cecily should move, and, as for the second time her eyes met Cecily's, she was struck afresh by their desperate appeal. Well as she knew, and contemptuous as she was, of all Philippa's posing, this new look of hers was genuine. It served to stay her steps.

Philippa made a hesitating movement towards her.

"Oh, it was *noble* of you," she whispered.

The familiar word jarred upon Cecily. She frowned impatiently.

"Shall we leave nobility out of our conversation?" she asked. "I'm rather tired of it. Will you sit down?"

Philippa complied, and after a moment Cecily too sat down at some little distance. For an interval there was silence.

"I suppose you will admit that I managed to save you just now from a scandal," she said at last.

"Yes, indeed," murmured the other woman.

"Then will you look upon this as a business transaction, and pay me by speaking the truth?"

⁸"Yes," said Philippa again, her mournful eyes fixed upon Cecily's.

"Did you see my husband the other night?"

"No—he wasn't here."

"But you came to see him?"

"Yes."

Cecily drew in her breath a little.

"At his request, of course?" she asked lightly, with a smile.

"No—he didn't know I was coming."

Again they looked at one another in silence.

"Please listen," said Cecily after a time, slowly. "Though I did not leave my husband on your account, I shouldn't have returned to his house if I had known that his—his friendship with you was not over."

"It *is* over."

"Then will you be kind enough to explain to me why you were here last week?"

Philippa's eyes wavered. She began to trace patterns on the floor with her foot.

"I—I came to borrow money," she answered under her breath.

Cecily leaned back in her chair. With Philippa's words came a swift realization of the sordidness of a "love affair." She was startled a moment later by a sudden torrent of words from the woman opposite to her.

"You'll have to know all about it, I suppose!" she broke out in a hoarse, unnatural voice. "I'm desperate—hunted. Do you know what that feels like? Of course you don't. There's a man who threatens—oh, I can't tell you!—I can't tell you!" She broke into sudden hysterical crying.

"Hush!" said Cecily, more gently. "Tell me. You must tell me everything now. It is only fair to yourself, and to me. You wanted money, you say? But why didn't you write, instead of——"

"I *did* write," she explained, between her sobs, "ever so many times. He always returned my letters unopened. He—he had discovered that I was going to marry Nigel. And then—I used to come down here and wait for him to come out. But I never saw him. One evening, when I was waiting, I saw both the servants leave the flat, and I thought he would be alone. I didn't know he wasn't in town. I had the latch-key. He gave it to me once, when I—when I used to work here. I knew he wrote late. I thought if I could once get to his study and see him, I might——" She paused. Cecily was still silent.

"It was very mad," she went on, "but it seemed an opportunity. The hall door downstairs was open. I suppose there was a party going on in one of the flats, and I trusted to luck.... But he wasn't here. I didn't know he'd gone away...." Again her voice failed.

"And to-day?" asked Cecily. "You came back to-day to see him?"

"Yes. Of course I had no idea you were here.... I thought I might—he might...." She laid the latch-key with which she had entered on the table between them.

The room was quite still. Cecily scarcely knew how to define her sensations, but relief was one of them—the greatest. She was glad, inexpressibly glad to find her new suspicions of Robert groundless. She started when Philippa sprang with sudden passion to her feet.

"Oh!" she cried, "how you despise me, don't you? But if you'd had my existence—— Do you know what life means for a woman who has no money?" she demanded, fiercely. "Do you know what it means to be turned out into the world when your parents die, without influence, without proper training for any work, just to sink or swim as you can? I tell you, you clutch at anything, at anybody.... I shall have

to tell you.... I lived with a woman once—and there was some money—I”—she moistened her dry lips—“I had the handling of her—money, and I—I meant to return it, of course. But she found out before I had time. She was hard—as hard as nails. She gave me a certain time to pay it back, and if I didn’t she threatened to make it public. Well—I borrowed it—I had to—from a man.” Again she suddenly lowered her eyes—and Cecily understood. “It’s he who threatens,” she went on in a choking voice. “It’s not paid back yet—and he’s poor—— Oh, you’ve never met such a man in your world, of course! *You* don’t know the sort of man who would—— It’s the money he wants. And I can’t marry Nigel, because he—this man will go to him, and——”

She threw herself on the sofa and hid her face.

Cecily drew nearer. Human misery is terrible to witness. She was moved inexpressibly. Philippa’s affectations, her poses, her exasperating mannerisms, had dropped from her, leaving her just a naked, shivering human soul, desperately afraid.

“Philippa!” she whispered, bending over her, “if only you had ever, even *once* before, been sincere with me!” She spoke in a voice trembling with pity, and Philippa looked up.

“Go on,” she said. “Don’t be afraid to tell me everything.”

Philippa raised her head, pushing her hair away from her haggard eyes. She looked old and beaten and hunted as she sat there.

“There’s nothing much to tell,” she said, doggedly. “That’s what I did—and I’ve paid for it. It’s awful to get into a net. I saw your husband was interested in me—at the beginning, I mean. I couldn’t afford to let him go.”

The slow color rose to Cecily’s cheek. Chaotic emotions surged within her; among them shame, and a curious despairing pity that after all her husband had never been loved—merely tricked,—deceived. “Poor Robin!” she found herself repeating silently, with a sort of passion of protection, as she returned in thought to the “little” name of their happy days.

Philippa was still talking, wildly, incoherently, as though with relief.

“And then when I met Nigel, and he wanted to marry me, I was thankful. I was so tired of struggling and having to pretend. I wanted to feel safe and—and sheltered. I wanted it so much. And now I shall lose him too. And it will all begin over again—all over again——” She stopped, drawing a long, exhausted breath.

Cecily rose and went to the window, which she threw wider open. She felt that she wanted fresh air. Then she turned. “Listen!” she said. “Don’t say any more. Go home now, and write to me. Tell me just what you want to put things straight, and I’ll manage it somehow.”

For a minute Philippa sat motionless, staring, her mouth a little open, her untidy hair hanging round her face.

“You mean——?” she began.

“I should like to put things quite straight for you,” Cecily answered, simply.

Philippa rose rather unsteadily to her feet. She began to realize that she was safe. With the knowledge, her old self, the self made out of incessant posing, constant mental attitudinizing, began to gather like a shell over the elemental human being for whom Cecily had been experiencing a very passion of pity.

She pushed her crushed hat at the right angle, her head drooped to its accustomed position, a little on one side, her body reassumed its yearning lines. She held out both hands to Cecily.

"How we have misjudged each other, you and I!" she exclaimed, employing the deep tones in her voice. "I thought you unsympathetic, unimaginative. And you no doubt thought me——" She hesitated. It became difficult with Cecily's eyes upon her to suggest the possible mental attitude she might formerly have adopted towards her husband's secretary. "You have a fine nature," she murmured. "You——"

Cecily checked her sharply. The impulsive wave of pity had passed.

"Please don't," she said, coldly. "I'm not noble, nor generous, nor a fine character, nor any of the things you are fond of talking about." Her heart began to beat quickly. "You altered the world for me!" she cried, with a sudden passion for which she could not account. "*Some one* would have done it anyhow, no doubt; I have realized that. But it happened to be *you*. If I were jealous now, I couldn't lift a finger to help you. But the worst of it is, I'm not jealous any more, and because you're a woman, too,—and that in itself is hard enough,—I'll help you now. You have taught me to put it out of any man's power to hurt me much again. But listen to me!" Her voice rang imperatively. Philippa raised unwilling eyes, and the women looked at each other. "For what I've had to kill to make it possible *not* to be hurt, I will never forgive you to the end of my life." The words were uttered with an intense deliberation. Philippa paled, and turned away without offering her hand.

Before she reached the door, she heard Cecily's voice again. This time it was quite under control. She spoke as though they had been conducting an ordinary business interview.

"Good-bye. Please tell me exactly how matters stand, and everything shall be arranged."

Philippa closed the door. She was saved, but it had been at a price.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN the adjoining room, meantime, Rose Summers was passing through her *mauvais quart d'heure*. She was bewildered, indignant, uncertain. The whole aspect of the situation appeared to have changed—yet dare she say anything to one of the chief actors in the drama?—an actor who sat opposite to her with a stolid demeanor and tragic eyes. She decided that she did not dare. Cecily was, therefore, unavoidably detained for a few minutes, but would not be long. In the meanwhile Rose looked at Mayne, and very ridiculously wanted to cry.

“So you’ve got your own way, as usual,” he began, quizzically, after a few perfunctory questions from Rose about his forthcoming expedition.

Rose winced. It is astonishing how much a smile can hurt. “Wasn’t it the best way?—at least the only way?” she answered, appealingly.

He shrugged his shoulders. “So he doesn’t know she’s here?”

“Doesn’t even know she’s coming,” Rose answered, meekly.

“And he will be overwhelmed with joy?” Mayne inquired, with another smile, difficult to meet.

Rose decided to show fight. “Yes, I think he will,” she replied.

There was a pause, while he looked out of the window. When he spoke, it was with his back to her.

“And Cecily? Does she want this—this reconciliation?”

Mrs. Summers smothered the thought of the possible result of the interview in progress.

“Yes. On the whole—yes. She was touched at what I wrote of his looking so ill.”

“Wasn’t that hitting below the belt?” Mayne asked, with more than a touch of mockery. “And he’s still away?” he added, when she did not reply.

“Yes—but he may be home any day.”

“So you didn’t agree with the step Cecily took?” he asked presently, continuing his merciless questioning,—“leaving him, I mean.”

“On the contrary, I quite agreed. But one need not take unnecessarily long steps.”

“Merely steps of the conventional length, you would say? Just long enough to keep a woman at the side of a man who is unworthy of her.”

She answered his bitterness very gently.

“There’s so much more in it than that—to a woman like Cecily. She *has* loved him—and now he needs her. I understand it.”

He gave a short laugh. “Will *he* understand it? I picture him—complacent.”

“No, Dick,” said Rose, gravely. “He’s been too far into the depths. If he hadn’t, I should never have written to Cecily.”

She hesitated, glanced at him, and made up her mind to go on.

“You see, Dick, it is not as though she had ever——” She paused. She could not bear to look at him.

“Loved me?” He finished the sentence for her slowly, all his affectation of hardness dropping like a mask. “No, you are right. That always settled it. I know I’m a fool,” he went on in a perfectly quiet voice. “Don’t think I don’t know it. I’m like a child crying because a star never came down from the sky to—to be treasured by him.”

Rose put out her hand to him, the room swimming before her eyes.

“Dear old Dick!”

98He drew himself up.

“I’m off,” he said, abruptly. “Good-bye, Mrs. Summers.” He took both her hands in one of his.

“You won’t stay to see——” began Rose in irresolute consternation.

“No,” he returned, firmly. “After all, I’ve said good-bye.”

She looked at him, and did not argue.

“God bless you, Dick,” she whispered.

“Give my love to Cecily,” he said, turning at the door.

That was all. Rose heard his footsteps down the hall—heard the hall door close. She was still standing in the middle of the room, where he had left her; she did not know how long she had been standing there, when Cecily came in.

“He’s gone,” cried Rose. “He wouldn’t stay. Shall I call him back?” she asked, desperately. “He told me you had said good-bye.”

Cecily was very pale. She turned a little paler before she spoke.

“No,” she said, slowly. “He is right. Don’t call him. We have said good-bye.”

“Cis?” whispered Rose. “Is it all right?”

99“Oh, yes! I suppose it’s all right,” she answered in a dazed voice.

Then she went into her bedroom and shut the door.

Rose did not follow her.

CHAPTER XXVII

IT was after dusk the following evening when Robert drove across town from Liverpool Street.

He had telegraphed to one of the servants, who had lived with them since their marriage, that he should return that evening, and as he neared the desolate home he pictured, he was thinking drearily that some settlement of the situation was inevitable. He had no hope of Cecily. Rose had said so little that he had returned from his visit to her more despondent than ever. She must be in Cecily's confidence. She knew Cecily's attitude—and she had said nothing; given him no comfort. The outlook was inexpressibly dreary. He longed for Cecily. She was never out of his thoughts. She haunted his dreams—his terrible, mocking dreams. In these nightly visions, he saw her over and over again; in the garden at the Priory, walking bareheaded under the trees, smiling as she ran towards him. Or he turned, to find her at the door, her eyes full of laughter, her arms outstretched to him. Always the radiant, happy Cecily of their early married life. And then the waking—the heart-breaking return to reality; his shame, his bitter, useless self-reproach.

Fool—fool that he had been! He writhed to recall his infatuation, and all that it implied. He thought of it incessantly. He did no work. He scarcely slept. He suffered as a highly-strung nature always suffers, keenly, extravagantly—to the serious danger of health and sanity. When she saw him at her country home, Rose had felt that poetic justice was satisfied. Robert, in her opinion, and she was no lenient judge, had borne enough.

He opened the door of the flat with his latch-key, and Smithers, the parlor-maid, came running down the hall.

There was suppressed excitement in her demeanor, but he scarcely noticed it, as he bade her good-evening, and put his wraps down on the table. There were flowers in the hall. He noticed them, and thought of Cecily. She always suggested flowers. She had a way of filling every pot and pan in the house with them. He was passing the door of her bedroom. It was ajar, and there was a light within—flickering firelight. He wondered why—wondered with a pang at his heart. It was cruel to light a fire in there, it made it seem so much as though Cecily——

“Robin!”

He started violently, and felt the color die out of his face. His name was repeated, the “little” name that Cecily had not used for years. He pushed open the door.

His wife sat by the fire, looking back over her shoulder. She was in a tea-gown of soft silk, which fell away from her arms. As he stood on the threshold, she rose, smiling, as he had often dreamt he saw her, and held her hands out towards him.

Somehow he stumbled to her, and fell on his knees at her feet.

She bent down to him, and stroked his hair.

"Robin, dear," she said, gently, as a mother speaks to her child. "Oh, Robin, what a thin little boy!"

He began to sob convulsively, like a child, and she put her arms round him, and held him—in silence....

Presently he began to speak, pouring out his love and longing for her in the old voluble, vehement fashion, accusing himself—praying for forgiveness.

She sighed a little as she soothed him.

"But it *is* all right, darling, isn't it?" he said anxiously at last. "Really all right, I mean?"

"Yes, Robin, we're going to understand each other in future."

"And you *do* forgive me, Cis—for everything?"

"Yes, dear—hush! Don't let us talk about it."

"And you love me?" he urged, with the persistence of a child.

She hesitated, almost imperceptibly, before she assented.

"As you used to?" he asked, breathlessly. "In the old way? Just the same?"

She looked at him with troubled eyes. "Robin, shall we begin by not asking each other too many questions?"

The arms he had clasped round her dropped slowly. "Then you don't!" There was inexpressible disappointment in his tone.

"We can't set the clock back," said Cecily, at last, slowly. "I am a different person now."

He put his head on to her knee. "I want the old Cecily!" he cried.

Cecily's eyes filled with tears. When he raised his head he saw them.

"You mean, I might have kept her? Do you mean that, Cis?"

She made a movement of distress. "Oh, Robert, don't. Let us leave it. We can't wake the past. It is dead. Let us think of the future."

"But it's the past that *makes* the future," said Robert, drearily.

"Yes," she admitted in sad agreement.

There was a silence. Cecily looked at the fire with eyes that he watched hungrily.

"Cis!" he implored, presently, "say what you're thinking! Don't keep me outside your thoughts. Why must things always be different?"

She looked at him wonderingly. "Why?" Was it impossible for him to realize all that the years had done? She thought of the girl who had married him, and contrasted her with the woman who sat here now, by the fire, gently stroking the head against her knee. She could either have laughed or cried aloud.

"Because I'm different," was all she said. "I've learned things, and one can't do away with knowledge."

"What have you learned?"

"For one thing, what most men mean by love."

"You don't doubt that I love you, Cis!" he begged, despairingly.

She hesitated. "It's so difficult to say anything that won't make you think I'm really bitter and resentful in my heart," she began. "And you see, Robin, I'm not. If I were, you would have a better chance of—of what you want me to feel. I didn't want to discuss this, but you make me."

"It's better," he returned, in a dull voice. "I would rather. Let us at least be honest with each other."

She began to speak after a moment, hesitating a little, and feeling for the words.

"You see, Robin, when I was lonely and sad, and you saw me every day, I bored you. For nearly two years now you have seen very little of me. I—they say I've got pretty again, and people—men like me, and pay me attention, and all that. And now you are 'in love' with me again. Oh, yes," as he made a hurt, protesting sound, "I'm very willing to believe it's more than just that. But it's difficult to forget—the other, isn't it?"

He bowed his head.

"I suppose I ought to have managed better," she went on, musingly. "But—in the old days, when we married, I never looked upon you as a man to be 'managed' like the rest. It would have seemed to me like insulting you—an insult to the love I thought you had for me."

"Yes," said Robert, humbly, "I know. I've laid myself open to that reproach."

She patted his hand softly.

"Marriage is a very difficult game to play, isn't it?" she went on. "And do you know, Robin, I've come to the conclusion that to play it successfully the woman at least ought not to be in love. *Then* she can 'manage.' Then she can play skillfully, and find her success amusing. But suggest her methods to a girl in love, and she thinks them degrading." She smiled sadly. "Love is a horrid little god to woman, Robin. He first robs her of her best weapon, her sense of humor, and then, as the only method of restoring it to her—flies out of the window."

"Oh, Cis!" he sighed, "I've given you reason enough. But—I don't offer it as an excuse, but do you know, I wonder, how difficult it is for a man——"

"To be what is called faithful?" she asked. "Yes, I think I do. And, if *that* were all, Robin—— It isn't that exactly which shakes a woman's trust to the depths, and changes the world for her. It's what goes with it. The loss of all the other things at the same time. Her husband's consideration, his tenderness, his friendship. That these should go too, when he's 'out of love,' is what most women find so hard to bear—so incomprehensible.... You see, since I've been able to think dispassionately, I've tried to make it *my* case. Men say 'women are so different.' It's a convenient phrase, but it isn't true. You'd be surprised to find how many women are remarkably like men in every way. I'm one of them." She paused. All at once she lived over again a moment in the fierce Roman sunshine. "I can imagine myself tempted as you were tempted," she added, quietly.

"Tell me—what would you have done?" asked Robert, in a low voice.

"I think," she said, rather huskily, "I should have remembered the great love we had when we were married—and all the dear little everyday things afterwards. I should have remembered that, at the bottom of my heart, you were more to me, just because of those little home things, than any other human being. I should"—her voice sank lower—"I should have remembered our child. Ah!"—she drew in her breath sharply—"but that's different for me—I was her mother!"⁸ Robert laid his cheek against her hand. "Anyhow," she went on presently, more calmly, "I would have fought with myself. I should have been so afraid the new love would pass, and that then, when it was gone, I might find I'd lost my first real treasure. But men never seem to think of that. Perhaps they are greater gamblers than women. I don't know." She shook her head quietly, her eyes looking far away.

"Cecily!" he implored. "Don't say I've lost it. Oh, Cecily, love me again!"

Her eyes, full of tears, met his. "You ask for something that's gone," she said, miserably. "Dead roses are always dead roses. Not all our tears will make them fresh again."

There was a long silence. Presently he rose and began to walk up and down the room.

"Why did you come back?" he asked at last, sharp pain in his voice.

She got up and went to him.

"I thought you wanted me."

"Not if you no longer care." His lips trembled.

She put both hands on his arm, and drew him to her.

"Robin, dear," she whispered, "listen! There are different sorts of love. It's true—I9 can't deny it—that I don't feel in the old way,—in the way I did when—when we first married. But all the same you are more to me than any man in the world. Your troubles are my troubles. I hate you to be unhappy. When Rose told me how ill you looked, I wanted to fly all the way home, to look after you." She thought suddenly of the letter she had read in the hotel bedroom, and was thankful to feel that she was speaking truth. "All that part of my love has never failed. Do you know, Robin, when one has loved very much, I believe one spins a sort of web, made up of a thousand, thousand threads, binding one to the loved person? They are very slight, but very strong. We can't break them. I can't break the threads I spun round you. I have tried, but I can't. Oh, Robin, don't say I oughtn't to have come back!"

He laid his head on her breast with a touchingly helpless gesture.

"If you hadn't come back I should have died," he said. "I don't deserve anything, Cecily. But, oh, my dear, give me—as much—as you can."