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by Elizabeth Von Arnim

Contents

Chapter 1

It began in a Woman's Club in London on a February afternoon—an uncomfortable club, and a miserable afternoon—when Mrs. Wilkins, who had come down from Hampstead to shop and had lunched at her club, took up *The Times* from the table in the smoking-room, and running her listless eye down the Agony Column saw this:

> To Those who Appreciate Wistaria and Sunshine. Small mediaeval Italian Castle on the shores of the Mediterranean to be Let Furnished for the month of April. Necessary servants remain. Z, Box 1000, *The Times*.

That was its conception; yet, as in the case of many another, the conceiver was unaware of it at the moment.

So entirely unaware was Mrs. Wilkins that her April for that year had then and there been settled for her that she dropped the newspaper with a gesture that was both irritated and resigned, and went over to the window and stared drearily out at the dripping street.

Not for her were mediaeval castles, even those that are specially described as small. Not for her the shores in April of the Mediterranean, and the wistaria and sunshine. Such delights were only for the rich. Yet the advertisement had been addressed to persons who appreciate these things, so that it had been, anyhow, addressed too to her, for she certainly appreciated them; more than anybody knew; more than she had ever told. But she was poor. In the whole world she possessed of her very own only ninety pounds, saved from year to year, put by carefully pound by pound, out of her dress allowance. She had scraped this sum together at the suggestion of her husband as a shield and refuge against a rainy day. Her dress allowance, given her by her father, was £100 a year, so that Mrs. Wilkins's clothes were what her husband, urging her to save, called modest and becoming, and her acquaintance to each other, when they spoke of her at all, which was seldom for she was very negligible, called a perfect sight.

Mr. Wilkins, a solicitor, encouraged thrift, except that branch of it which got into his food. He did not call that thrift, he called it bad housekeeping. But for the thrift which, like moth, penetrated into Mrs. Wilkins's clothes and spoilt them, he had much praise. "You never know," he said, "when there will be a rainy day, and you may be very glad to find you have a nest-egg. Indeed we both may."

Looking out of the club window into Shaftesbury Avenue—hers was an economical club, but convenient for Hampstead, where she lived, and for Shoolbred's, where she shopped—Mrs. Wilkins, having stood there some time very drearily, her mind's eye on the Mediterranean in April, and the wistaria, and the enviable opportunities of the rich, while her bodily eye watched the really extremely horrible sooty rain falling steadily on the hurrying umbrellas and splashing omnibuses, suddenly wondered whether perhaps this was not the rainy day Mellersh—Mellersh was Mr. Wilkins—had so often encouraged her to prepare for, and whether to get out of such a climate and into the small mediaeval castle wasn't perhaps what Providence had all along intended her to do with her savings. Part of her savings, of course; perhaps quite a small part. The castle, being mediaeval, might also be dilapidated, and dilapidations were surely cheap. She wouldn't in the least mind a few of them, because you didn't pay for dilapidations which were already there; on the contrary—by reducing the price you had to pay they really paid you. But what nonsense to think of it . . .

She turned away from the window with the same gesture of mingled irritation and resignation with which she had laid down *The Times*, and crossed the room towards the door with the intention of getting her mackintosh and umbrella and fighting her way into one of the overcrowded omnibuses and going to Shoolbred's on her way home and buying some soles for Mellersh's dinner—Mellersh was difficult with fish and liked only soles, except salmon—when she beheld Mrs. Arbuthnot, a woman she knew by sight as also living in Hampstead and belonging to the club, sitting at the table in the middle of the room on which the newspapers and magazines were kept, absorbed, in her turn, in the first page of *The Times*.

Mrs. Wilkins had never yet spoken to Mrs. Arbuthnot, who belonged to one of the various church sets, and who analysed, classified, divided and registered the poor; whereas she and Mellersh, when they did go out, went to the parties of impressionist painters, of whom in Hampstead there were many. Mellersh had a sister who had married one of them and lived up on the Heath, and because of this alliance Mrs. Wilkins was drawn into a circle which was highly unnatural to her, and she had learned to dread pictures. She had to say things about them, and she didn't know what to say. She used to murmur, "Marvellous," and feel that it was not enough. But nobody minded. Nobody listened. Nobody took any notice of Mrs. Wilkins. She was the kind of person who is not noticed at parties. Her clothes, infested by thrift, made her practically invisible; her face was non-arresting; her conversation was reluctant; she was shy. And if one's clothes and face and conversation are all negligible, thought Mrs. Wilkins, who recognised her disabilities, what, at parties, is there left of one?

Also she was always with Wilkins, that clean-shaven, fine-looking man, who gave a party, merely by coming to it, a great air. Wilkins was very respectable. He was known to be highly thought of by his senior partners. His sister's circle admired him. He pronounced adequately intelligent judgments on art and artists. He was pithy; he was prudent; he never said a word too much, nor, on the other hand, did he ever say a word too little. He produced the impression of keeping copies of everything he said; and he was so obviously reliable that it often happened that people who met him at these parties became discontented with their own solicitors, and after a period of restlessness extricated themselves and went to Wilkins.

Naturally Mrs. Wilkins was blotted out. "She," said his sister, with something herself of the judicial, the digested, and the final in her manner, "should stay at home." But Wilkins could not leave his wife at home. He was a family solicitor, and all such have wives and show them. With his in the week he went to parties, and with his on Sundays he went to church. Being still fairly young—he was thirty-nine—and ambitious of old ladies, of whom he had not yet acquired in his practice a sufficient number, he could not afford to miss church, and it was there that Mrs. Wilkins became familiar, though never through words, with Mrs. Arbuthnot.

She saw her marshalling the children of the poor into pews. She would come in at the head of the procession from the Sunday School exactly five minutes before the choir, and get her boys and girls neatly fitted into their allotted seats, and down on their little knees in their preliminary prayer, and up again on their feet just as, to the swelling organ, the vestry door opened, and the choir and clergy, big with the litanies and commandments they were presently to roll out, emerged. She had a sad face, yet she was evidently efficient. The combination used to make Mrs. Wilkins wonder, for she had been told by Mellersh, on days when she had only been able to get plaice, that if one were efficient one wouldn't be depressed, and that if one does one's job well one becomes automatically bright and brisk.

About Mrs. Arbuthnot there was nothing bright and brisk, though much in her way with the Sunday School children that was automatic; but when Mrs. Wilkins, turning from the window, caught sight of her in the club she was not being automatic at all, but was looking fixedly at one portion of the first page of *The Times*, holding the paper quite still, her eyes not moving. She was just staring; and her face, as usual, was the face of a patient and disappointed Madonna.

Obeying an impulse she wondered at even while obeying it, Mrs. Wilkins, the shy and the reluctant, instead of proceeding as she had intended to the cloakroom and from thence to Schoolbred's in search of Mellersh's fish, stopped at the table and sat down exactly opposite Mrs. Arbuthnot, to whom she had never yet spoken in her life.

It was one of those long, narrow refectory tables, so that they were quite close to each other.

Mrs. Arbuthnot, however, did not look up. She continued to gaze, with eyes that seemed to be dreaming, at one spot only of The Times.

Mrs. Wilkins watched her a minute, trying to screw up courage to speak to her. She wanted to ask her if she had seen the advertisement. She did not know why she wanted to ask her this, but she wanted to. How stupid not to be able to speak to her. She looked so kind. She looked so unhappy. Why couldn't two unhappy people refresh each other on their way through this dusty business of life by a little talk—real, natural talk, about what they felt, what they would have liked, what they still tried to hope? And she could not help thinking that Mrs. Arbuthnot, too, was reading that very same advertisement. Her eyes were on the very part of the paper. Was she, too, picturing what it would be like—the colour, the fragrance, the light, the soft lapping of the sea among little hot rocks? Colour, fragrance, light, sea; instead of Shaftesbury Avenue, and the wet omnibuses, and the fish department at Shoolbred's, and the Tube to Hampstead, and dinner, and to-morrow the same and the day after the same and always the same . . .

Suddenly Mrs. Wilkins found herself leaning across the table. “Are you reading about the mediaeval castle and the wistaria?” she heard herself asking.

Naturally Mrs. Arbuthnot was surprised; but she was not half so much surprised as Mrs. Wilkins was at herself for asking.

Mrs. Arbuthnot had not yet to her knowledge set eyes on the shabby, lank, loosely-put-together figure sitting opposite her, with its small freckled face and big grey eyes almost disappearing under a smashed-down wet-weather hat, and she gazed at her a moment without answering. She *was* reading about the mediaeval castle and the wistaria, or rather had read about it ten minutes before, and since then had been lost in dreams—of light, of colour, of fragrance, of the soft lapping of the sea among little hot rocks . . .

“Why do you ask me that?” she said in her grave voice, for her training of and by the poor had made her grave and patient.

Mrs. Wilkins flushed and looked excessively shy and frightened. “Oh, only because I saw it too, and I thought perhaps—I thought somehow—” she stammered.

Whereupon Mrs. Arbuthnot, her mind being used to getting people into lists and divisions, from habit considered, as she gazed thoughtfully at Mrs. Wilkins, under what heading, supposing she had to classify her, she could most properly be put.

“And I know you by sight,” went on Mrs. Wilkins, who, like all the shy, once she was started plunged on, frightening herself to more and more speech by the sheer sound of what she had said last in her ears. “Every Sunday—I see you every Sunday in church—”

“In church?” echoed Mrs. Arbuthnot.

“And this seems such a wonderful thing—this advertisement about the wistaria—and—”

Mrs. Wilkins, who must have been at least thirty, broke off and wriggled in her chair with the movement of an awkward and embarrassed schoolgirl.

“It seems *so* wonderful,” she went on in a kind of burst, “and—it is such a miserable day . . .”

And then she sat looking at Mrs. Arbuthnot with the eyes of an imprisoned dog.

“This poor thing,” thought Mrs. Arbuthnot, whose life was spent in helping and alleviating, “needs advice.”

She accordingly prepared herself patiently to give it.

“If you see me in church,” she said, kindly and attentively, “I suppose you live in Hampstead too?”

“Oh yes,” said Mrs. Wilkins. And she repeated, her head on its long thin neck drooping a little as if the recollection of Hampstead bowed her, “Oh yes.”

“Where?” asked Mrs. Arbuthnot, who, when advice was needed, naturally first proceeded to collect the facts.

But Mrs. Wilkins, laying her hand softly and caressingly on the part of *The Times* where the advertisement was, as though the mere printed words of it were precious, only said, “Perhaps that’s why *this* seems so wonderful.”

“No—I think *that’s* wonderful anyhow,” said Mrs. Arbuthnot, forgetting facts and faintly sighing.

“Then you *were* reading it?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Arbuthnot, her eyes going dreamy again.

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful?” murmured Mrs. Wilkins.

“Wonderful,” said Mrs. Arbuthnot. Her face, which had lit up, faded into patience again. “Very wonderful,” she said. “But it’s no use wasting one’s time thinking of such things.”

“Oh, but it *is*,” was Mrs. Wilkins’s quick, surprising reply; surprising because it was so much unlike the rest of her—the characterless coat and skirt, the crumpled hat, the undecided wisp of hair straggling out. “And just the considering of them is worth while in itself—such a change from Hampstead—and sometimes I believe—I really do believe—if one considers hard enough one gets things.”

Mrs. Arbuthnot observed her patiently. In what category would she, supposing she had to, put her?

“Perhaps,” she said, leaning forward a little, “you will tell me your name. If we are to be friends”—she smiled her grave smile—“as I hope we are, we had better begin at the beginning.”

"Oh yes—how kind of you. I'm Mrs. Wilkins," said Mrs. Wilkins. "I don't expect," she added, flushing, as Mrs. Arbuthnot said nothing, "that it conveys anything to you. Sometimes it—it doesn't seem to convey anything to me either. But"—she looked round with a movement of seeking help—"I *am* Mrs. Wilkins."

She did not like her name. It was a mean, small name, with a kind of facetious twist, she thought, about its end like the upward curve of a pugdog's tail. There it was, however. There was no doing anything with it. Wilkins she was and Wilkins she would remain; and though her husband encouraged her to give it on all occasions as Mrs. Mellersh-Wilkins she only did that when he was within earshot, for she thought Mellersh made Wilkins worse, emphasising it in the way Chatsworth on the gate-posts of a villa emphasises the villa.

When first he suggested she should add Mellersh she had objected for the above reason, and after a pause—Mellersh was much too prudent to speak except after a pause, during which presumably he was taking a careful mental copy of his coming observation—he said, much displeased, "But I am not a villa," and looked at her as he looks who hopes, for perhaps the hundredth time, that he may not have married a fool.

Of course he was not a villa, Mrs. Wilkins assured him; she had never supposed he was; she had not dreamed of meaning . . . she was only just thinking . . .

The more she explained the more earnest became Mellersh's hope, familiar to him by this time, for he had then been a husband for two years, that he might not by any chance have married a fool; and they had a prolonged quarrel, if that can be called a quarrel which is conducted with dignified silence on one side and earnest apology on the other, as to whether or no Mrs. Wilkins had intended to suggest that Mr. Wilkins was a villa.

"I believe," she had thought when it was at last over—it took a long while—"that *anybody* would quarrel about *anything* when they've not left off being together for a single day for two whole years. What we both need is a holiday."

"My husband," went on Mrs. Wilkins to Mrs. Arbuthnot, trying to throw some light on herself, "is a solicitor. He—" She cast about for something she could say elucidatory of Mellersh, and found: "He's very handsome."

"Well," said Mrs. Arbuthnot kindly, "that must be a great pleasure to you."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Wilkins.

"Because," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, a little taken aback, for constant intercourse with the poor had accustomed her to have her pronouncements accepted without question, "because beauty—handsomeness—is a gift like any other, and if it is properly used—"

She trailed off into silence. Mrs. Wilkins's great grey eyes were fixed on her, and it seemed suddenly to Mrs. Arbuthnot that perhaps she was becoming crystallised into a habit of exposition, and of exposition after the manner of nursemaids, through having an audience that couldn't but agree, that would be afraid, if it wished, to interrupt, that didn't know, that was, in fact, at her mercy.

But Mrs. Wilkins was not listening; for just then, absurd as it seemed, a picture had flashed across her brain, and there were two figures in it sitting together under a great trailing wistaria that stretched across the branches of a tree she didn't know, and it was herself and Mrs. Arbuthnot—she saw them—she saw them. And behind them, bright in sunshine, were old grey walls—the mediaeval castle—she saw it—they were there . . .

She therefore stared at Mrs. Arbuthnot and did not hear a word she said. And Mrs. Arbuthnot stared too at Mrs. Wilkins, arrested by the expression on her face, which was swept by the excitement of what she saw, and was as luminous and tremulous under it as water in sunlight when it is ruffled by a gust of wind. At this moment, if she had been at a party, Mrs. Wilkins would have been looked at with interest.

They stared at each other; Mrs. Arbuthnot surprised, inquiringly, Mrs. Wilkins with the eyes of some one who has had a revelation. Of course. That was how it could be done. She herself, she by herself, couldn't afford it, and wouldn't be able, even if she could afford it, to go there all alone; but she and Mrs. Arbuthnot together . . .

She leaned across the table. "Why don't we try and get it?" she whispered.

Mrs. Arbuthnot became even more wide-eyed. "Get it?" she repeated.

"Yes," said Mrs. Wilkins, still as though she were afraid of being overheard. "Not just sit here and say How wonderful, and then go home to Hampstead without having put out a finger—go home just as usual and see about the dinner and the fish just as we've been doing for years and years and will go on doing for years and years. In fact," said Mrs. Wilkins, flushing to the roots of her hair, for the sound of what she was saying, of what

was coming pouring out, frightened her, and yet she couldn't stop, "I see no end to it. There is no end to it. So that there ought to be a break, there ought to be intervals—in everybody's interests. Why, it would really be being unselfish to go away and be happy for a little, because we would come back so much nicer. You see, after a bit everybody needs a holiday."

"But—how do you mean, get it?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Take it," said Mrs. Wilkins.

"Take it?"

"Rent it. Hire it. Have it."

"But—do you mean you and I?"

"Yes. Between us. Share. Then it would only cost half, and you look so—you look exactly as if you wanted it just as much as I do—as if you ought to have a rest—have something happy happen to you."

"Why, but we don't know each other."

"But just think how well we would if we went away together for a month! And I've saved for a rainy day, and I expect so have you, and this *is* the rainy day—look at it—"

"She is unbalanced," thought Mrs. Arbuthnot; yet she felt strangely stirred.

"Think of getting away for a whole month—from everything—to heaven—"

"She shouldn't say things like that," thought Mrs. Arbuthnot. "The vicar—" Yet she felt strangely stirred. It would indeed be wonderful to have a rest, a cessation.

Habit, however, steadied her again; and years of intercourse with the poor made her say, with the slight though sympathetic superiority of the explainer, "But then, you see, heaven isn't somewhere else. It is here and now. We are told so."

She became very earnest, just as she did when trying patiently to help and enlighten the poor. "Heaven is within us," she said in her gentle low voice. "We are told that on the very highest authority. And you know the lines about the kindred points, don't you—"

"Oh yes, I know *them*," interrupted Mrs. Wilkins impatiently.

"The kindred points of heaven and home," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, who was used to finishing her sentences. "Heaven is in our home."

"It isn't," said Mrs. Wilkins, again surprisingly.

Mrs. Arbuthnot was taken aback. Then she said gently, "Oh, but it is. It is there if we choose, if we make it."

"I do choose, and I do make it, and it isn't," said Mrs. Wilkins.

Then Mrs. Arbuthnot was silent, for she too sometimes had doubts about homes. She sat and looked uneasily at Mrs. Wilkins, feeling more and more the urgent need to getting her classified. If she could only classify Mrs. Wilkins, get her safely under her proper heading, she felt that she herself would regain her balance, which did seem very strangely to be slipping all to one side. For neither had she had a holiday for years, and the advertisement when she saw it had set her dreaming, and Mrs. Wilkins's excitement about it was infectious, and she had the sensation, as she listened to her impetuous, odd talk and watched her lit-up face, that she was being stirred out of sleep.

Clearly Mrs. Wilkins was unbalanced, but Mrs. Arbuthnot had met the unbalanced before—indeed she was always meeting them—and they had no effect on her own stability at all; whereas this one was making her feel quite wobbly, quite as though to be off and away, away from her compass points of God, Husband, Home and Duty—she didn't feel as if Mrs. Wilkins intended Mr. Wilkins to come too—and just for once be happy, would be both good and desirable. Which of course it wasn't; which certainly of course it wasn't. She, also, had a nest-egg, invested gradually in the Post Office Savings Bank, but to suppose that she would ever forget her duty to the extent of drawing it out and spending it on herself was surely absurd. Surely she couldn't, she wouldn't ever do such a thing? Surely she wouldn't, she couldn't ever forget her poor, forget misery and sickness as completely as that? No doubt a trip to Italy would be extraordinarily delightful, but there were many delightful things one would like to do, and what was strength given to one for except to help one not to do them?

Steadfast as the points of the compass to Mrs. Arbuthnot were the great four facts of life: God, Husband, Home, Duty. She had gone to sleep on these facts years ago, after a period of much misery, her head resting on

them as on a pillow; and she had a great dread of being awakened out of so simple and untroublesome a condition. Therefore it was that she searched with earnestness for a heading under which to put Mrs. Wilkins, and in this way illumine and steady her own mind; and sitting there looking at her uneasily after her last remark, and feeling herself becoming more and more unbalanced and infected, she decided *pro tem*, as the vicar said at meetings, to put her under the heading Nerves. It was just possible that she ought to go straight into the category Hysteria, which was often only the antechamber to Lunacy, but Mrs. Arbuthnot had learned not to hurry people into their final categories, having on more than one occasion discovered with dismay that she had made a mistake; and how difficult it had been to get them out again, and how crushed she had been with the most terrible remorse.

Yes. Nerves. Probably she had no regular work for others, thought Mrs. Arbuthnot; no work that would take her outside herself. Evidently she was rudderless—blown about by gusts, by impulses. Nerves was almost certainly her category, or would be quite soon if no one helped her. Poor little thing, thought Mrs. Arbuthnot, her own balance returning hand in hand with her compassion, and unable, because of the table, to see the length of Mrs. Wilkins's legs. All she saw was her small, eager, shy face, and her thin shoulders, and the look of childish longing in her eyes for something that she was sure was going to make her happy. No; such things didn't make people happy, such fleeting things. Mrs. Arbuthnot had learned in her long life with Frederick—he was her husband, and she had married him at twenty and was now thirty-three—where alone true joys are to be found. They are to be found, she now knew, only in daily, in hourly, living for others; they are to be found only—hadn't she over and over again taken her disappointments and discouragements there, and come away comforted?—at the feet of God.

Frederick had been the kind of husband whose wife betakes herself early to the feet of God. From him to them had been a short though painful step. It seemed short to her in retrospect, but it had really taken the whole of the first year of their marriage, and every inch of the way had been a struggle, and every inch of it was stained, she felt at the time, with her heart's blood. All that was over now. She had long since found peace. And Frederick, from her passionately loved bridegroom, from her worshipped young husband, had become second only to God on her list of duties and forbearances. There he hung, the second in importance, a bloodless thing bled white by her prayers. For years she had been able to be happy only by forgetting happiness. She wanted to stay like that. She wanted to shut out everything that would remind her of beautiful things, that might set her off again longing, desiring....

"I'd like so much to be friends," she said earnestly. "Won't you come and see me, or let me come to you sometimes? Whenever you feel as if you wanted to talk. I'll give you my address"—she searched in her handbag —"and then you won't forget." And she found a card and held it out.

Mrs. Wilkins ignored the card.

"It's so funny," said Mrs. Wilkins, just as if she had not heard her, "but I *see* us both—you and me—this April in the mediaeval castle."

Mrs. Arbuthnot relapsed into uneasiness. "Do you?" she said, making an effort to stay balanced under the visionary gaze of the shining grey eyes. "Do you?"

"Don't you ever see things in a kind of flash before they happen?" asked Mrs. Wilkins.

"Never," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

She tried to smile; she tried to smile the sympathetic yet wise and tolerant smile with which she was accustomed to listen to the necessarily biassed and incomplete views of the poor. She didn't succeed. The smile trembled out.

"Of course," she said in a low voice, almost as if she were afraid the vicar and the Savings Bank were listening, "it would be most beautiful—most beautiful—"

"Even if it were wrong," said Mrs. Wilkins, "it would only be for a month."

"That—" began Mrs. Arbuthnot, quite clear as to the reprehensibleness of such a point of view; but Mrs. Wilkins stopped her before she could finish.

"Anyhow," said Mrs. Wilkins, stopping her, "I'm sure it's wrong to go on being good for too long, till one gets miserable. And I can see you've been good for years and years, because you look so unhappy"—Mrs. Arbuthnot opened her mouth to protest—"and I—I've done nothing but duties, things for other people, ever since I was a

girl, and I don't believe anybody loves me a bit—a bit—the b-better—and I long—oh, I long—for something else—something else—"

Was she going to cry? Mrs. Arbuthnot became acutely uncomfortable and sympathetic. She hoped she wasn't going to cry. Not there. Not in that unfriendly room, with strangers coming and going.

But Mrs. Wilkins, after tugging agitatedly at a handkerchief that wouldn't come out of her pocket, did succeed at last in merely apparently blowing her nose with it, and then, blinking her eyes very quickly once or twice, looked at Mrs. Arbuthnot with a quivering air of half humble, half frightened apology, and smiled.

"Will you believe," she whispered, trying to steady her mouth, evidently dreadfully ashamed of herself, "that I've never spoken to any one before in my life like this? I can't think, I simply don't know, what has come over me."

"It's the advertisement," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, nodding gravely.

"Yes," said Mrs. Wilkins, dabbing furtively at her eyes, "and us both being so—"—she blew her nose again a little—"miserable."

Chapter 2

Of course Mrs. Arbuthnot was not miserable—how could she be, she asked herself, when God was taking care of her?—but she let that pass for the moment unrepudiated, because of her conviction that here was another fellow-creature in urgent need of her help; and not just boots and blankets and better sanitary arrangements this time, but the more delicate help of comprehension, of finding the exact right words.

The exact right words, she presently discovered, after trying various ones about living for others, and prayer, and the peace to be found in placing oneself unreservedly in God's hands—to meet all these words Mrs. Wilkins had other words, incoherent and yet, for the moment at least, till one had had more time, difficult to answer—the exact right words were a suggestion that it would do no harm to answer the advertisement. Non-committal. Mere inquiry. And what disturbed Mrs. Arbuthnot about this suggestion was that she did not make it solely to comfort Mrs. Wilkins; she made it because of her own strange longing for the mediaeval castle.

This was very disturbing. There she was, accustomed to direct, to lead, to advise, to support—except Frederick; she long since had learned to leave Frederick to God—being led herself, being influenced and thrown off her feet, by just an advertisement, by just an incoherent stranger. It was indeed disturbing. She failed to understand her sudden longing for what was, after all, self-indulgence, when for years no such desire had entered her heart.

"There's no harm in simply *asking*," she said in a low voice, as if the vicar and the Savings Bank and all her waiting and dependent poor were listening and condemning.

"It isn't as if it *committed* us to anything," said Mrs. Wilkins, also in a low voice, but her voice shook.

They got up simultaneously—Mrs. Arbuthnot had a sensation of surprise that Mrs. Wilkins should be so tall—and went to a writing-table, and Mrs. Arbuthnot wrote to Z, Box 1000, *The Times*, for particulars. She asked for all particulars, but the only one they really wanted was the one about the rent. They both felt that it was Mrs. Arbuthnot who ought to write the letter and do the business part. Not only was she used to organising and being practical, but she also was older, and certainly calmer; and she herself had no doubt too that she was wiser. Neither had Mrs. Wilkins any doubt of this; the very way Mrs. Arbuthnot parted her hair suggested a great calm that could only proceed from wisdom.

But if she was wiser, older and calmer, Mrs. Arbuthnot's new friend nevertheless seemed to her to be the one who impelled. Incoherent, she yet impelled. She appeared to have, apart from her need of help, an upsetting kind of character. She had a curious infectiousness. She led one on. And the way her unsteady mind leaped at conclusions—wrong ones, of course; witness the one that she, Mrs. Arbuthnot, was miserable—the way she leaped at conclusions was disconcerting.

Whatever she was, however, and whatever her unsteadiness, Mrs. Arbuthnot found herself sharing her excitement and her longing; and when the letter had been posted in the letter-box in the hall and actually was beyond getting back again, both she and Mrs. Wilkins felt the same sense of guilt.

"It only shows," said Mrs. Wilkins in a whisper, as they turned away from the letter-box, "how immaculately good we've been all our lives. The very first time we do anything our husbands don't know about we feel guilty."

"I'm afraid I can't say I've been immaculately good," gently protested Mrs. Arbuthnot, a little uncomfortable at this fresh example of successful leaping at conclusions, for she had not said a word about her feeling of guilt.

"Oh, but I'm sure you have—I *see* you being good—and that's why you're not happy."

"She shouldn't say things like that," thought Mrs. Arbuthnot. "I must try and help her not to."

Aloud she said gravely, "I don't know why you insist that I'm not happy. When you know me better I think you'll find that I am. And I'm sure you don't mean really that goodness, if one could attain it, makes one unhappy."

"Yes, I do," said Mrs. Wilkins. "Our sort of goodness does. We have attained it, and we are unhappy. There are miserable sorts of goodness and happy sorts—the sort we'll have at the mediaeval castle, for instance, is the happy sort."

"That is, supposing we go there," said Mrs. Arbuthnot restrainingly. She felt that Mrs. Wilkins needed holding on to. "After all, we've only written just to ask. Anybody may do that. I think it quite likely we shall find the conditions impossible, and even if they were not, probably by to-morrow we shall not want to go."

"I *see* us there," was Mrs. Wilkins's answer to that.

All this was very unbalancing. Mrs. Arbuthnot, as she presently splashed through the dripping streets on her way to a meeting she was to speak at, was in an unusually disturbed condition of mind. She had, she hoped, shown herself very calm to Mrs. Wilkins, very practical and sober, concealing her own excitement. But she was really extraordinarily moved, and she felt happy, and she felt guilty, and she felt afraid, and she had all the feelings, though this she did not know, of a woman who has come away from a secret meeting with her lover. That, indeed, was what she looked like when she arrived late on her platform; she, the open-browed, looked almost furtive as her eyes fell on the staring wooden faces waiting to hear her try and persuade them to contribute to the alleviation of the urgent needs of the Hampstead poor, each one convinced that they needed contributions themselves. She looked as though she were hiding something discreditable but delightful. Certainly her customary clear expression of candour was not there, and its place was taken by a kind of suppressed and frightened pleasedness, which would have led a more worldly-minded audience to the instant conviction of recent and probably impassioned lovemaking.

Beauty, beauty, beauty . . . the words kept ringing in her ears as she stood on the platform talking of sad things to the sparsely attended meeting. She had never been to Italy. Was that really what her nest-egg was to be spent on after all? Though she couldn't approve of the way Mrs. Wilkins was introducing the idea of predestination into her immediate future, just as if she had no choice, just as if to struggle, or even to reflect, were useless, it yet influenced her. Mrs. Wilkins's eyes had been the eyes of a seer. Some people were like that, Mrs. Arbuthnot knew; and if Mrs. Wilkins had actually seen her at the mediaeval castle it did seem probable that struggling would be a waste of time. Still, to spend her nest-egg on self-indulgence— The origin of this egg had been corrupt, but she had at least supposed its end was to be creditable. Was she to deflect it from its intended destination, which alone had appeared to justify her keeping it, and spend it on giving herself pleasure?

Mrs. Arbuthnot spoke on and on, so much practised in the kind of speech that she could have said it all in her sleep, and at the end of the meeting, her eyes dazzled by her secret visions, she hardly noticed that nobody was moved in any way whatever, least of all in the way of contributions.

But the vicar noticed. The vicar was disappointed. Usually his good friend and supporter Mrs. Arbuthnot succeeded better than this. And, what was even more unusual, she appeared, he observed, not even to mind.

"I can't imagine," he said to her as they parted, speaking irritably, for he was irritated both by the audience and by her, "what these people are coming to. *Nothing* seems to move them."

"Perhaps they need a holiday," suggested Mrs. Arbuthnot; an unsatisfactory, a queer reply, the vicar thought.

"In February?" he called after her sarcastically.

"Oh no—not till April," said Mrs. Arbuthnot over her shoulder.

"Very odd," thought the vicar. "Very odd indeed." And he went home and was not perhaps quite christian to his wife.

That night in her prayers Mrs. Arbuthnot asked for guidance. She felt she ought really to ask, straight out and roundly, that the mediaeval castle should already have been taken by some one else and the whole thing thus be settled, but her courage failed her. Suppose her prayer were to be answered? No; she couldn't ask it; she couldn't risk it. And after all—she almost pointed this out to God—if she spent her present nest-egg on a holiday she could quite soon accumulate another. Frederick pressed money on her; and it would only mean, while she rolled up a second egg, that for a time her contributions to the parish charities would be less. And then it could be the next nest-egg whose original corruption would be purged away by the use to which it was finally put.

For Mrs. Arbuthnot, who had no money of her own, was obliged to live on the proceeds of Frederick's activities, and her very nest-egg was the fruit, posthumously ripened, of ancient sin. The way Frederick made his living was one of the standing distresses of her life. He wrote immensely popular memoirs, regularly, every year, of the mistresses of kings. There were in history numerous kings who had had mistresses, and there were still

more numerous mistresses who had had kings; so that he had been able to publish a book of memoirs during each year of his married life, and even so there were great further piles of these ladies waiting to be dealt with. Mrs. Arbuthnot was helpless. Whether she liked it or not, she was obliged to live on the proceeds. He gave her a dreadful sofa once, after the success of his Du Barri memoir, with swollen cushions and soft, receptive lap, and it seemed to her a miserable thing that there, in her very home, should flaunt this re-incarnation of a dead old French sinner.

Simply good, convinced that morality is the basis of happiness, the fact that she and Frederick should draw their sustenance from guilt, however much purged by the passage of centuries, was one of the secret reasons of her sadness. The more the memoired lady had forgotten herself, the more his book about her was read and the more free-handed he was to his wife; and all that he gave her was spent, after adding slightly to her nest-egg—for she did hope and believe that some day people would cease to want to read of wickedness, and then Frederick would need supporting—on helping the poor. The parish flourished because, to take a handful at random, of the ill-behaviour of the ladies Du Barri, Montespan, Pompadour, Ninon de l'Enclos, and even of learned Maintenon. The poor were the filter through which the money was passed, to come out, Mrs. Arbuthnot hoped, purified. She could do no more. She had tried in days gone by to think the situation out, to discover the exact right course for her to take, but had found it, as she had found Frederick, too difficult, and had left it, as she had left Frederick, to God. Nothing of this money was spent on her house or dress; those remained, except for the great soft sofa, austere. It was the poor who profited. Their very boots were stout with sins. But how difficult it had been. Mrs. Arbuthnot, groping for guidance, prayed about it to exhaustion. Ought she perhaps to refuse to touch the money, to avoid it as she would have avoided the sins which were its source? But then what about the parish's boots? She asked the vicar what he thought, and, through much delicate language, evasive and cautious, it did finally appear that he was for the boots.

At least she had persuaded Frederick, when first he began his terrible successful career—he only began it after their marriage; when she married him he had been a blameless official attached to the library of the British Museum—to publish the memoirs under another name, so that she was not publicly branded. Hampstead read the books with glee, and had no idea that their writer lived in its midst. Frederick was almost unknown, even by sight, in Hampstead. He never went to any of its gatherings. Whatever it was he did in the way of recreation was done in London, but he never spoke of what he did or whom he saw; he might have been perfectly friendless for any mention he ever made of friends to his wife. Only the vicar knew where the money for the parish came from, and he regarded it, he told Mrs. Arbuthnot, as a matter of honour not to mention it.

And at least her little house was not haunted by the loose-lived ladies, for Frederick did his work away from home. He had two rooms near the British Museum, which was the scene of his exhumations, and there he went every morning, and he came back long after his wife was asleep. Sometimes he did not come back at all. Sometimes she did not see him for several days together. Then he would suddenly appear at breakfast, having let himself in with his latchkey the night before, very jovial and good-natured and free-handed and glad if she would allow him to give her something—a well-fed man, contented with the world; a jolly, full-blooded, satisfied man. And she was always gentle, and anxious that his coffee should be as he liked it.

He seemed very happy. Life, she often thought, however much one tabulated was yet a mystery. There were always some people it was impossible to place. Frederick was one of them. He didn't seem to bear the remotest resemblance to the original Frederick. He didn't seem to have the least need of any of the things he used to say were so important and beautiful—love, home, complete communion of thoughts, complete immersion in each other's interests. After those early painful attempts to hold him up to the point from which they had hand in hand so splendidly started, attempts in which she herself had got terribly hurt and the Frederick she supposed she had married was mangled out of recognition, she hung him up finally by her bedside as the chief subject of her prayers, and left him, except for those, entirely to God. She had loved Frederick too deeply to be able now to do anything but pray for him. He had no idea that he never went out of the house without her blessing going with him too, hovering, like a little echo of finished love, round that once dear head. She didn't dare think of him as he used to be, as he had seemed to her to be in those marvellous first days of their love-making, of their marriage. Her child had died; she had nothing, nobody of her own to lavish herself on. The poor became her children, and God the object of her love. What could be happier than such a life, she sometimes asked herself; but her face, and particularly her eyes, continued sad.

"Perhaps when we're old . . . perhaps when we are both quite old . . ." she would think wistfully.

Chapter 3

The owner of the mediaeval castle was an Englishman, a Mr. Briggs, who was in London at the moment and wrote that it had beds enough for eight people, exclusive of servants, three sitting-rooms, battlements, dungeons, and electric light. The rent was £60 for the month, the servants' wages were extra, and he wanted references—he wanted assurances that the second half of his rent would be paid, the first half being paid in advance, and he wanted assurances of respectability from a solicitor, or a doctor, or a clergyman. He was very polite in his letter, explaining that his desire for references was what was usual and should be regarded as a mere formality.

Mrs. Arbuthnot and Mrs. Wilkins had not thought of references, and they had not dreamed a rent could be so high. In their minds had floated sums like three guineas a week; or less, seeing that the place was small and old.

Sixty pounds for a single month.

It staggered them.

Before Mrs. Arbuthnot's eyes rose up boots: endless vistas, all the stout boots that sixty pounds would buy; and besides the rent there would be the servants' wagesc, and the food, and the railway journeys out and home. While as for references, these did indeed seem a stumbling-block; it did seem impossible to give any without making their plan more public than they had intended.

They had both—even Mrs. Arbuthnot, lured for once away from perfect candour by the realisation of the great saving of trouble and criticism an imperfect explanation would produce—they had both thought it would be a good plan to give out, each to her own circle, their circles being luckily distinct, that each was going to stay with a friend who had a house in Italy. It would be true as far as it went—Mrs. Wilkins asserted that it would be quite true, but Mrs. Arbuthnot thought it wouldn't be quite—and it was the only way, Mrs. Wilkins said, to keep Mellersh even approximately quiet. To spend any of her money just on the mere getting to Italy would cause him indignation; what he would say if he knew she was renting part of a mediaeval castle on her own account Mrs. Wilkins preferred not to think. It would take him days to say it all; and this although it was her very own money, and not a penny of it had ever been his.

"But I expect," she said, "your husband is just the same. I expect all husbands are alike in the long run."

Mrs. Arbuthnot said nothing, because her reason for not wanting Frederick to know was the exactly opposite one—Frederick would be only too pleased for her to go, he would not mind it in the very least; indeed, he would hail such a manifestation of self-indulgence and worldliness with an amusement that would hurt, and urge her to have a good time and not to hurry home with a crushing detachment. Far better, she thought, to be missed by Mellersh than to be sped by Frederick. To be missed, to be needed, from whatever motive, was, she thought, better than the complete loneliness of not being missed or needed at all.

She therefore said nothing, and allowed Mrs. Wilkins to leap at her conclusions unchecked. But they did, both of them, for a whole day feel that the only thing to be done was to renounce the mediaeval castle; and it was in arriving at this bitter decision that they really realised how acute had been their longing for it.

Then Mrs. Arbuthnot, whose mind was trained in the finding of ways out of difficulties, found a way out of the reference difficulty; and simultaneously Mrs. Wilkins had a vision revealing to her how to reduce the rent.

Mrs. Arbuthnot's plan was simple, and completely successful. She took the whole of the rent in person to the owner, drawing it out of her Savings Bank—again she looked furtive and apologetic, as if the clerk must know the money was wanted for purposes of self-indulgence—and, going up with the six ten pound notes in her hand-bag to the address near the Brompton Oratory where the owner lived, presented them to him, waiving her right to pay only half. And when he saw her, and her parted hair and soft dark eyes and sober apparel, and heard her grave voice, he told her not to bother about writing round for those references.

"It'll be all right," he said, scribbling a receipt for the rent. "Do sit down, won't you? Nasty day, isn't it? You'll find the old castle has lots of sunshine, whatever else it hasn't got. Husband going?"

Mrs. Arbuthnot, unused to anything but candour, looked troubled at this question and began to murmur inarticulately, and the owner at once concluded that she was a widow—a war one, of course, for other widows were old—and that he had been a fool not to guess it.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said, turning red right up to his fair hair. "I didn't mean—h'm, h'm, h'm—"

He ran his eye over the receipt he had written. "Yes, I think that's all right," he said, getting up and giving it to her. "Now," he added, taking the six notes she held out and smiling, for Mrs. Arbuthnot was agreeable to look at, "I'm richer, and you're happier. I've got money, and you've got San Salvatore. I wonder which is best."

"I think you know," said Mrs. Arbuthnot with her sweet smile.

He laughed and opened the door for her. It was a pity the interview was over. He would have liked to ask her to lunch with him. She made him think of his mother, of his nurse, of all things kind and comforting, besides having the attraction of not being his mother or his nurse.

"I hope you'll like the old place," he said, holding her hand a minute at the door. The very feel of her hand, even through its glove, was reassuring; it was the sort of hand, he thought, that children would like to hold in the dark. "In April, you know, it's simply a mass of flowers. And then there's the sea. You must wear white. You'll fit in very well. There are several portraits of you there."

"Portraits?"

"Madonnas, you know. There's one on the stairs really exactly like you."

Mrs. Arbuthnot smiled and said good-bye and thanked him. Without the least trouble and at once she had got him placed in his proper category: he was an artist and of an effervescent temperament.

She shook hands and left, and he wished she hadn't. After she was gone he supposed that he ought to have asked for those references, if only because she would think him so unbusiness-like not to, but he could as soon have insisted on references from a saint in a nimbus as from that grave, sweet lady.

Rose Arbuthnot.

Her letter, making the appointment, lay on the table.

Pretty name.

That difficulty, then, was overcome. But there still remained the other one, the really annihilating effect of the expense on the nest-eggs, and especially on Mrs. Wilkins's, which was in size, compared with Mrs. Arbuthnot's, as the egg of the plover to that of the duck; and this in its turn was overcome by the vision vouchsafed to Mrs. Wilkins, revealing to her the steps to be taken for its overcoming. Having got San Salvatore—the beautiful, the religious name, fascinated them—they in their turn would advertise in the Agony Column of *The Times*, and would inquire after two more ladies, of similar desires to their own, to join them and share the expenses.

At once the strain of the nest-eggs would be reduced from half to a quarter. Mrs. Wilkins was prepared to fling her entire egg into the adventure, but she realised that if it were to cost even sixpence over her ninety pounds her position would be terrible. Imagine going to Mellersh and saying, "I owe." It would be awful enough if some day circumstances forced her to say, "I have no nest-egg," but at least she would be supported in such a case by the knowledge that the egg had been her own. She therefore, though prepared to fling her last penny into the adventure, was not prepared to fling into it a single farthing that was not demonstrably her own; and she felt that if her share of the rent was reduced to fifteen pounds only, she would have a safe margin for the other expenses. Also they might economise very much on food—gather olives off their own trees and eat them, for instance, and perhaps catch fish.

Of course, as they pointed out to each other, they could reduce the rent to an almost negligible sum by increasing the number of sharers; they could have six more ladies instead of two if they wanted to, seeing that there were eight beds. But supposing the eight beds were distributed in couples in four rooms, it would not be altogether what they wanted, to find themselves shut up at night with a stranger. Besides, they thought that perhaps having so many would not be quite so peaceful. After all, they were going to San Salvatore for peace and rest and joy, and six more ladies, especially if they got into one's bedroom, might a little interfere with that.

However, there seemed to be only two ladies in England at that moment who had any wish to join them, for they had only two answers to their advertisement.

"Well, we only want two," said Mrs. Wilkins, quickly recovering, for she had imagined a great rush.

"I think a choice would have been a good thing," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"You mean because then we needn't have had Lady Caroline Dester."

"I didn't say that," gently protested Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"We needn't have her," said Mrs. Wilkins. "Just one more person would help us a great deal with the rent. We're not obliged to have two."

"But why should we not have her? She seems really quite what we want."

"Yes—she does from her letter," said Mrs. Wilkins doubtfully.

She felt she would be terribly shy of Lady Caroline. Incredible as it may seem, seeing how they get into everything, Mrs. Wilkins had never come across any members of the aristocracy.

They interviewed Lady Caroline, and they interviewed the other applicant, a Mrs. Fisher.

Lady Caroline came to the club in Shaftesbury Avenue, and appeared to be wholly taken up by one great longing, a longing to get away from everybody she had ever known. When she saw the club, and Mrs. Arbuthnot, and Mrs. Wilkins, she was sure that here was exactly what she wanted. She would be in Italy—a place she adored; she would not be in hotels—places she loathed; she would not be staying with friends—persons she disliked; and she would be in the company of strangers who would never mention a single person she knew, for the simple reason that they had not, could not have, and would not come across them. She asked a few questions about the fourth woman, and was satisfied with the answers. Mrs. Fisher, of Prince of Wales Terrace. A widow. She too would be unacquainted with any of her friends. Lady Caroline did not even know where Prince of Wales Terrace was.

"It's in London," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Is it?" said Lady Caroline.

It all seemed most restful.

Mrs. Fisher was unable to come to the club because, she explained by letter, she could not walk without a stick; therefore Mrs. Arbuthnot and Mrs. Wilkins went to her.

"But if she can't come to the club how can she go to Italy?" wondered Mrs. Wilkins, aloud.

"We shall hear that from her own lips," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

From Mrs. Fisher's lips they merely heard, in reply to delicate questioning, that sitting in trains was not walking about; and they knew that already. Except for the stick, however, she appeared to be a most desirable fourth—quiet, educated, elderly. She was much older than they or Lady Caroline—Lady Caroline had informed them she was twenty-eight—but not so old as to have ceased to be active-minded. She was very respectable indeed, and still wore a complete suit of black though her husband had died, she told them, eleven years before. Her house was full of signed photographs of illustrious Victorian dead, all of whom she said she had known when she was little. Her father had been an eminent critic, and in his house she had seen practically everybody who was anybody in letters and art. Carlyle had scowled at her; Matthew Arnold had held her on his knee; Tennyson had sonorously rallied her on the length of her pig-tail. She animatedly showed them the photographs, hung everywhere on her walls, pointing out the signatures with her stick, and she neither gave any information about her own husband nor asked for any about the husbands of her visitors; which was the greatest comfort. Indeed, she seemed to think that they also were widows, for on inquiring who the fourth lady was to be, and being told it was a Lady Caroline Dester, she said, "Is she a widow too?" And on their explaining that she was not, because she had not yet been married, observed with abstracted amiability, "All in good time."

But Mrs. Fisher's very abstractedness—and she seemed to be absorbed chiefly in the interesting people she used to know and in their memorial photographs, and quite a good part of the interview was taken up by reminiscent anecdote of Carlyle, Meredith, Matthew Arnold, Tennyson, and a host of others—her very abstractedness was a recommendation. She only asked, she said, to be allowed to sit quiet in the sun and remember. That was all Mrs. Arbuthnot and Mrs. Wilkins asked of their sharers. It was their idea of a perfect sharer that she should sit quiet in the sun and remember, rousing herself on Saturday evenings sufficiently to pay her share. Mrs. Fisher was very fond, too, she said, of flowers, and once when she was spending a week-end with her father at Box Hill—

"Who lived at Box Hill?" interrupted Mrs. Wilkins, who hung on Mrs. Fisher's reminiscences, intensely excited by meeting somebody who had actually been familiar with all the really and truly and undoubtedly great—actually seen them, heard them talking, touched them.

Mrs. Fisher looked at her over the top of her glasses in some surprise. Mrs. Wilkins, in her eagerness to tear the heart out quickly of Mrs. Fisher's reminiscences, afraid that at any moment Mrs. Arbuthnot would take her away and she wouldn't have heard half, had already interrupted several times with questions which appeared ignorant to Mrs. Fisher.

"Meredith of course," said Mrs. Fisher rather shortly. "I remember a particular week-end"—she continued. "My father often took me, but I always remember this week-end particularly—"

"Did you know Keats?" eagerly interrupted Mrs. Wilkins.

Mrs. Fisher, after a pause, said with sub-acid reserve that she had been unacquainted with both Keats and Shakespeare.

"Oh of course—how ridiculous of me!" cried Mrs. Wilkins, flushing scarlet. "It's because"—she floundered—"it's because the immortals somehow still seem alive, don't they—as if they were here, going to walk into the room in another minute—and one forgets they are dead. In fact one knows perfectly well that they're not dead—not nearly so dead as you and I even now," she assured Mrs. Fisher, who observed her over the top of her glasses.

"I thought I *saw* Keats the other day," Mrs. Wilkins incoherently proceeded, driven on by Mrs. Fisher's look over the top of her glasses. "In Hampstead—crossing the road in front of that house—you know—the house where he lived—"

Mrs. Arbuthnot said they must be going.

Mrs. Fisher did nothing to prevent them.

"I *really* thought I saw him," protested Mrs. Wilkins, appealing for belief first to one and then to the other while waves of colour passed over her face, and totally unable to stop because of Mrs. Fisher's glasses and the steady eyes looking at her over their tops. "I believe I *did* see him—he was dressed in a—"

Even Mrs. Arbuthnot looked at her now, and in her gentlest voice said they would be late for lunch.

It was at this point that Mrs. Fisher asked for references. She had no wish to find herself shut up for four weeks with somebody who saw things. It is true that there were three sitting-rooms, besides the garden and the battlements at San Salvatore, so that there would be opportunities of withdrawal from Mrs. Wilkins; but it would be disagreeable to Mrs. Fisher, for instance, if Mrs. Wilkins were suddenly to assert that she saw Mr. Fisher. Mr. Fisher was dead; let him remain so. She had no wish to be told he was walking about the garden. The only reference she really wanted, for she was much too old and firmly seated in her place in the world for questionable associates to matter to her, was one with regard to Mrs. Wilkins's health. Was her health quite normal? Was she an ordinary, everyday, sensible woman? Mrs. Fisher felt that if she were given even one address she would be able to find out what she needed. So she asked for references, and her visitors appeared to be so much taken aback—Mrs. Wilkins, indeed, was instantly sobered—that she added, "It is usual."

Mrs. Wilkins found her speech first. "But," she said, "aren't we the ones who ought to ask for some from you?"

And this seemed to Mrs. Arbuthnot too the right attitude. Surely it was they who were taking Mrs. Fisher into their party, and not Mrs. Fisher who was taking them into it?

For answer Mrs. Fisher, leaning on her stick, went to the writing-table and in a firm hand wrote down three names and offered them to Mrs. Wilkins, and the names were so respectable, more, they were so momentous, they were so nearly august, that just to read them was enough. The President of the Royal Academy, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Governor of the Bank of England—who would dare disturb such personages in their meditations with inquiries as to whether a female friend of theirs was all she should be?

"They have known me since I was little," said Mrs. Fisher—everybody seemed to have known Mrs. Fisher since or when she was little.

"I don't think references are nice things at all between—between ordinary decent women," burst out Mrs. Wilkins, made courageous by being, as she felt, at bay; for she very well knew that the only reference she could give without getting into trouble was Shoolbred, and she had little confidence in that, as it would be entirely based on Mellersh's fish. "We're not business people. We needn't distrust each other—"

And Mrs. Arbuthnot said, with a dignity that yet was sweet, "I'm afraid references do bring an atmosphere into our holiday plan that isn't quite what we want, and I don't think we'll take yours up or give you any

ourselves. So that I suppose you won't wish to join us."

And she held out her hand in good-bye.

Then Mrs. Fisher, her gaze diverted to Mrs. Arbuthnot, who inspired trust and liking even in Tube officials, felt that she would be idiotic to lose the opportunity of being in Italy in the particular conditions offered, and that she and this calm-browed woman between them would certainly be able to curb the other one when she had her attacks. So she said, taking Mrs. Arbuthnot's offered hand, "Very well. I waive references."

She waived references.

The two as they walked to the station in Kensington High Street could not help thinking that this way of putting it was lofty. Even Mrs. Arbuthnot, spendthrift of excuses for lapses, thought Mrs. Fisher might have used other words; and Mrs. Wilkins, by the time she got to the station, and the walk and the struggle on the crowded pavement with other people's umbrellas had warmed her blood, actually suggested waiving Mrs. Fisher.

"If there is any waiving to be done, do let us be the ones who waive," she said eagerly.

But Mrs. Arbuthnot, as usual, held on to Mrs. Wilkins; and presently, having cooled down in the train, Mrs. Wilkins announced that at San Salvatore Mrs. Fisher would find her level. "I see her finding her level there," she said, her eyes very bright.

Whereupon Mrs. Arbuthnot, sitting with her quiet hands folded, turned over in her mind how best she could help Mrs. Wilkins not to see quite so much; or at least, if she must see, to see in silence.

Chapter 4

It had been arranged that Mrs. Arbuthnot and Mrs. Wilkins, travelling together, should arrive at San Salvatore on the evening of March 31st—the owner, who told them how to get there, appreciated their disinclination to begin their time in it on April 1st—and Lady Caroline and Mrs. Fisher, as yet unacquainted and therefore under no obligations to bore each other on the journey, for only towards the end would they find out by a process of sifting who they were, were to arrive on the morning of April 2nd. In this way everything would be got nicely ready for the two who seemed, in spite of the equality of the sharing, yet to have something about them of guests.

There were disagreeable incidents towards the end of March, when Mrs. Wilkins, her heart in her mouth and her face a mixture of guilt, terror and determination, told her husband that she had been invited to Italy, and he declined to believe it. Of course he declined to believe it. Nobody had ever invited his wife to Italy before. There was no precedent. He required proofs. The only proof was Mrs. Arbuthnot, and Mrs. Wilkins had produced her; but after what entreaties, what passionate persuading! Mrs. Arbuthnot had not imagined she would have to face Mr. Wilkins and say things to him that were short of the truth, and it brought home to her what she had for some time suspected, that she was slipping more and more away from God.

Indeed, the whole of March was filled with unpleasant, anxious moments. It was an uneasy month. Mrs. Arbuthnot's conscience, made super-sensitive by years of pampering, could not reconcile what she was doing with its own high standard of what was right. It gave her little peace. It nudged her at her prayers. It punctuated her entreaties for divine guidance with disconcerting questions, such as, "Are you not a hypocrite? Do you really mean that? Would you not, frankly, be disappointed if that prayer were granted?"

The prolonged wet, raw weather was on the side too of her conscience, producing far more sickness than usual among the poor. They had bronchitis; they had fevers; there was no end to the distress. And here she was going off, spending precious money on going off, simply and solely to be happy. One woman. One woman being happy, and these piteous multitudes . . .

She was unable to look the vicar in the face. He did not know, nobody knew, what she was going to do, and from the very beginning she was unable to look anybody in the face. She excused herself from making speeches appealing for money. How could she stand up and ask people for money when she herself was spending so much on her own selfish pleasure? Nor did it help her or quiet her that, having actually told Frederick, in her desire to make up for what she was squandering, that she would be grateful if he would let her have some money, he instantly gave her a cheque for £100. He asked no questions. She was scarlet. He looked at her a moment and then looked away. It was a relief to Frederick that she should take some money. She gave it all immediately to the organisation she worked with, and found herself more tangled in doubts than ever.

Mrs. Wilkins, on the contrary, had no doubts. She was quite certain that it was a most proper thing to have a holiday, and altogether right and beautiful to spend one's own hard-collected savings on being happy.

"Think how much nicer we shall be when we come back," she said to Mrs. Arbuthnot, encouraging that pale lady.

No, Mrs. Wilkins had no doubts, but she had fears; and March was for her too an anxious month, with the unconscious Mr. Wilkins coming back daily to his dinner and eating his fish in the silence of imagined security.

Also things happen so awkwardly. It really is astonishing, how awkwardly they happen. Mrs. Wilkins, who was very careful all this month to give Mellersh only the food he liked, buying it and hovering over its cooking with a zeal more than common, succeeded so well that Mellersh was pleased; definitely pleased; so much pleased that he began to think that he might, after all, have married the right wife instead of, as he had frequently suspected, the wrong one. The result was that on the third Sunday in the month—Mrs. Wilkins had made up her trembling mind that on the fourth Sunday, there being five in that March and it being on the fifth of them that she and Mrs. Arbuthnot were to start, she would tell Mellersh of her invitation—on the third Sunday, then, after a very well-cooked lunch in which the Yorkshire pudding had melted in his mouth and the apricot tart had been so

perfect that he ate it all, Mellersh, smoking his cigar by the brightly burning fire the while hail gusts banged on the window, said: “I am thinking of taking you to Italy for Easter.” And paused for her astounded and grateful ecstasy.

None came. The silence in the room, except for the hail hitting the windows and the gay roar of the fire, was complete. Mrs. Wilkins could not speak. She was dumbfounded. The next Sunday was the day she had meant to break her news to him, and she had not yet even prepared the form of words in which she would break it.

Mr. Wilkins, who had not been abroad since before the war, and was noticing with increasing disgust, as week followed week of wind and rain, the peculiar persistent vileness of the weather, had slowly conceived a desire to get away from England for Easter. He was doing very well in his business. He could afford a trip. Switzerland was useless in April. There was a familiar sound about Easter in Italy. To Italy he would go; and as it would cause comment if he did not take his wife, take her he must—besides, she would be useful; a second person was always useful in a country whose language one did not speak for holding things, for waiting with the luggage.

He had expected an explosion of gratitude and excitement. The absence of it was incredible. She could not, he concluded, have heard. Probably she was absorbed in some foolish day-dream. It was regrettable how childish she remained.

He turned his head—their chairs were in front of the fire—and looked at her. She was staring straight into the fire, and it was no doubt the fire that made her face so red.

“I am thinking,” he repeated, raising his clear, cultivated voice and speaking with acerbity, for inattention at such a moment was deplorable, “of taking you to Italy for Easter. Did you not hear me?”

Yes, she had heard him, and she had been wondering at the extraordinary coincidence—really most extraordinary—she was just going to tell him how—how she had been invited—a friend had invited her—Easter, too—Easter was in April, wasn’t it?—her friend had a—had a house there.

In fact Mrs. Wilkins, driven by terror, guilt and surprise, had been more incoherent if possible than usual.

It was a dreadful afternoon. Mellersh, profoundly indignant, besides having his intended treat coming back on him like a blessing to roost, cross-examined her with the utmost severity. He demanded that she refuse the invitation. He demanded that, since she had so outrageously accepted it without consulting him, she should write and cancel her acceptance. Finding himself up against an unsuspected, shocking rock of obstinacy in her, he then declined to believe she had been invited to Italy at all. He declined to believe in this Mrs. Arbuthnot, of whom till that moment he had never heard; and it was only when the gentle creature was brought round—with such difficulty, with such a desire on her part to throw the whole thing up rather than tell Mr. Wilkins less than the truth—and herself endorsed his wife’s statements that he was able to give them credence. He could not but believe Mrs. Arbuthnot. She produced the precise effect on him that she did on Tube officials. She hardly needed to say anything. But that made no difference to her conscience, which knew and would not let her forget that she had given him an incomplete impression. “Do you,” asked her conscience, “see any real difference between an incomplete impression and a completely stated lie? God sees none.”

The remainder of March was a confused bad dream. Both Mrs. Arbuthnot and Mrs. Wilkins were shattered; try as they would not to, both felt extraordinarily guilty; and when on the morning of the 30th they did finally get off there was no exhilaration about the departure, no holiday feeling at all.

“We’ve been too good—*much* too good,” Mrs. Wilkins kept on murmuring as they walked up and down the platform at Victoria, having arrived there an hour before they need have, “and that’s why we feel as though we’re doing wrong. We’re brow-beaten—we’re not any longer real human beings. Real human beings aren’t ever as good as we’ve been. Oh”—she clenched her thin hands—“to *think* that we ought to be so happy now, here on the very station, actually starting, and we’re not, and it’s being spoilt for us just simply because we’ve spoilt *them!* What have we done—what have we done, I should like to know,” she inquired of Mrs. Arbuthnot indignantly, “except for once want to go away by ourselves and have a little rest from *them?*”

Mrs. Arbuthnot, patiently pacing, did not ask who she meant by *them*, because she knew. Mrs. Wilkins meant their husbands, persisting in her assumption that Frederick was as indignant as Mellersh over the departure of his wife, whereas Frederick did not even know his wife had gone.

Mrs. Arbuthnot, always silent about him, had said nothing of this to Mrs. Wilkins. Frederick went too deep into her heart for her to talk about him. He was having an extra bout of work finishing another of those dreadful books, and had been away practically continually the last few weeks, and was away when she left. Why should

she tell him beforehand? Sure as she so miserably was that he would have no objection to anything she did, she merely wrote him a note and put it on the hall-table ready for him if and when he should come home. She said she was going for a month's holiday as she needed a rest and she had not had one for so long, and that Gladys, the efficient parlourmaid, had orders to see to his comforts. She did not say where she was going; there was no reason why she should; he would not be interested, he would not care.

The day was wretched, blustering and wet; the crossing was atrocious, and they were very sick. But after having been very sick, just to arrive at Calais and not be sick was happiness, and it was there that the real splendour of what they were doing first began to warm their benumbed spirits. It got hold of Mrs. Wilkins first, and spread from her like a rose-coloured flame over her pale companion. Mellersh at Calais, where they restored themselves with soles because of Mrs. Wilkins's desire to eat a sole Mellersh wasn't having—Mellersh at Calais had already begun to dwindle and seem less important. None of the French porters knew him; not a single official at Calais cared a fig for Mellersh. In Paris there was no time to think of him because their train was late and they only just caught the Turin train at the Gare de Lyons; and by the afternoon of the next day when they got into Italy, England, Frederick, Mellersh, the vicar, the poor, Hampstead, the club, Shoolbred, everybody and everything, the whole inflamed sore dreariness, had faded to the dimness of a dream.

Chapter 5

It was cloudy in Italy, which surprised them. They had expected brilliant sunshine. But never mind: it was Italy, and the very clouds looked fat. Neither of them had ever been there before. Both gazed out of the windows with rapt faces. The hours flew as long as it was daylight, and after that there was the excitement of getting nearer, getting quite near, getting there. At Genoa it had begun to rain—Genoa! Imagine actually being at Genoa, seeing its name written up in the station just like any other name—at Nervi it was pouring, and when at last towards midnight, for again the train was late, they got to Mezzago, the rain was coming down in what seemed solid sheets. But it was Italy. Nothing it did could be bad. The very rain was different—straight rain, falling properly on to one's umbrella; not that violently blowing English stuff that got in everywhere. And it did leave off; and when it did, behold the earth would be strewn with roses.

Mr. Briggs, San Salvatore's owner, had said, "You get out at Mezzago, and then you drive." But he had forgotten what he amply knew, that trains in Italy are sometimes late, and he had imagined his tenants arriving at Mezzago at eight o'clock and finding a string of flys to choose from.

The train was four hours late, and when Mrs. Arbuthnot and Mrs. Wilkins scrambled down the ladder-like high steps of their carriage into the black downpour, their skirts sweeping off great pools of sooty wet because their hands were full of suit-cases, if it had not been for the vigilance of Domenico, the gardener at San Salvatore, they would have found nothing for them to drive in. All ordinary flys had long since gone home. Domenico, foreseeing this, had sent his aunt's fly, driven by her son his cousin; and his aunt and her fly lived in Castagneto, the village crouching at the feet of San Salvatore, and therefore, however late the train was, the fly would not dare come home without containing that which it had been sent to fetch.

Domenico's cousin's name was Beppo, and he presently emerged out of the dark where Mrs. Arbuthnot and Mrs. Wilkins stood, uncertain what to do next after the train had gone on, for they could see no porter and they thought from the feel of it that they were standing not so much on a platform as in the middle of the permanent way.

Beppo, who had been searching for them, emerged from the dark with a kind of pounce and talked Italian to them vociferously. Beppo was a most respectable young man, but he did not look as if he were, especially not in the dark, and he had a dripping hat slouched over one eye. They did not like the way he seized their suit-cases. He could not be, they thought, a porter. However, they presently from out of his streaming talk discerned the words San Salvatore, and after that they kept on saying them to him, for it was the only Italian they knew, as they hurried after him, unwilling to lose sight of their suit-cases, stumbling across rails and through puddles out to where in the road a small, high fly stood.

Its hood was up, and its horse was in an attitude of thought. They climbed in, and the minute they were in—Mrs. Wilkins, indeed, could hardly be called in—the horse awoke with a start from its reverie and immediately began going home rapidly; without Beppo; without the suit-cases.

Beppo darted after him, making the night ring with his shouts, and caught the hanging reins just in time. He explained proudly, and as it seemed to him with perfect clearness, that the horse always did that, being a fine animal full of corn and blood, and cared for by him, Beppo, as if he were his own son, and the ladies must not be alarmed—he had noticed they were clutching each other; but clear, and loud, and profuse of words though he was, they only looked at him blankly.

He went on talking, however, while he piled the suit-cases up round them, sure that sooner or later they must understand him, especially as he was careful to talk very loud and illustrate everything he said with the simplest elucidatory gestures, but they both continued only to look at him. They both, he noticed sympathetically, had white faces, fatigued faces, and they both had big eyes, fatigued eyes. They were beautiful ladies, he thought, and their eyes, looking at him over the tops of the suit-cases watching his every movement—there were no trunks, only numbers of suit-cases—were like the eyes of the Mother of God. The only thing the ladies said, and they repeated it at regular intervals, even after they had started, gently prodding him as he sat on his box to call his attention to it, was, "San Salvatore?"

And each time he answered vociferously, encouragingly, "*Sì, sì*—San Salvatore."

"We don't *know* of course if he's taking us there," said Mrs. Arbuthnot at last in a low voice, after they had been driving as it seemed to them a long while, and had got off the paving-stones of the sleep-shrouded town and were out on a winding road with what they could just see was a low wall on their left beyond which was a great black emptiness and the sound of the sea. On their right was something close and steep and high and black—rocks, they whispered to each other; huge rocks.

"No—we don't *know*," agreed Mrs. Wilkins, a slight coldness passing down her spine.

They felt very uncomfortable. It was so late. It was so dark. The road was so lonely. Suppose a wheel came off. Suppose they met Fascisti, or the opposite of Fascisti. How sorry they were now that they had not slept at Genoa and come on the next morning in daylight.

"But that would have been the first of April," said Mrs. Wilkins, in a low voice.

"It is that now," said Mrs. Arbuthnot beneath her breath.

"So it is," murmured Mrs. Wilkins.

They were silent.

Beppo turned round on his box—a disquieting habit already noticed, for surely his horse ought to be carefully watched—and again addressed them with what he was convinced was lucidity—no *patois*, and the clearest explanatory movements.

How much they wished their mothers had made them learn Italian when they were little. If only now they could have said, "Please sit round the right way and look after the horse." They did not even know what horse was in Italian. It was contemptible to be so ignorant.

In their anxiety, for the road twisted round great jutting rocks, and on their left was only the low wall to keep them out of the sea should anything happen, they too began to gesticulate, waving their hands at Beppo, pointing ahead. They wanted him to turn round again and face his horse, that was all. He thought they wanted him to drive faster; and there followed a terrifying ten minutes during which, as he supposed, he was gratifying them. He was proud of his horse, and it could go very fast. He rose in his seat, the whip cracked, the horse rushed forward, the rocks leaped towards them, the little fly swayed, the suit-cases heaved, Mrs. Arbuthnot and Mrs. Wilkins clung. In this way they continued, swaying, heaving, clattering, clinging, till at a point near Castagneto there was a rise in the road, and on reaching the foot of the rise the horse, who knew every inch of the way, stopped suddenly, throwing everything in the fly into a heap, and then proceeded up at the slowest of walks.

Beppo twisted himself round to receive their admiration, laughing with pride in his horse.

There was no answering laugh from the beautiful ladies. Their eyes, fixed on him, seemed bigger than ever, and their faces against the black of the night showed milky.

But here at least, once they were up the slope, were houses. The rocks left off, and there were houses; the low wall left off, and there were houses; the sea shrunk away, and the sound of it ceased, and the loneliness of the road was finished. No lights anywhere, of course, nobody to see them pass; and yet Beppo, when the houses began, after looking over his shoulder and shouting "Castagneto" at the ladies, once more stood up and cracked his whip and once more made his horse dash forward.

"We shall be there in a minute," Mrs. Arbuthnot said to herself, holding on.

"We shall soon stop now," Mrs. Wilkins said to herself, holding on. They said nothing aloud, because nothing would have been heard above the whip-cracking and the wheel-clattering and the boisterous inciting noises Beppo was making at his horse.

Anxiously they strained their eyes for any sight of the beginning of San Salvatore.

They had supposed and hoped that after a reasonable amount of village a mediaeval archway would loom upon them, and through it they would drive into a garden and draw up at an open, welcoming door, with light streaming from it and those servants standing in it who, according to the advertisement, remained.

Instead the fly suddenly stopped.

Peering out they could see they were still in the village street, with small dark houses each side; and Beppo, throwing the reins over the horse's back as if completely confident this time that he would not go any farther, got down off his box. At the same moment, springing as it seemed out of nothing, a man and several half-grown boys appeared on each side of the fly and began dragging out the suit-cases.

"No, no—San Salvatore, San Salvatore"—exclaimed Mrs. Wilkins, trying to hold on to what suit-cases she could.

"*Sì, sì*—San Salvatore," they all shouted, pulling.

"This *can't* be San Salvatore," said Mrs. Wilkins, turning to Mrs. Arbuthnot, who sat quite still watching her suit-cases being taken from her with the same patience she applied to lesser evils. She knew she could do nothing if these men were wicked men determined to have her suit-cases.

"I don't think it can be," she admitted, and could not refrain from a moment's wonder at the ways of God. Had she really been brought here, she and poor Mrs. Wilkins, after so much trouble in arranging it, so much difficulty and worry, along such devious paths of prevarication and deceit, only to be—

She checked her thoughts, and gently said to Mrs. Wilkins, while the ragged youths disappeared with the suit-cases into the night and the man with the lantern helped Beppo pull the rug off her, that they were both in God's hands; and for the first time on hearing this, Mrs. Wilkins was afraid.

There was nothing for it but to get out. Useless to try to go on sitting in the fly repeating San Salvatore. Every time they said it, and their voices each time were fainter, Beppo and the other man merely echoed it in a series of loud shouts. If only they had learned Italian when they were little. If only they could have said, "We wish to be driven to the door." But they did not even know what door was in Italian. Such ignorance was not only contemptible, it was, they now saw, definitely dangerous. Useless, however, to lament it now. Useless to put off whatever it was that was going to happen to them by trying to go on sitting in the fly. They therefore got out.

The two men opened their umbrellas for them and handed them to them. From this they received a faint encouragement, because they could not believe that if these men were wicked they would pause to open umbrellas. The man with the lantern then made signs to them to follow him, talking loud and quickly, and Beppo, they noticed, remained behind. Ought they to pay him? Not, they thought, if they were going to be robbed and perhaps murdered. Surely on such an occasion one did not pay. Besides, he had not after all brought them to San Salvatore. Where they had got to was evidently somewhere else. Also, he did not show the least wish to be paid; he let them go away into the night with no clamour at all. This, they could not help thinking, was a bad sign. He asked for nothing because presently he was to get so much.

They came to some steps. The road ended abruptly in a church and some descending steps. The man held the lantern low for them to see the steps.

"San Salvatore?" said Mrs. Wilkins once again, very faintly, before committing herself to the steps. It was useless to mention it now, of course, but she could not go down steps in complete silence. No mediaeval castle, she was sure, was ever built at the bottom of steps.

Again, however, came the echoing shout—"*Sì, sì*—San Salvatore."

They descended gingerly, holding up their skirts just as if they would be wanting them another time and had not in all probability finished with skirts for ever.

The steps ended in a steeply sloping path with flat stone slabs down the middle. They slipped a good deal on these wet slabs, and the man with the lantern, talking loud and quickly, held them up. His way of holding them up was polite.

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Wilkins in a low voice to Mrs. Arbuthnot, "It is all right after all."

"We're in God's hands," said Mrs. Arbuthnot again; and again Mrs. Wilkins was afraid.

They reached the bottom of the sloping path, and the light of the lantern flickered over an open space with houses round three sides. The sea was the fourth side, lazily washing backwards and forwards on pebbles.

"San Salvatore," said the man pointing with his lantern to a black mass curved round the water like an arm flung about it.

They strained their eyes. They saw the black mass, and on the top of it a light.

"San Salvatore?" they both repeated incredulously, for where were the suit-cases, and why had they been forced to get out of the fly?

"*Sì, sì*—San Salvatore."

They went along what seemed to be a quay, right on the edge of the water. There was not even a low wall here—nothing to prevent the man with the lantern tipping them in if he wanted to. He did not, however, tip them in.

Perhaps it was all right after all, Mrs. Wilkins again suggested to Mrs. Arbuthnot on noticing this, who this time was herself beginning to think that it might be, and said no more about God's hands.

The flicker of the lantern danced along, reflected in the wet pavement of the quay. Out to the left, in the darkness and evidently at the end of a jetty, was a red light. They came to an archway with a heavy iron gate. The man with the lantern pushed the gate open. This time they went up steps instead of down, and at the top of them was a little path that wound upwards among flowers. They could not see the flowers, but the whole place was evidently full of them.

It here dawned on Mrs. Wilkins that perhaps the reason why the fly had not driven them up to the door was that there was no road, only a footpath. That also would explain the disappearance of the suit-cases. She began to feel confident that they would find their suit-cases waiting for them when they got up to the top. San Salvatore was, it seemed, on the top of a hill, as a mediaeval castle should be. At a turn of the path they saw above them, much nearer now and shining more brightly, the light they had seen from the quay. She told Mrs. Arbuthnot of her dawning belief, and Mrs. Arbuthnot agreed that it was very likely a true one.

Once more, but this time in a tone of real hopefulness, Mrs. Wilkins said, pointing upwards at the black outline against the only slightly less black sky, "San Salvatore?" And once more, but this time comfortingly, encouragingly, came back the assurance, "*Sì, sì*—San Salvatore."

They crossed a little bridge, over what was apparently a ravine, and then came a flat bit with long grass at the sides and more flowers. They felt the grass flicking wet against their stockings, and the invisible flowers were everywhere. Then up again through trees, along a zigzag path with the smell all the way of the flowers they could not see. The warm rain was bringing out all the sweetness. Higher and higher they went in this sweet darkness, and the red light on the jetty dropped farther and farther below them.

The path wound round to the other side of what appeared to be a little peninsula; the jetty and the red light disappeared; across the emptiness on their left were distant lights.

"Mezzago," said the man, waving his lantern at the lights.

"*Sì, sì*," they answered, for they had by now learned "*sì, sì*". Upon which the man congratulated them in a great flow of polite words, not one of which they understood, on their magnificent Italian; for this was Domenico, the vigilant and accomplished gardener of San Salvatore, the prop and stay of the establishment, the resourceful, the gifted, the eloquent, the courteous, the intelligent Domenico. Only they did not know that yet; and he did in the dark, and even sometimes in the light, look, with his knife-sharp swarthy features and swift, panther movements, very like somebody wicked.

They passed along another flat bit of path, with a black shape like a high wall towering above them on their right, and then the path went up again under trellises, and trailing sprays of scented things caught at them and shook raindrops on them, and the light of the lantern flickered over lilies, and then came a flight of ancient steps worn with centuries, and then another iron gate, and then they were inside, though still climbing a twisting flight of stone steps with old walls on either side like the walls of dungeons, and with a vaulted roof.

At the top was a wrought-iron door, and through it shone a flood of electric light.

"*Ecco*," said Domenico, lithely running up the last few steps ahead and pushing the door open.

And there they were, arrived; and it was San Salvatore; and their suit-cases were waiting for them; and they had not been murdered.

They looked at each other's white faces and blinking eyes very solemnly.

It was a great, a wonderful moment. Here they were, in their mediaeval castle at last. Their feet touched its stones.

Mrs. Wilkins put her arm round Mrs. Arbuthnot's neck and kissed her.

"The first thing to happen in this house," she said softly, solemnly, "shall be a kiss."

"Dear Lotty," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Dear Rose," said Mrs. Wilkins, her eyes brimming with gladness.

Domenico was delighted. He liked to see beautiful ladies kiss. He made them a most appreciative speech of welcome, and they stood arm in arm, holding each other up, for they were very tired, blinking smilingly at him, and not understanding a word.

Chapter 6

When Mrs. Wilkins woke next morning she lay in bed a few minutes before getting up and opening the shutters. What would she see out of her window? A shining world, or a world of rain? But it would be beautiful; whatever it was would be beautiful.

She was in a little bedroom with bare white walls and a stone floor and sparse old furniture. The beds—there were two—were made of iron, enamelled black and painted with bunches of gay flowers. She lay putting off the great moment of going to the window as one puts off opening a precious letter, gloating over it. She had no idea what time it was; she had forgotten to wind up her watch ever since, centuries ago, she last went to bed in Hampstead. No sounds were to be heard in the house, so she supposed it was very early, yet she felt as if she had slept a long while—so completely rested, so perfectly content. She lay with her arms clasped round her head thinking how happy she was, her lips curved upwards in a delighted smile. In bed by herself: adorable condition. She had not been in a bed without Mellersh once now for five whole years; and the cool roominess of it, the freedom of one's movements, the sense of recklessness, of audacity, in giving the blankets a pull if one wanted to, or twitching the pillows more comfortably! It was like the discovery of an entirely new joy.

Mrs. Wilkins longed to get up and open the shutters, but where she was was really so very delicious. She gave a sigh of contentment, and went on lying there looking round her, taking in everything in her room, her own little room, her very own to arrange just as she pleased for this one blessed month, her room bought with her own savings, the fruit of her careful denials, whose door she could bolt if she wanted to, and nobody had the right to come in. It was such a strange little room, so different from any she had known, and so sweet. It was like a cell. Except for the two beds, it suggested a happy austerity. "And the name of the chamber," she thought, quoting and smiling round at it, "was Peace."

Well, this was delicious, to lie there thinking how happy she was, but outside those shutters it was more delicious still. She jumped up, pulled on her slippers, for there was nothing on the stone floor but one small rug, ran to the window and threw open the shutters.

"*Oh!*" cried Mrs. Wilkins.

All the radiance of April in Italy lay gathered together at her feet. The sun poured in on her. The sea lay asleep in it, hardly stirring. Across the bay the lovely mountains, exquisitely different in colour, were asleep too in the light; and underneath her window, at the bottom of the flower-starred grass slope from which the wall of the castle rose up, was a great cypress, cutting through the delicate blues and violets and rose-colours of the mountains and the sea like a great black sword.

She stared. Such beauty; and she there to see it. Such beauty; and she alive to feel it. Her face was bathed in light. Lovely scents came up to the window and caressed her. A tiny breeze gently lifted her hair. Far out in the bay a cluster of almost motionless fishing boats hovered like a flock of white birds on the tranquil sea. How beautiful, how beautiful. Not to have died before this . . . to have been allowed to see, breathe, feel this. . . . She stared, her lips parted. Happy? Poor, ordinary, everyday word. But what could one say, how could one describe it? It was as though she could hardly stay inside herself, it was as though she were too small to hold so much of joy, it was as though she were washed through with light. And how astonishing to feel this sheer bliss, for here she was, not doing and not going to do a single unselfish thing, not going to do a thing she didn't want to do. According to everybody she had ever come across she ought at least to have twinges. She had not one twinge. Something was wrong somewhere. Wonderful that at home she should have been so good, so terribly good, and merely felt tormented. Twinges of every sort had there been her portion; aches, hurts, discouragements, and she the whole time being steadily unselfish. Now she had taken off all her goodness and left it behind her like a heap of rain-sodden clothes, and she only felt joy. She was naked of goodness, and was rejoicing in being naked. She was stripped, and exulting. And there, away in the dim mugginess of Hampstead, was Mellersh being angry.

She tried to visualise Mellersh, she tried to see him having breakfast and thinking bitter things about her; and lo, Mellersh himself began to shimmer, became rose-colour, became delicate violet, became an enchanting blue, became formless, became iridescent. Actually Mellersh, after quivering a minute, was lost in light.

"*Well*," thought Mrs. Wilkins, staring, as it were, after him. How extraordinary not to be able to visualise Mellersh; and she who used to know every feature, every expression of his by heart. She simply could not see him as he was. She could only see him resolved into beauty, melted into harmony with everything else. The familiar words of the General Thanksgiving came quite naturally into her mind, and she found herself blessing God for her creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life, but above all for His inestimable Love; out loud; in a burst of acknowledgment. While Mellersh, at that moment angrily pulling on his boots before going out into the dripping streets, was indeed thinking bitter things about her.

She began to dress, choosing clean white clothes in honour of the summer's day, unpacking her suit-cases, tidying her adorable little room. She moved about with quick, purposeful steps, her long thin body held up straight, her small face, so much puckered at home with effort and fear, smoothed out. All she had been and done before this morning, all she had felt and worried about, was gone. Each of her worries behaved as the image of Mellersh had behaved, and dissolved into colour and light. And she noticed things she had not noticed for years —when she was doing her hair in front of the glass she noticed it, and thought, "Why, what pretty stuff." For years she had forgotten she had such a thing as hair, plaiting it in the evening and unplaiting it in the morning with the same hurry and indifference with which she laced and unlaced her shoes. Now she suddenly saw it, and she twisted it round her fingers before the glass, and was glad it was so pretty. Mellersh couldn't have seen it either, for he had never said a word about it. Well, when she got home she would draw his attention to it. "Mellersh," she would say, "look at my hair. Aren't you pleased you've got a wife with hair like curly honey?"

She laughed. She had never said anything like that to Mellersh yet, and the idea of it amused her. But why had she not? Oh yes—she used to be afraid of him. Funny to be afraid of anybody; and especially of one's husband, whom one saw in his more simplified moments, such as asleep, and not breathing properly through his nose.

When she was ready she opened her door to go across to see if Rose, who had been put the night before by a sleepy maidservant into a cell opposite, were awake. She would say good-morning to her, and then she would run down and stay with that cypress tree till breakfast was ready, and after breakfast she wouldn't so much as look out of a window till she had helped Rose get everything ready for Lady Caroline and Mrs. Fisher. There was much to be done that day, settling in, arranging the rooms; she mustn't leave Rose to do it alone. They would make it all so lovely for the two to come, have such an entrancing vision ready for them of little cells bright with flowers. She remembered she had wanted Lady Caroline not to come; fancy wanting to shut some one out of heaven because she thought she would be shy of her! And as though it mattered if she were, and as though she would be anything so self-conscious as shy. Besides, what a reason. She could not accuse herself of goodness over that. And she remembered she had wanted not to have Mrs. Fisher either, because she had seemed lofty. How funny of her. So funny to worry about such little things, making them important.

The bedrooms and two of the sitting-rooms at San Salvatore were on the top floor, and opened into a roomy hall with a wide glass window at the north end. San Salvatore was rich in small gardens in different parts and on different levels. The garden this window looked down on was made on the highest part of the walls, and could only be reached through the corresponding spacious hall on the floor below. When Mrs. Wilkins came out of her room this window stood wide open, and beyond it in the sun was a Judas tree in full flower. There was no sign of anybody, no sound of voices or feet. Tubs of arum lilies stood about on the stone floor, and on a table flamed a huge bunch of fierce nasturtiums. Spacious, flowery, silent, with the wide window at the end opening into the garden, and the Judas tree absurdly beautiful in the sunshine, it seemed to Mrs. Wilkins, arrested on her way across to Mrs. Arbuthnot, too good to be true. Was she really going to live in this for a whole month? Up to now she had had to take what beauty she could as she went along, snatching at little bits of it when she came across it —a patch of daisies on a fine day in a Hampstead field, a flash of sunset between two chimney pots. She had never been in definitely, completely beautiful places. She had never been even in a venerable house; and such a thing as a profusion of flowers in her rooms was unattainable to her. Sometimes in the spring she had bought six tulips at Shoolbred's, unable to resist them, conscious that Mellersh if he knew what they had cost would think it inexcusable; but they had soon died, and then there were no more. As for the Judas tree, she hadn't an idea what it was, and gazed at it out there against the sky with the rapt expression of one who sees a heavenly vision.

Mrs. Arbuthnot, coming out of her room, found her there like that, standing in the middle of the hall staring.

"Now what does she think she sees now?" thought Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"We *are* in God's hands," said Mrs. Wilkins, turning to her, speaking with extreme conviction.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Arbuthnot quickly, her face, which had been covered with smiles when she came out of her room, falling. "Why, what has happened?"

For Mrs. Arbuthnot had woken up with such a delightful feeling of security, of relief, and she did not want to find she had not after all escaped from the need of refuge. She had not even dreamed of Frederick. For the first time for years she had been spared the nightly dream that he was with her, that they were heart to heart, and its miserable awakening. She had slept like a baby, and had woken up confident; she had found there was nothing she wished to say in her morning prayer except Thank you. It was disconcerting to be told she was after all in God's hands.

"I hope nothing has happened?" she asked anxiously.

Mrs. Wilkins looked at her a moment, and laughed. "How funny," she said, kissing her.

"What is funny?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot, her face clearing because Mrs. Wilkins laughed.

"We are. This is. Everything. It's all so wonderful. It's so funny and so adorable that we should be in it. I daresay when we finally reach heaven—the one they talk about so much—we shan't find it a bit more beautiful."

Mrs. Arbuthnot relaxed to smiling security again. "Isn't it divine?" she said.

"Were you ever, ever in your life so happy?" asked Mrs. Wilkins, catching her by the arm.

"No," said Mrs. Arbuthnot. Nor had she been; not ever; not even in her first love-days with Frederick. Because always pain had been close at hand in that other happiness, ready to torture with doubts, to torture even with the very excess of her love; while this was the simple happiness of complete harmony with her surroundings, the happiness that asks for nothing, that just accepts, just breathes, just is.

"Let's go and look at that tree close," said Mrs. Wilkins. "I don't believe it can only be a tree."

And arm in arm they went along the hall, and their husbands would not have known them their faces were so young with eagerness, and together they stood at the open window, and when their eyes, having feasted on the marvellous pink thing, wandered farther among the beauties of the garden, they saw sitting on the low wall at the east edge of it, gazing out over the bay, her feet in lilies, Lady Caroline.

They were astonished. They said nothing in their astonishment, but stood quite still, arm in arm, staring down at her.

She too had on a white frock, and her head was bare. They had had no idea that day in London, when her hat was down to her nose and her furs were up to her ears, that she was so pretty. They had merely thought her different from the other women in the club, and so had the other women themselves, and so had all the waitresses, eyeing her sideways and eyeing her again as they passed the corner where she sat talking; but they had had no idea she was so pretty. She was exceedingly pretty. Everything about her was very much that which it was. Her fair hair was very fair, her lovely grey eyes were very lovely and grey, her dark eyelashes were very dark, her white skin was very white, her red mouth was very red. She was extravagantly slender—the merest thread of a girl, though not without little curves beneath her thin frock where little curves should be. She was looking out across the bay, and was sharply defined against the background of empty blue. She was full in the sun. Her feet dangled among the leaves and flowers of the lilies just as if it did not matter that they should be bent or bruised.

"She ought to have a headache," whispered Mrs. Arbuthnot at last, "sitting there in the sun like that."

"She ought to have a hat," whispered Mrs. Wilkins.

"She's treading on lilies."

"But they're hers as much as ours."

"Only one-fourth of them."

Lady Caroline turned her head. She looked up at them a moment, surprised to see them so much younger than they had seemed that day at the club, and so much less unattractive. Indeed, they were really almost quite attractive, if any one could ever be really quite attractive in the wrong clothes. Her eyes, swiftly glancing over them, took in every inch of each of them in the half second before she smiled and waved her hand and called out Good-morning. There was nothing, she saw at once, to be hoped for in the way of interest from their clothes. She did not consciously think this, for she was having a violent reaction against beautiful clothes and the slavery they impose on one, her experience being that the instant one had got them they took one in hand and gave one no peace till they had been everywhere and been seen by everybody. You didn't take your clothes to parties; they

took you. It was quite a mistake to think that a woman, a really well-dressed woman, wore out her clothes; it was the clothes that wore out the woman—dragging her about at all hours of the day and night. No wonder men stayed young longer. Just new trousers couldn't excite them. She couldn't suppose that even the newest trousers ever behaved like that, taking the bit between their teeth. Her images were disorderly, but she thought as she chose, she used what images she liked. As she got off the wall and came towards the window, it seemed a restful thing to know she was going to spend an entire month with people in dresses made as she dimly remembered dresses used to be made five summers ago.

"I got here yesterday morning," she said, looking up at them and smiling. She really was bewitching. She had everything, even a dimple.

"It's a great pity," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, smiling back, "because we were going to choose the nicest room for you."

"Oh, but I've done that," said Lady Caroline. "At least, I think it's the nicest. It looks two ways—I adore a room that looks two ways, don't you? Over the sea to the west, and over this Judas tree to the north."

"And we had meant to make it pretty for you with flowers," said Mrs. Wilkins.

"Oh, Domenico did that. I told him to directly I got here. He's the gardener. He's wonderful."

"It's a good thing, of course," said Mrs. Arbuthnot a little hesitatingly, "to be independent, and to know exactly what one wants."

"Yes, it saves trouble," agreed Lady Caroline.

"But one shouldn't be so independent," said Mrs. Wilkins, "as to leave no opportunity for other people to exercise their benevolences on one."

Lady Caroline, who had been looking at Mrs. Arbuthnot, now looked at Mrs. Wilkins. That day at that queer club she had had merely a blurred impression of Mrs. Wilkins, for it was the other one who did all the talking, and her impression had been of somebody so shy, so awkward that it was best to take no notice of her. She had not even been able to say good-bye properly, doing it in an agony, turning red, turning damp. Therefore she now looked at her in some surprise; and she was still more surprised when Mrs. Wilkins added, gazing at her with the most obvious sincere admiration, speaking indeed with a conviction that refused to remain unuttered, "I didn't realise you were *so* pretty."

She stared at Mrs. Wilkins. She was not usually told this quite so immediately and roundly. Abundantly as she was used to it—impossible not to be after twenty-eight solid years—it surprised her to be told it with such bluntness, and by a woman.

"It's very kind of you to think so," she said.

"Why, you're lovely," said Mrs. Wilkins. "Quite, quite lovely."

"I hope," said Mrs. Arbuthnot pleasantly, "you make the most of it."

Lady Caroline then stared at Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Oh yes," she said. "I make the most of it. I've been doing that ever since I can remember."

"Because," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, smiling and raising a warning forefinger, "it won't last."

Then Lady Caroline began to be afraid these two were originals. If so, she would be bored. Nothing bored her so much as people who insisted on being original, who came and buttonholed her and kept her waiting while they were being original. And the one who admired her—it would be tiresome if she dogged her about in order to look at her. What she wanted of this holiday was complete escape from all she had had before, she wanted the rest of complete contrast. Being admired, being dogged, wasn't contrast, it was repetition; and as for originals, to find herself shut up with two on the top of a precipitous hill in a mediaeval castle built for the express purpose of preventing easy goings out and in, would not, she was afraid, be especially restful. Perhaps she had better be a little less encouraging. They had seemed such timid creatures, even the dark one—she couldn't remember their names—that day at the club, that she had felt it quite safe to be very friendly. Here they had come out of their shells; already; indeed, at once. There was no sign of timidity about either of them here. If they had got out of their shells so immediately, at the very first contact, unless she checked them they would soon begin to press upon her, and then good-bye to her dream of thirty restful, silent days, lying unmolested in the sun, getting her feathers smooth again, not being spoken to, not waited on, not grabbed at and monopolised, but just recovering from the fatigue, the deep and melancholy fatigue, of the too much.

Besides, there was Mrs. Fisher. She too must be checked. Lady Caroline had started two days earlier than had been arranged for two reasons: first, because she wished to arrive before the others in order to pick out the room or rooms she preferred, and second, because she judged it likely that otherwise she would have to travel with Mrs. Fisher. She did not want to travel with Mrs. Fisher. She did not want to arrive with Mrs. Fisher. She saw no reason whatever why for a single moment she should have to have anything at all to do with Mrs. Fisher.

But unfortunately Mrs. Fisher also was filled with a desire to get to San Salvatore first and pick out the room or rooms she preferred, and she and Lady Caroline had after all travelled together. As early as Calais they began to suspect it; in Paris they feared it; at Modane they knew it; at Mezzago they concealed it, driving out to Castagneto in two separate flys, the nose of the one almost touching the back of the other the whole way. But when the road suddenly left off at the church and the steps, further evasion was impossible; and faced by this abrupt and difficult finish to their journey there was nothing for it but to amalgamate.

Because of Mrs. Fisher's stick Lady Caroline had to see about everything. Mrs. Fisher's intentions, she explained from her fly when the situation had become plain to her, were active, but her stick prevented their being carried out. The two drivers told Lady Caroline boys would have to carry the luggage up to the castle, and she went in search of some, while Mrs. Fisher waited in the fly because of her stick. Mrs. Fisher could speak Italian, but only, she explained, the Italian of Dante, which Matthew Arnold used to read with her when she was a girl, and she thought this might be above the heads of boys. Therefore Lady Caroline, who spoke ordinary Italian very well, was obviously the one to go and do things.

"I am in your hands," said Mrs. Fisher, sitting firmly in her fly. "You must please regard me as merely an old woman with a stick."

And presently, down the steps and cobbles to the piazza, and along the quay, and up the zigzag path, Lady Caroline found herself as much obliged to walk slowly with Mrs. Fisher as if she were her own grandmother.

"It's my stick," Mrs. Fisher complacently remarked at intervals.

And when they rested at those bends of the zigzag path where seats were, and Lady Caroline, who would have liked to run on and get to the top quickly, was forced in common humanity to remain with Mrs. Fisher because of her stick, Mrs. Fisher told her how she had been on a zigzag path once with Tennyson.

"Isn't his cricket wonderful?" said Lady Caroline absently.

"*The* Tennyson," said Mrs. Fisher, turning her head and observing her a moment over her spectacles.

"Isn't he?" said Lady Caroline.

"I am speaking," said Mrs. Fisher, "of Alfred."

"Oh," said Lady Caroline.

"And it was a path, too," Mrs. Fisher went on severely, "curiously like this. No eucalyptus tree, of course, but otherwise curiously like this. And at one of the bends he turned and said to me—I see him now turning and saying to me—"

Yes, Mrs. Fisher would have to be checked. And so would these two up at the window. She had better begin at once. She was sorry she had got off the wall. All she need have done was to have waved her hand, and waited till they came down and out into the garden to her.

So she ignored Mrs. Arbuthnot's remark and raised forefinger, and said with marked coldness—at least, she tried to make it sound marked—that she supposed they would be going to breakfast, and that she had had hers; but it was her fate that however coldly she sent forth her words they came out sounding quite warm and agreeable. That was because she had a sympathetic and delightful voice, due entirely to some special formation of her throat and the roof of her mouth, and having nothing whatever to do with what she was feeling. Nobody in consequence ever believed they were being snubbed. It was most tiresome. And if she stared icily it did not look icy at all, because her eyes, lovely to begin with, had the added loveliness of very long, soft, dark eyelashes. No icy stare could come out of eyes like that; it got caught and lost in the soft eyelashes, and the persons stared at merely thought they were being regarded with a flattering and exquisite attentiveness. And if ever she was out of humour or definitely cross—and who would not be sometimes in such a world?—she only looked so pathetic that people all rushed to comfort her, if possible by means of kissing. It was more than tiresome, it was maddening. Nature was determined that she should look and sound angelic. She could never be disagreeable or rude without being completely misunderstood.

"I had my breakfast in my room," she said, trying her utmost to sound curt. "Perhaps I'll see you later."

And she nodded, and went back to where she had been sitting on the wall, with the lilies being nice and cool round her feet.

Chapter 7

Their eyes followed her admiringly. They had no idea they had been snubbed. It was a disappointment, of course, to find she had forestalled them and that they were not to have the happiness of preparing for her, of watching her face when she arrived and first saw everything, but there was still Mrs. Fisher. They would concentrate on Mrs. Fisher, and would watch her face instead; only, like everybody else, they would have preferred to watch Lady Caroline's.

Perhaps, then, as Lady Caroline had talked of breakfast, they had better begin by going and having it, for there was too much to be done that day to spend any more time gazing at the scenery—servants to be interviewed, the house to be gone through and examined, and finally Mrs. Fisher's room to be got ready and adorned.

They waved their hands gaily at Lady Caroline, who seemed absorbed in what she saw and took no notice, and turning away found the maidservant of the night before had come up silently behind them in cloth slippers with string soles.

She was Francesca, the elderly parlour-maid, who had been with the owner, he had said, for years, and whose presence made inventories unnecessary; and after wishing them good-morning and hoping they had slept well, she told them breakfast was ready in the dining-room on the floor below, and if they would follow her she would lead.

They did not understand a single word of the very many in which Francesca succeeded in clothing this simple information, but they followed her, for it at least was clear that they were to follow, and going down the stairs, and along the broad hall like the one above except for glass doors at the end instead of a window opening into the garden, they were shown into the dining-room; where, sitting at the head of the table having her breakfast, was Mrs. Fisher.

This time they exclaimed. Even Mrs. Arbuthnot exclaimed, though her exclamation was only "Oh."

Mrs. Wilkins exclaimed at greater length. "Why, but it's like having the bread taken out of one's mouth!" exclaimed Mrs. Wilkins.

"How do you do," said Mrs. Fisher. "I can't get up because of my stick." And she stretched out her hand across the table.

They advanced and shook it.

"We had no idea you were here," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Yes," said Mrs. Fisher, resuming her breakfast. "Yes. I am here." And with composure she removed the top of her egg.

"It's a great disappointment," said Mrs. Wilkins. "We had meant to give you *such* a welcome."

This was the one, Mrs. Fisher remembered, briefly glancing at her, who when she came to Prince of Wales Terrace said she had seen Keats. She must be careful with this one—curb her from the beginning.

She therefore ignored Mrs. Wilkins and said gravely, with a downward face of impenetrable calm bent on her egg, "Yes. I arrived yesterday with Lady Caroline."

"It's really dreadful," said Mrs. Wilkins, exactly as if she had not been ignored. "There's nobody left to get anything ready for now. I feel thwarted. I feel as if the bread had been taken out of my mouth just when I was going to be happy swallowing it."

"Where will you sit?" asked Mrs. Fisher of Mrs. Arbuthnot—markedly of Mrs. Arbuthnot; the comparison with the bread seemed to her most unpleasant.

"Oh, thank you—" said Mrs. Arbuthnot, sitting down rather suddenly next to her.

There were only two places she could sit down in, the places laid on either side of Mrs. Fisher. She therefore sat down in one, and Mrs. Wilkins sat down opposite her in the other.

Mrs. Fisher was at the head of the table. Round her was grouped the coffee and the tea. Of course they were all sharing San Salvatore equally, but it was she herself and Lotty, Mrs. Arbuthnot mildly reflected, who had found it, who had had the work of getting it, who had chosen to admit Mrs. Fisher into it. Without them, she could not help thinking, Mrs. Fisher would not have been there. Morally Mrs. Fisher was a guest. There was no hostess in this party, but supposing there had been a hostess it would not have been Mrs. Fisher, nor Lady Caroline, it would have been either herself or Lotty. Mrs. Arbuthnot could not help feeling this as she sat down, and Mrs. Fisher, the hand which Ruskin had wrung suspended over the pots before her, inquired, "Tea or coffee?" She could not help feeling it even more definitely when Mrs. Fisher touched a small gong on the table beside her as though she had been used to that gong and that table ever since she was little, and, on Francesca's appearing, bade her in the language of Dante bring more milk. There was a curious air about Mrs. Fisher, thought Mrs. Arbuthnot, of being in possession; and if she herself had not been so happy she would have perhaps minded.

Mrs. Wilkins noticed it too, but it only made her discursive brain think of cuckoos. She would no doubt immediately have begun to talk of cuckoos, incoherently, unrestrainably and deplorably, if she had been in the condition of nerves and shyness she was in last time she saw Mrs. Fisher. But happiness had done away with shyness—she was very serene; she could control her conversation; she did not have, horrified, to listen to herself saying things she had no idea of saying when she began; she was quite at her ease, and completely natural. The disappointment of not going to be able to prepare a welcome for Mrs. Fisher had evaporated at once, for it was impossible to go on being disappointed in heaven. Nor did she mind her behaving as hostess. What did it matter? You did not mind things in heaven. She and Mrs. Arbuthnot, therefore, sat down more willingly than they otherwise would have done, one on either side of Mrs. Fisher, and the sun, pouring through the two windows facing east across the bay, flooded the room, and there was an open door leading into the garden, and the garden was full of many lovely things, especially freesias.

The delicate and delicious fragrance of the freesias came in through the door and floated round Mrs. Wilkins's enraptured nostrils. Freesias in London were quite beyond her. Occasionally she went into a shop and asked what they cost, so as just to have an excuse for lifting up a bunch and smelling them, well knowing that it was something awful like a shilling for about three flowers. Here they were everywhere—bursting out of every corner and carpeting the rose beds. Imagine it—having freesias to pick in armsful if you wanted to, and with glorious sunshine flooding the room, and in your summer frock, and its being only the first of April!

"I suppose you realise, don't you, that we've got to heaven?" she said, beaming at Mrs. Fisher with all the familiarity of a fellow-angel.

"They are considerably younger than I had supposed," thought Mrs. Fisher, "and not nearly so plain." And she mused a moment, while she took no notice of Mrs. Wilkins's exuberance, on their instant and agitated refusal that day at Prince of Wales Terrace to have anything to do with the giving or the taking of references.

Nothing could affect her, of course; nothing that anybody did. She was far too solidly seated in respectability. At her back stood massively in a tremendous row those three great names she had offered, and they were not the only ones she could turn to for support and countenance. Even if these young women—she had no grounds for believing the one out in the garden to be really Lady Caroline Dester, she had merely been told she was—even if these young women should all turn out to be what Browning used to call—how well she remembered his amusing and delightful way of putting things—Fly-by-Nights, what could it possibly, or in any way matter to her? Let them fly by night if they wished. One was not sixty-five for nothing. In any case there would only be four weeks of it, at the end of which she would see no more of them. And in the meanwhile there were plenty of places where she could sit quietly away from them and remember. Also there was her own sitting-room, a charming room, all honey-coloured furniture and pictures, with windows to the sea towards Genoa, and a door opening on to the battlements. The house possessed two sitting-rooms, and she had explained to that pretty creature Lady Caroline—certainly a pretty creature, whatever else she was; Tennyson would have enjoyed taking her for blows on the downs—who had seemed inclined to appropriate the honey-coloured one, that she needed some little refuge entirely to herself because of her stick.

"Nobody wants to see an old woman hobbling about everywhere," she had said. "I shall be quite content to spend much of my time by myself in here or sitting out on these convenient battlements."

And she had a very nice bedroom, too; it looked two ways, across the bay to the morning sun—she liked the morning sun—and onto the garden. There were only two of these bedrooms with cross-views in the house, she

and Lady Caroline had discovered, and they were by far the airiest. They each had two beds in them, and she and Lady Caroline had had the extra beds taken out at once and put into two of the other rooms. In this way there was much more space and comfort. Lady Caroline, indeed, had turned hers into a bed-sitting-room, with the sofa out of the bigger drawing-room and the writing-table and the most comfortable chair, but she herself had not had to do that because she had her own sitting-room, equipped with what was necessary. Lady Caroline had thought at first of taking the bigger sitting-room entirely for her own, because the dining-room on the floor below could quite well be used between meals to sit in by the two others, and was a very pleasant room with nice chairs, but she had not liked the bigger sitting-room's shape—it was a round room in the tower, with deep slit windows pierced through the massive walls, and a domed and ribbed ceiling arranged to look like an open umbrella, and it seemed a little dark. Undoubtedly Lady Caroline had cast covetous glances at the honey-coloured room, and if she, Mrs. Fisher, had been less firm would have installed herself in it. Which would have been absurd.

"I hope," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, smilingly making an attempt to convey to Mrs. Fisher that though she, Mrs. Fisher, might not be exactly a guest she certainly was not in the very least a hostess, "your room is comfortable."

"Quite," said Mrs. Fisher. "Will you have some more coffee?"

"No, thank you. Will you?"

"No, thank you. There were two beds in my bedroom, filling it up unnecessarily, and I had one taken out. It has made it much more convenient."

"Oh *that's* why I've got two beds in my room!" exclaimed Mrs. Wilkins, illuminated; the second bed in her little cell had seemed an unnatural and inappropriate object from the moment she saw it.

"I gave no directions," said Mrs. Fisher, addressing Mrs. Arbuthnot, "I merely asked Francesca to remove it."

"I have two in my room as well," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Your second one must be Lady Caroline's. She had hers removed too," said Mrs. Fisher. "It seems foolish to have more beds in a room than there are occupiers."

"But *we* haven't got any husbands here either," said Mrs. Wilkins, "and I don't see any use in extra beds in one's room if one hasn't got husbands to put in them. Can't we have them taken away too?"

"Beds," said Mrs. Fisher coldly, "cannot be removed from one room after another. They must remain somewhere."

Mrs. Wilkins's remarks seemed to Mrs. Fisher persistently unfortunate. Each time she opened her mouth she said something best left unsaid. Loose talk about husbands had never in Mrs. Fisher's circle been encouraged. In the 'eighties, when she chiefly flourished, husbands were taken seriously, as the only real obstacles to sin. Beds too, if they had to be mentioned, were approached with caution; and a decent reserve prevented them and husbands ever being spoken of in the same breath.

She turned more markedly than ever to Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Do let me give you a little more coffee," she said.

"No, thank you. But won't you have some more?"

"No indeed. I never have more than two cups at breakfast. Would you like an orange?"

"No, thank you. Would you?"

"No, I don't eat fruit at breakfast. It is an American fashion which I am too old now to adopt. Have you had all you want?"

"Quite. Have you?"

Mrs. Fisher paused before replying. Was this a habit, this trick of answering a simple question with the same question? If so it must be curbed, for no one could live for four weeks in any real comfort with somebody who had a habit.

She glanced at Mrs. Arbuthnot, and her parted hair and gentle brow reassured her. No; it was accident, not habit, that had produced those echoes. She could as soon imagine a dove having tiresome habits as Mrs. Arbuthnot. Considering her, she thought what a splendid wife she would have been for poor Carlyle. So much better than that horrid clever Jane. She would have soothed him.

"Then shall we go?" she suggested.

"Let me help you up," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, all consideration.

"Oh, thank you—I can manage perfectly. It's only sometimes that my stick prevents me—"

Mrs. Fisher got up quite easily; Mrs. Arbuthnot had hovered over her for nothing.

"*I'm* going to have one of these gorgeous oranges," said Mrs. Wilkins, staying where she was and reaching across to a black bowl piled with them. "Rose, how can you resist them. Look—have this one. Do have this beauty—" And she held out a big one.

"No, I'm going to see to my duties," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, moving towards the door. "You'll forgive me for leaving you, won't you," she added politely to Mrs. Fisher.

Mrs. Fisher moved towards the door too; quite easily; almost quickly; her stick did not hinder her at all. She had no intention of being left with Mrs. Wilkins.

"What time would you like to have lunch?" Mrs. Arbuthnot asked her, trying to keep her head as at least a non-guest, if not precisely a hostess, above water.

"Lunch," said Mrs. Fisher, "is at half-past twelve."

"You shall have it at half-past twelve then," said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "I'll tell the cook. It will be a great struggle," she continued, smiling, "but I've brought a little dictionary—"

"The cook," said Mrs. Fisher, "knows."

"Oh?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Lady Caroline has already told her," said Mrs. Fisher.

"Oh?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot again.

"Yes. Lady Caroline speaks the kind of Italian cooks understand. I am prevented going into the kitchen because of my stick. And even if I were able to go, I fear I shouldn't be understood."

"But—" began Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"But it's *too* wonderful," Mrs. Wilkins finished for her from the table, delighted with these unexpected simplifications in her and Rose's lives. "Why, we've got positively nothing to do here, either of us, except just be happy. You wouldn't believe," she said, turning her head and speaking straight to Mrs. Fisher, portions of orange in either hand, "how terribly good Rose and I have been for years without stopping, and how much now we need a perfect rest."

And Mrs. Fisher, going without answering her out of the room, said to herself, "She must, she shall be curbed."

Chapter 8

Presently, when Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Arbuthnot, unhampered by any duties, wandered out and down the worn stone steps and under the pergola into the lower garden, Mrs. Wilkins said to Mrs. Arbuthnot, who seemed pensive, “Don’t you see that if somebody else does the ordering it frees us?”

Mrs. Arbuthnot said she did see, but nevertheless she thought it rather silly to have everything taken out of their hands.

“I love things to be taken out of my hands,” said Mrs. Wilkins.

“But we found San Salvatore,” said Mrs. Arbuthnot, “and it is rather silly that Mrs. Fisher should behave as if it belonged only to her.”

“What is rather silly,” said Mrs. Wilkins with much serenity, “is to mind. I can’t see the least point in being in authority at the price of one’s liberty.”

Mrs. Arbuthnot said nothing to that for two reasons—first, because she was struck by the remarkable and growing calm of the hitherto incoherent and excited Lotty, and secondly because what she was looking at was so very beautiful.

All down the stone steps on either side were periwinkles in full flower, and she could now see what it was that had caught at her the night before and brushed, wet and scented, across her face. It was wistaria. *Wistaria and sunshine* . . . she remembered the advertisement. Here indeed were both in profusion. The wistaria was tumbling over itself in its excess of life, its prodigality of flowering; and where the pergola ended the sun blazed on scarlet geraniums, bushes of them, and nasturtiums in great heaps, and marigolds so brilliant that they seemed to be burning, and red and pink snapdragons, all outdoing each other in bright, fierce colour. The ground behind these flaming things dropped away in terraces to the sea, each terrace a little orchard, where among the olives grew vines on trellises, and fig-trees, and peach-trees, and cherry-trees. The cherry-trees and peach-trees were in blossom—lovely showers of white and deep rose-colour among the trembling delicacy of the olives; the fig-leaves were just big enough to smell of figs, the vine-buds were only beginning to show. And beneath these trees were groups of blue and purple irises, and bushes of lavender, and grey, sharp cactuses, and the grass was thick with dandelions and daisies, and right down at the bottom was the sea. Colour seemed flung down anyhow, anywhere; every sort of colour, piled up in heaps, pouring along in rivers—the periwinkles looked exactly as if they were being poured down each side of the steps—and flowers that grow only in borders in England, proud flowers keeping themselves to themselves over there, such as the great blue irises and the lavender, were being jostled by small, shining common things like dandelions and daisies and the white bells of the wild onion, and only seemed the better and the more exuberant for it.

They stood looking at this crowd of loveliness, this happy jumble, in silence. No, it didn’t matter what Mrs. Fisher did; not here; not in such beauty. Mrs. Arbuthnot’s discomposure melted out of her. In the warmth and light of what she was looking at, of what to her was a manifestation, an entirely new side of God, how could one be discomposed? If only Frederick were with her, seeing it too, seeing as he would have seen it when first they were lovers, in the days when he saw what she saw and loved what she loved. . .

She sighed.

“You mustn’t sigh in heaven,” said Mrs. Wilkins. “One doesn’t.”

“I was thinking how one longs to share this with those one loves,” said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

“You mustn’t long in heaven,” said Mrs. Wilkins. “You’re supposed to be quite complete there. And it is heaven, isn’t it, Rose? See how everything has been let in together—the dandelions and the irises, the vulgar and the superior, me and Mrs. Fisher—all welcome, all mixed up anyhow, and all so visibly happy and enjoying ourselves.”

“Mrs. Fisher doesn’t seem happy—not visibly, anyhow,” said Mrs. Arbuthnot, smiling.

“She’ll begin soon, you’ll see.”

Mrs. Arbuthnot said she didn't believe that after a certain age people began anything.

Mrs. Wilkins said she was sure no one, however old and tough, could resist the effects of perfect beauty. Before many days, perhaps only hours, they would see Mrs. Fisher bursting out into every kind of exuberance. "I'm quite sure," said Mrs. Wilkins, "that we've got to heaven, and once Mrs. Fisher realises that that's where she is, she's bound to be different. You'll see. She'll leave off being ossified, and go all soft and able to stretch, and we shall get quite—why, I shouldn't be surprised if we get quite fond of her."

The idea of Mrs. Fisher bursting out into anything, she who seemed so particularly firmly fixed inside her buttons, made Mrs. Arbuthnot laugh. She condoned Lotty's loose way of talking of heaven, because in such a place, on such a morning, condonation was in the very air. Besides, what an excuse there was.

And Lady Caroline, sitting where they had left her before breakfast on the wall, peeped over when she heard laughter, and saw them standing on the path below, and thought what a mercy it was they were laughing down there and had not come up and done it round her. She disliked jokes at all times, but in the morning she hated them; especially close up; especially crowding in her ears. She hoped the originals were on their way out for a walk, and not on their way back from one. They were laughing more and more. What could they possibly find to laugh at?

She looked down on the tops of their heads with a very serious face, for the thought of spending a month with laughers was a grave one, and they, as though they felt her eyes, turned suddenly and looked up.

The dreadful geniality of those women. . .

She shrank away from their smiles and wavings, but she could not shrink out of sight without falling into the lilies. She neither smiled nor waved back, and turning her eyes to the more distant mountains surveyed them carefully till the two, tired of waving, moved away along the path and turned the corner and disappeared.

This time they both did notice that they had been met with, at least, unresponsiveness.

"If we weren't in heaven," said Mrs. Wilkins serenely, "I should say we had been snubbed, but as nobody snubs anybody there of course we can't have been."

"Perhaps she is unhappy," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Whatever it is she is she'll get over it here," said Mrs. Wilkins with conviction.

"We must try and help her," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Oh, but nobody helps anybody in heaven. That's finished with. You don't try to be, or do. You simply *are*."

Well, Mrs. Arbuthnot wouldn't go into that—not here, not to-day. The vicar, she knew, would have called Lotty's talk levity, if not profanity. How old he seemed from here; an old, old vicar.

They left the path, and clambered down the olive terraces, down and down, to where at the bottom the warm, sleepy sea heaved gently among the rocks. There a pine-tree grew close to the water, and they sat under it, and a few yards away was a fishing-boat lying motionless and green-bellied on the water. The ripples of the sea made little gurgling noises at their feet. They screwed up their eyes to be able to look into the blaze of light beyond the shade of their tree. The hot smell from the pine-needles and from the cushions of wild thyme that padded the spaces between the rocks, and sometimes a smell of pure honey from a clump of warm irises up behind them in the sun, puffed across their faces. Very soon Mrs. Wilkins took her shoes and stockings off, and let her feet hang in the water. After watching her a minute Mrs. Arbuthnot did the same. Their happiness was then complete. Their husbands would not have known them. They left off talking. They ceased to mention heaven. They were just cups of acceptance.

Meanwhile Lady Caroline, on her wall, was considering her position. The garden on the top of the wall was a delicious garden, but its situation made it insecure and exposed to interruptions. At any moment the others might come and want to use it, because both the hall and the dining-room had doors opening straight into it. Perhaps, thought Lady Caroline, she could arrange that it should be solely hers. Mrs. Fisher had the battlements, delightful with flowers, and a watch-tower all to herself, besides having snatched the one really nice room in the house. There were plenty of places the originals could go to—she had herself seen at least two other little gardens, while the hill the castle stood on was itself a garden, with walks and seats. Why should not this one spot be kept exclusively for her? She liked it; she liked it best of all. It had the Judas tree and an umbrella pine, it had the freesias and the lilies, it had a tamarisk beginning to flush pink, it had the convenient low wall to sit on, it had from each of its three sides the most amazing views—to the east the bay and mountains, to the north the village across the tranquil clear green water of the little harbour and the hills dotted with white houses and

orange groves, and to the west was the thin thread of land by which San Salvatore was tied to the mainland, and then the op