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Anne Douglas Sedgwick

Paths of Judgement



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PATHS OF JUDGEMENT

By

ANNE DOUGLAS SEDGWICK

(Author of "*The Rescue*" "*The Confounding of Camelia*" etc)

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PART I

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PART II

CHAPTER: I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV

PART I

CHAPTER I

MRS. CUTHBERT MERRICK, erect in her shining dogcart, watched the stout pony's indolent advance with severity, but with forbearance. The road was steep and the day hot.

Far below, the ascent began among beech-woods that climbed from gentle valleys; then came the pine-trees, casting blue-black shadows across the dusty road, and when the hill-top was reached the lighter shade of lime and birch and beech again dappled the sunny whiteness.

Mrs. Merrick allowed the pony to pause here, and glanced round at the wide distances below with something more of distaste for the supremacy of her outlook than admiration for its beauty. The view from the hill-top was a grievance to her. They had only bucolic meadows, and trees of an orderly dulness, that didn't even make Constable effects, to look at, below there, about Trensme Hall. But she turned her eyes resolutely from the unpleasing comparison, applied her whip smartly, and a minute's quick trot brought her to her destination.

Along the road ran the low stone wall of a flower-filled garden; beyond the flowers a small stone house, its windows shining, faced the south-western spaces, and behind the house a sudden rise of pleasant summer woods saved it from bleakness in its lonely eminence. Indeed the house, though alone, was not lonely. It had an effect of standing with contented serenity in its long outlook over the pine-woods, the beech-woods, the rippled wave of low hill and valley, lapping one upon the other to the splendid line of the horizon.

So high, so alone, yet so set in beauty, so independent, with the half-clasp of its limes and beeches, the jewelled splash of flowers about it. The independence and serenity were almost defiant, Mrs. Merrick thought, as she looked with a familiar disapproval at the house, too large for a cottage, too classic, with its pillared door-way and balanced proportions, for its diminutiveness. It made one think of a tiny Greek temple incongruously placed, and to Mrs. Merrick it symbolized an attitude that had always bewildered and irritated her. The garden, too, irritated her and made her envious. Even at this late summer season its beauty was abundant. Her well-trained gardener at Trensme Hall, with the two boys under him, produced no such effects with all his wide opportunities. Her garden was like an official report; this was like a poem. Mrs. Merrick did not use the simile; she merely felt, as before, irritating comparisons.

Flowers grew in long lines from the house to the garden wall, eddying into broad pools of colour. In the delicate green shadow of the limes were Canterbury-bells, frail bubbles, purple and white, making in the shade a soft radiance, as though they held light within them. Beds of white pansies, thickly growing, looked like cream poured upon the ground; near them nasturtiums, a disordered host, dashed waves of colour against the wall.

As Mrs. Merrick sat looking, with some visible sourness, at the garden, a girl, carrying a spade and a watering-pot came round the corner of the house. She was dressed in a white cotton dress and wore, over smooth but loosened hair, a flapping white hat. She gave one an impression of at once flower-like freshness and most human untidiness. The black ribbon at her neck was half untied, her hat was battered; her dress was askew and dabbled with water. Unabashed by these infelicities, she set down her burdens, drew off her heavy gloves, and advanced through the purple and white and flame; smiling indifferently.

Mrs. Merrick's smile as she put out her hand was obviously decorative. She presented an amusing contrast to the graceful disarray that greeted her. Her thin dry face was flushed above a rigid collar; a sharply tonged fringe and a netted miracle of twists and convolutions seemed appendages of the sailor hat--tilted forward and fastened to her head by a broad elastic band, a spotted veil and two accurate pins. She could but sit erect; her meagre body in its tightly buttoned bodice, was box-like. Her figure was her chief vanity; its "neatness" her aim, and the word with her signified a careful, unrelaxing compression.

"Gardening, Felicia?" she asked, glancing down at her niece's earth-dogged shoes.

Felicia Merrick's father and her own husband were brothers.

"Yes; digging all morning; weeding and watering most of the afternoon." Felicia was thinking that to-day her aunt looked more funnily than ever like a collection of parcels strapped together for postal delivery. She was mentally tying a stamped label to her hat; the circle of the curl between the eyebrows was already a post-mark.

"Doesn't Thomas do the digging? It must, I know, be hard to manage with one boy, but surely he could do the digging."

"He does, unless I want to."

"People can see you from the road--not that any one passes by here often."

"Not often," Felicia assented.

"I want to know if you can come down to us to-morrow for a week," said Mrs. Merrick, allowing the antagonistic

moment to pass, and after a slight hesitation Felicia answered, "Yes, thanks."

Mrs. Merrick had often suspected that Felicia's gratitude on these occasions was not up to the mark of the opportunities they gave her, and now, emphasizing the present opportunity, she went on, "You can't fail to enjoy yourself. Lady Angela Bagley is with us. You have heard of her. I met her in London this Spring; we took a great fancy to each other. She is a wonderful woman--really wonderful. Such intellect, such soul, such world polish, and with it such saintliness. Everybody feels that about her; it helps one to know that there are such people in the world," said Mrs. Merrick, sighing as she flicked the pony--"people who have everything the world can give, and who care nothing for it." Felicia wondered from which of her recent guests her aunt had picked up these phrases which came oddly from her anxious materialism.

"I have often seen her picture in the ladies' papers," she replied; "it will be nice to see her." She dimly remembered a narrow face, a mist of hair, a long, yearning throat, and she at once decided that she would not like Lady Angela and her soul.

"Yes, it will be nice for you. She takes an interest in everybody. Of course your father must come, too. There are some interesting men whom he will like meeting. Mr. Daunt, the young M.P., is a cousin of Lady Angela--the comet of the season, my dear;--most wonderful speech in the House--you probably heard of it; Imperialism--national prestige;--and a friend of his, Mr. Wynne, a most captivating person. He writes essays, he paints, he plays the violin; people are quite mad about him in London. You mustn't fall in love with him, Felicia, for, charming as he is, he has no money."

Felicia, her arms leaning on the wall, picked at a flake of loosened stone with only a dim smile of acknowledgment for this jest.

"And old Mr. Jones, the scholar, from Oxford; your father, I feel sure, will be eager to meet him. How is your father, Felicia? Plunged in books, I suppose. Is he writing?"

"Yes. He is well."

"He will get ideas, I think, from Mr. Jones. I spoke of his book to Mr. Jones; he had never heard of it. I gave it to him; he looked through it last night. Of course, as he said, it is quite out of date by now."

Felicia picked off another flake, and said nothing.

"So," Mrs. Merrick went on more briskly--her niece had the faculty of disconcerting her even in the midst of apparent triumphs--"So it will be nice for him to talk things over with Mr. Jones. Here is Austin now. I thought that he would see or hear me."

Mr. Austin Merrick came down the garden path at a sauntering pace, his hands in his pockets, breathing in the sunlit air as though the afternoon's balmy radiance, rather than sight or sound of his sister-in-law, had lured him from his studies.

He was a tall man, with a stout, easy, indolent body and a handsome head. His eyes were of a vague but excitable blue; his thick grey hair haloed a clean-shaven face, delicate in feature, the nose finely aquiline, the lips full, slightly pursed, as if in a judicial weighing of his own impressions; his cheeks were rosy and a trifle pendulous. Loosely fitting clothes, a fluttering green neck-tie, a Panama hat, placed at the back of his head with a certain recklessness, carried out the impression of ease and of indifference.

"Ah! Kate," he said. He approached the gate and gave her his large, white hand. His eyes passed over her face, and wandered contemplatively away to the landscape behind it, a glance that made Mrs. Merrick irritably wonder whether she had put too much powder on her nose.

"You and Felicia are coming to me for a week," she said, again flicking her whip, and smiling with a touch of eagerness. "I mustn't let you get rusty up here."

If Miss Merrick had a faculty for disconcerting her aunt, her aunt had an equal faculty for "drawing" her father. His eye did not turn from the landscape, but it became more fixed and more pleasant as he said, "Ah, my dear Kate, rust, you know, is a matter of environment, and without my good little whetstone here I don't fancy that the combined efforts of our not highly intelligent country people could save me from it--when I go among them. A mental fog, a stagnant dulness, you know, affect one in spite of one's resolve to keep one's steel bright. Up here we have our own little space of dry, bracing air--we keep one another sharpened, don't we, Felicia? Rather uncomfortably sharpened, we sometimes find, when we come down from our tiny Parnassus."

Smiling, speaking in his most leisurely tones, Mr. Merrick laid his arm around his daughter's shoulders. She did not emphasize the effectiveness of the caress by returning it, or even by looking up, though her slight smile seemed to claim for his speech a jocular intention, while disavowing its magnificent complacency.

Mrs. Merrick's sudden flush made evident her nose's amelioration. "It is well to have the gift of idealization, Austin--it makes life far more comfortable. Will you risk rust, then, in coming to us, for a week?" The irony of her tone was not easy.

"One moment, Kate." Mr. Merrick, still leaning on his daughter's shoulder, stretched out a demonstrative forefinger. "Do you see that quite delightful effect--that group of trees melting against the sky--" It was to Felicia alone

that he spoke, naming a French painter of whom Mrs. Merrick had never heard. "He could do it; it's like one of his smiling bits." His eye still dwelt upon it as he said, "I am rather busy just now, Kate. I have a great deal of reading on hand. I am studying a rather obscure phase of that most obscure thing--German idealism; what caves they creep into, poor fellows! Any depth rather than face the sun, the unpleasant sun;--I can't leave just now."

"But a holiday would do you good." Mrs. Merrick was forced to some urgency. Much as she wished this exasperating brother-in-law of hers to feel that she dispensed favours, she seldom met him in one of these sourly suave contests without being made to feel that she was receiving one. Indeed, her odd sceptical, scoffing brother-in-law, his solitude, his disdain, and his pagan-looking house as a background, was a figure she could not afford to miss from her parties--parties often so painfully scraped together--painfully commonplace when scraped. This year her party was surprisingly significant, but even in its midst Austin would count well as her appendage--would certainly redeem her from her husband's heavy conformity, that simply counted for nothing. He impressed her, and she imagined that he must impress other people.

"I have a really interesting group," she said, and she recited the list, adding, "Mr. Jones particularly wants to meet you. He found your book so suggestive--" Mrs. Merrick, in pinching circumstances, was careless of consistency; she had no appearances to keep up before Felicia.

"Jones? Ah, yes," Mr. Merrick repeated with benignity.

"A clever man, you know."

"Not bad," Mr. Merrick owned, indulgent in discriminating gravity. "That little book of his on Comte wasn't half bad; you remember it, Felicia?"

Mrs. Merrick had not heard of the book on Comte; it was an added discomfiture. "You will come, then?" She gathered up her reins.

"May we leave it open, Kate? I can, I know, give you a day or two, but may I leave the time and number open? Felicia shall go to you to-morrow, and I will join you as soon as may be." His face had regained its full serenity, and Mrs. Merrick was forced to accept the galling concession.

When she had driven off, Felicia picked up her spade and resumed her digging. Her father stood in the path watching her.

"Could one of Spenser's heroines be imagined digging?" he mused. "The day, the flowers--you among them--bring Spenser to my mind."

"I could imagine Britomart gardening if she had nothing bigger on hand to do," said Felicia. "But I am not a Britomart type."

"And yet you are not unbelligerent, Felicia;--an indolent, unroused Britomart. But I don't see you in armour. Charming, that white dress drenched with sunlight."

"And with water. I saw Aunt Kate disapproving; no wonder. I suppose we must go to her? Aren't you sometimes rather tired of Aunt Kate and her parties?"

"My dear child, selfishness is the besetting danger of a congenial isolation such as ours. We must think of her and of your uncle. And then"--Mr. Merrick paused as his daughter made no reply--"it is well that you should have these distractions."

"How refuse, when we have only German idealism as an excuse?" Felicia remarked.

"A very good one were we self-centred enough to urge it. But you may find these people interesting, Felicia; I really wonder that Kate managed to get people as interesting to come to her. Young Daunt is a very clever fellow. He speaks well and keeps a position of quite extraordinary independence."

"What is he?--a Liberal?"

"Really, my dear Felicia--your ignorance of politics!" Her father laughed, half approving the indifference to the world's loud drums such ignorance betokened. "Daunt, like all ambitious young men nowadays, is on the winning side; he is a Conservative; an under-secretary in the Admiralty."

"Personally ambitious, do you mean?"

"When does one see any ambition other than personal, my dear?" Mr. Merrick asked mournfully, taking off his hat and rubbing his thick but delicate hand through his hair. "Devotion to an idea, self-immolation if need be, is no longer to be found in British public life."

Felicia was stooping low to pick weeds, and her father seemed to be addressing himself to the landscape in general, as much as to her vague attention. "He is clever, as a man poor and determined on worldly success, and bound to succeed, is clever. It's a cloddish cleverness, after all. This Wynne, now, is of an appealingly contrasted type. I've read a little volume of his somewhere; slight but sensitive, subtle, ironic; bound by no outworn faiths and making use of none for his own advancement; an observer merely, not a scambler."

Her head among her irises, Felicia observed, "Scrambling must be nice, I should think."

She continued her weeding, when her father with an indulgent laugh had walked off to the house, and she smiled a little to herself as she worked; it was, for the youth of the face, a mature smile; a smile that recognized and accepted irony and yet kept a cheerful kindness. Her father made her wince when he faced the world. Alas! Aunt Kate, the world!

The most inappropriate Britomart simile lingered and saddened her as her thought rested on it. It was true, though, that all her life long she had burnished weapons, sharpened her sword and kept her heart high. Now, it was as if with that sad smile and a shrug for the miscalculation of past energy, she leaned on the useless sword and watched the triviality of life go by. How find deep meanings in such muddy shallows? Of what avail was the striving urgency of growth? Where were great objects for armed faiths? She stood ready, waiting for lions; and only jackasses strayed by. But though she could laugh at herself, and see the Britomart attitude as sadly funny, her hand had not slackened--she still held her sword. If a lion did come, so much the better for her--and for life.

CHAPTER II

ONLY one other person passed along the lonely sunny road that afternoon--the Rev. Charles Godersham, rector of the charming little Gothic church--where Mr. Merrick, emphasis in his negative, never went, and whose spire pointed upward, from the woodland below, a delicate and derisive finger at the culprit. The spire was the first thing Felicia saw every morning, and, under a sky of dawn, she loved it, perversely perhaps, for all the things it did not seem to say to the merely decorous well-being of the lives it guarded. It symbolized, to her, wings that would fly to risks, a faith that could be won only by fighting. And as Felicia found irony in most things, she found it every morning in her own uplifted contemplation of the symbol that rejected her.

Mr. Godersham, also, symbolized to her meanings more pleasant than those of their formal intercourse. He wasn't at all a jackass, and he probably thought her father one, and as Felicia's place was beside her father the barrier was effectual. He was a well-favoured, good-hearted, sane and smiling man of fifty, vexed only by the extreme ugliness of numerous daughters to whom he was devoted and by the hostility of Mr. Austin Merrick. He would have been glad to smoke or play whist with Mr. Merrick, tolerantly indifferent to his defiant infidelity; he would have cheerfully waived the relationship of parson for that of mere neighbour; and he did not ask Mr. Merrick to listen to his sermons; he knew that they were poor; he counted for more as man than as parson; but the personality of this recalcitrant, wandering sheep, his vanity and patronizing superiority of manner made even a neighbourly tolerance difficult. It was with an impersonal courtesy that he bowed to Mr. Merrick's daughter as he rode by.

Soon after Felicia went in to give her father his tea. He was sitting in the small room that was, at once, library and drawing-room. Above book-filled shelves the walls were whitewashed, and against this background tall porcelains and bronzes showed their delicate outlines, and some fine mezzotints after Reynolds and Gainsborough their harmonies of golden-greys and blacks. In a corner stood an ivory-coloured cast of the Flying Victory of Samothrace, and above it the thoughtful bust of Marcus Aurelius looked down upon its arrested swiftness, its still and glorious strength. From open windows, where white curtains flapped softly, one looked over the garden and pinewoods and valleys to the sky of luminous gold.

One note, only, jarred; a charcoal drawing of a woman's head, hung prominently. Feebly ill-drawn, its over life-size exaggerated its absurdity; the eyes monstrously large, not well matched, all beaming high light and sentimental eyelash; the nose and mouth showing a rigid, a cloying sweetness. This production was the result of one of Mr. Merrick's rare fits of active self-expression, and, excellent judge of art though he was, he was completely blind to the grotesqueness of the caricature of his dead wife. He had drawn it, many years ago, from life, and claimed to see in it a subtle and exquisite likeness. Felicia suffered, though with the silent and humorous resignation characteristic of her, from living with it, even when a photograph of her mother, standing near, corrected its travesty of her charming countenance.

Mr. Merrick was sitting in a deep armchair, his attitude of complete ease harmonizing with the tranquil room, though his eyes, as he looked up from the review he was reading, were irate. "The modern recrudescence of mysticism is truly disheartening, Felicia," he said. "Have you read this article?"

Felicia, on her way to the tea-table, glanced at the title he held out, and nodded.

"How long will the human race, like an ostrich, hide its head from truth and, in the darkness, find revelation?"

"Why shouldn't they make themselves comfortable in any way they can?" Felicia asked, measuring her tea into the teapot.

"Comfort at the cost of truth is a despicable immorality."

"Well--what is truth? How is the poor ostrich to find it out? Besides, papa, you are comfortable, and the truths you believe in aren't." Her smile at him was one of the comforts Mr. Merrick most securely counted on. Felicia, in every way, made him comfortable, even when she argued with him, and by half-droll opposition called out his refutations.

"My dear child," he now said, "your logic is truly feminine. I have never shirked an intellectual consequence. If,

for the moment, I enjoy certain satisfactions, I never forget that my position is that of the condemned prisoner."

"We certainly have a nicely furnished cell."

"Your mind evades the realities of the bars," said Mr. Merrick, selecting, after a hesitation in the choice, a cake from the plate she handed him. "Once you have seen an ugly fact you turn your back upon it."

"What better thing can one do with an ugly fact? What claim has truth or logic upon anybody in a world of atoms and their concussions? The only thing to do is to make oneself comfortable--with tea or mysticism as the case may be."

Mr. Merrick received this flippancy with calm, convinced of an essential chime under superficial janglings. "You are, I am glad to say, Felicia, a woman who can think."

"We do a lot of thinking," Felicia assented. "How little else!" she could not repress. That her thinking had been for the most part lonely she was glad that her father never suspected, nor did he suspect a Puck-like fun she found in turning his own theories against him. He ate slowly now, his eyes raised in a train of thought that even his intelligent daughter, he felt, could hardly have followed. His own detachment from the shows of life was its theme. Suddenly, however, this contemplation was shaken by a more intimate, more stirring realization. "My dear Felicia," he exclaimed, glancing rapidly at the tea-table and at the stand of eatables, "is not this the day for the frosted cake?"

"Grant forgot it, papa; you shall have it to-morrow."

"There are only the small cakes, then?"

"And bread and butter."

"It is really very careless of Grant, very careless. She should not have forgotten," said Mr. Merrick, flushed, and as seriously aggrieved as a child. "Pray, speak sharply to her about it. I looked forward to the frosted cake to-day, freshly baked, warm, as I like it. It is very annoying. You are sure that she has not made it?"

"Sadly sure; I hoped you would not notice it." Felicia looked at him with a touch of placid severity. "Have another of the small ones."

"No--no, I thank you. I don't care for them." He had eaten three. The distressing episode curdled his mood for the rest of the day. A tactful and unexpected *hors d'oeuvre* at dinner effaced the grievance. It was with a species of tender, maternal malice that Felicia resorted to these cajoleries, herself making the peace-offering. And after dinner when he smoked, and she read *Leopardi* aloud to him, the frosted cake was quite forgotten.

When Felicia went up to her room her mind was running in a melancholy current that often underlay her surface ripple. She stood at her window looking out at the monotonous of the night, and she sighed deeply. Self-pity caught her. This life of repression, of appreciation, of theory, how weary she was of it, how lonely she was in it! How wonderful it would be--she had a swift smile at herself for the turn of thought--to love, to be loved. She stood dreaming of this deliverance, this awakening.

Felicia's ideas of love, despite the severely realistic literature and pessimistic theories that had nourished her youth, were as white, as gracious and as lofty as the shining crescent of the moon that hung in beauty over the pine-woods. She smiled, but with a little fear, analyzing the feminine waiting for a fairy prince, facing the fact that she was really ready to fall in love with the first nice person who presented himself for idealization. He must, of course, be possible; idealization had been impossible with the stupid men she had met at Trensme Hall; or the curate with his short legs and rabbit head. He must be possible--he must be delightful; and would he ever come? "Beware, Felicia," she thought. "You are young; you are lonely; you are sentimental and idle; that's a basis for mistakes and tragedies." She laughed at herself, but as she leaned there and looked out, all the yearning, all the sadness and solemnity of the pine-woods, the moon and the sky, found an echo in her untried heart.

CHAPTER III

AUSTIN MERRICK had begun life inauspiciously. The younger son of an unimportant country squire, he had been none of the things which a younger son should be, neither industrious, nor independent, nor even anxious to please those who might help his disadvantages. He was helpless, and he would not recognize the fact; would ask for no help. He had loitered through college, fitting himself for no career, talking vaguely of a literary life and of a philosophic pursuit of truth. He was still pursuing it, very placidly, not at all chagrined, indeed quite the contrary, by the fact that his pursuit implied that other people's apparent attainments rested on a highly illusory basis. Austin Merrick's attitude had always been what it now was--a calm down-smiling from a hill-top upon other people's dulness.

After travelling for some years, during which he published in the lesser reviews a few little articles of incoherent scepticism--the one book, as sceptical and even more incoherent, was of later date--Austin married a pretty American girl, who had a very small fortune.

Felicia Grey came from a little New England town, and after the death of a sternly practical father, a passionately transcendental mother, she seized upon an aunt, colourless and submissive, and came to Europe to see life.

She was highly educated and vastly ignorant. She intended to see life steadily, and to see it whole. The steadiness she certainly attained; she was fearless, eager, full of faith.

Austin Merrick met her at a Paris *pension* and his essentially irresolute soul was stirred by Miss Grey's resolute eyes, eyes large and clear, like a boy's. He stayed on at the *pension* and made Miss Grey's acquaintance, an easy matter, for she had little conception of risks or of formalities, and regarded all individuals as offering deeply interesting experiences. The aunt sat reading *Flaubert*, with a dictionary, in her bedroom, finding the duty dimly alarming, and refreshing it by reversions to Emerson, while her niece went sight-seeing with the young Englishman whom the elder Miss Grey described in home letters as "very cultivated and high-minded," adding that she imagined him to belong to an "aristocratic family."

Felicia Grey's crudeness, crisp and sparkling, Austin did not recognize; he thought wonderful in her what was only derivation, the absolute impartiality and courage of her outlook. She was startlingly indifferent to conventional claims, seriously uninfluenced by the world's weights and measures. Austin, conscious in his inmost soul of being anything but indifferent and uninfluenced, leaned upon the support of her ignorant valour. She was as serene and strong as he pretended to be.

With her serenity and her indifference, she was immensely enthusiastic about the things she cared for. Humanity, Freedom, Progress,—these words with capital letters—that he already felt it to be the fashion to scoff at a little if one wanted to keep abreast of the latest scorn—were burning realities to Miss Grey, and as he was already in love with her, he did not dare to laugh at them. Indeed, Miss Grey had not much sense of humour, and did not understand subtle scorns. He was in love, glorying in the abandonment of the feeling, and very sincerely unaware that had Miss Grey not been modestly equipped with dollars he would not so have abandoned himself. It was, indeed, a very modest equipment, but with his own tiny allowance, that didn't do at all—he was always in debt—would lift him above the material restrictions that had so long irked him. His indifference might really, then, equal hers.

He never had a more horrid shock than when one day she proved the reality of her indifference, terribly proved it, by speaking contemplatively of devoting her money to the cause of Russian freedom, and of making her own living by teaching. "It seems to me that one would face life more directly—more truly—like that," remarked Miss Grey.

He controlled the demonstration of his dismay and for several days argued with her on the duties of even such small wealth as hers, its responsibilities and opportunities. He always impressed Miss Grey; she was the least arrogant of beings, and in spite of her steady seeing of life, took people exactly at their own valuation. She, too, thought Mr. Merrick very "cultivated and high-minded"; she equipped him further with a "great soul," and, unconsciously to her maiden heart, thought him, too, very beautiful in his wise persuasiveness.

He persuaded her that a larger, richer, more helpful life was to be lived with money than without it, and, a few days later, that that life should be lived with him.

So Miss Grey went to England as Mrs. Austin Merrick, and she and her husband built the Greek temple on the bit of hill-top land that came to Austin through his mother, and in the Greek temple, under the rather pinched conditions that its erection left them in, Mrs. Austin passed fourteen very perplexed, helpless, and unhappy years.

She never recovered from the perplexity. Trying always to see great meanings, only small ones met her eyes. Not only was the mollusc-like routine of the life about her bewildering, for it was a dull country-side, but her husband's character. She never doubted the great soul, but she never seemed clearly to see it. He was loving and devoted; he thought her perfect, as he thought all his possessions; she did not know that it was her echo of his imaginary self that he prized, that she was the living surety of his own worth, never felt that the key-note of his character was an agile vanity that sprang to defend him from any attack that might mean self-revelation. He was always clever enough to see her worth, but not clever enough to see that her intelligence grew blurred and groping when it turned its light upon the objects of her affection.

Her husband's idleness bewildered Mrs. Merrick; not that she so saw it, or his shrinking from the test of action; but his life, in spite of its pompous premisses, had, in reality, little more actual significance than the lives of any of the neighbouring squires—if as much. What did she and Austin *do* in the world? her thoughts fumbled with the knife-like question.

She still saw in him the lofty thinker; but Austin Merrick's mind was a lazy one, unfit for constructive affirmation; and as he happened to be surrounded by minds as lazy, unfit for any effort of destructive criticism, he found the attitude of superiority more attainable by opposition. He did most of his thinking in youth, when the current of scientific agnosticism caught him; he had gone with it, not helping it in any way, merely borne along, and he had gone no farther than it had gone, drifting into a sleepy backwater of its once flowing tide, unable to follow it into deepened channels. His mental development had stopped at an epoch newly conscious of the inflexibility of natural law and the ruin of the dogmas that seemed to contradict it, and Mr. Merrick had not, in reality, advanced beyond this first crude negation. The largeness of his doubts was the result not of deep thinking, but of a lazy lack of thought. His pessimism was caused more by the ignorant optimism he saw about him than by any thwarted spiritual demand of his own nature. He was, indeed, in the position, dubiously fortunate for him, of being twenty years behind the best thought of his time

and fifty ahead of that of his neighbours, to many of whom Darwinism was still a looming, half-ludicrous monkey-monster, to be dispatched at the hands of a vigorous clergy, and naturalistic determinism an hypothesis that did not even remotely impinge upon the outskirts of their consciousness. But with all his complacencies, indolences, and attitudes, Austin Merrick was intelligent, dependent and affectionate, soured only by indifference, angered only by ridicule, and his wife in her relation to him knew nothing worse than that abiding sense of perplexity. She saw with difficulty the ironic side of life; the deepest draught of bitterness was spared her. She only dimly felt that life was tragic. Her small daughter surmised very early that it was grotesque as well as tragic. Felicia was thirteen when her mother died, leaving her with a radiant, pathetic memory. She always thought of her as a very young girl, and indeed Mrs. Austin with her clear gaze, rounded cheek, thick braids of hair coiled in school-girl fashion at the back of her head, looked hardly more than twenty when she died.

Felicia remembered the gaze, so funnily astonished in its tenderness, with which she watched her daughter, the gaze of a school-girl who had never quite grasped the fact of her own maternity. She was very tender, very loving, and poured all the baffled energies of her life into the uprearing of her daughter, who had been treated with the gentleness due to a child, the Emersonian reverence due to a human soul. Felicia remembered the naively sententious aphorisms with which she armed her. "In this life to fail is to triumph," was one, and the pathos to Felicia was in seeing that the aphorism was an unrealized truth in her mother's own life. She had indeed "carried her soul like a white bird," through the painful deserts of disillusion, a disillusion that only her daughter apprehended.

She left life ardent, loving and perplexed. The young Felicia was also ardent and loving, but not at all perplexed. Her clearness of vision did not trouble her steadfastness. She was very fond of her father, and she thought him very foolish; she resented keenly the fact that people more foolish than he should criticize him. She never mistook jackasses for lions, and her only title to commendation in her own eyes was that she, at all events, did not bray.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. MERRICK sent a cart for her niece's box next morning, and Felicia set out in the afternoon to walk the two miles to Trensme Hall, happy in the buoyancy of a sunny, breezy day. She responded easily to sunshine and buoyancy, and, in spite of her pessimistic education, easily expected happiness. Sometimes it seemed that it might be waiting for her behind every bush, for youth and an ardent temperament are more potent mood-makers than rational reflection. And, indeed, it did lurk, smiling, behind all the bushes to-day, for Felicia's mood was happy. She saw it in the blue and white of the high summer sky, in the sun-dappled woods, in the wild-flowers of the hedge-row; she heard it in the mazurka-like song of a bird hidden in green mysteries of shade; she felt it in the warm, fresh breeze that swayed light shadows across the road. It was only an intensifying of the sense of response when, at a turning of the road, she met a young man, who seemed quite magically to personify the breeziness, the brightness, the mazurka-like element of the day. Coming thus upon each other, both smiling to themselves, both looking, listening, and, as it were, expectant, it seemed only natural that their eyes should dwell upon each other with frank interest. Their steps slackened, a mute, pleased query passed between them, and the young man, doffing his hat, and giving Felicia as he did so a vivid impression of sunlit auburn hair, said, "I beg your pardon, but I am sure that you are Miss Merrick."

"And you are Mr. Wynne," said Felicia, for she was quite sure he was not the ambitious politician. Their certainty about one another was as natural as all the rest.

"I came to meet you," said Mr. Wynne. "I heard that you were arriving this afternoon, and that you lived on top of a hill and had a wonderful garden; and as I love gardens and hill-tops I thought I would try to meet you as near them as possible."

Maurice Wynne was also telling himself that he loved meeting Miss Merrick.

Felicia on this day was dressed in white. Her hat had a wreath of white roses, and, tying under her chin, shaded her thick, smooth hair--hair the colour of sandal-wood--and her pale face. He would have climbed any number of hills to see the face--so significant, so resolute, so delicate.

Her small, square chin, narrowing suddenly from rounded cheeks, her wide, firm lips, her nose and forehead, and the broad sweep of her eye-brows, had all this quality of resolute delicacy. In the pale yet vivid tints of her face her clear grey eyes seemed dark, and her eyelashes slanted across them like sunshine on deep pools of woodland water. Maurice was seeing all this, delightedly,--and that through the child-like moulding of the cheek, the lips' sweetness, the eyes' tranquillity, ran a latent touch of mischievous gaiety--a dryad laughing a little at her own new soul.

"You have missed the climb and the garden in meeting me," said Felicia, "unless you follow this road straight on, and that will lead you to them---"

"Perhaps you will show me both on some other day," said Maurice, "since I haven't missed you." He had turned to walk beside her, and Felicia, also making inner comments, reflected that a person so assured of his own graceful intentions could hardly be anything but graceful. His looks, his words, implied happy things with as much conviction as the bird still sang on behind them.

"It isn't in any way an unusual garden, though the view from it is unusual."

"I am sure that your garden is unusual—just as this first stage of my journey towards it has been. It is very unusual to meet a Watteau figure in a Watteau landscape."

"If you had started a little earlier," Felicia said, smiling, "and met me on the hill-side, I shouldn't have been so in harmony. There the pine-woods are very grave, and a Watteau figure would have been incongruous."

"Incongruous, but almost more delightfully unusual," he returned; "there would have been a pathos in it then. I am a painter of sorts, and so I may tell you, may I not, that the picture you made as you fluttered in the shadow and sunlight around that green turn of the road, was quite bewilderingly radiant and charming?"

Felicia was amused and a little confused by the fact that he might say it, so oddly this young man seemed to have taken possession of her. Once more, that he should express his pleasure in her picturesqueness seemed as inevitable as the bird's song. She could hardly feel that his rights were only those of a stranger. Anything she said, she felt sure, he would like, and a person who likes anything one says is no stranger. So, if he would, he might say that she was like a Watteau and had made a picture. She had experienced, for her part, something of the same sensation. Maurice had been a radiant and delightful apparition.

He was a slender young man, tall, narrow-shouldered, lightly made. Hair, small pointed beard, and the slight moustache that swept up from his lips, were of that vivid auburn. His skin was feminine in its clear pink and white. One might have felt the brilliancy of his eyes as hard had not their blue been so caressing. His look, with its intent sympathy, his smile, claiming intimacy with child-like trust, were all response and understanding. He enveloped one like a sunbeam. A species of sparkling emotion shone from him. He really dazzled Felicia a little. He was so much an incarnation of sunlight that her own happy mood seemed to have walked with her straight into a sort of fairy-tale--into a veritable Watteau landscape, at all events, where happiness was the only natural thing in the world.

As they approached the lodge-gates--they had been talking without pause of music, books, pictures, even about life--he asked her how she had guessed that he was Maurice Wynne--"Because there is only one of you--but there are several of *us*--Mrs. Merrick's guests, I mean."

"She told me about her guests. There were only two young men, and one of them sounded rather stately, overpowering, so I knew you were the other."

"Poor Geoffrey!" Maurice ejaculated with a laugh, "how you have guessed at him! But he is a good deal more than that, all the same. And he is a tremendous friend of mine."

"Is he? I hope you don't mind my flippancy; it was founded on the merest scrap of conjecture."

"It isn't flippancy; it's intuition. Geoffrey *is* that, only he is more. I don't mind a bit--I wouldn't mind flippancy, only I feel bound to testify. Geoffrey is the best of friends to me, you see; has been since our boyhood." His smiling homage was an even nicer indication of character than his charm and happiness. Felicia inwardly accorded a cool approval to the stately friend.

"I suppose you have heard about the others, too," Maurice went on; "Angela Bagley is another great chum of mine. I wonder how she will strike you. You must tell me--even if it's flippant. She is clever, too; at all events, she is very effective."

"Do you think they are the same thing?"

"Effectiveness is the only test of cleverness, isn't it?"

"If the people one affects are clever, one must be clever to affect them, I suppose."

"But if they are stupid?" smiled Maurice, "and such heaps of people are, aren't they?"

"Yet it is clever to take that into account and to make what one wants out of their stupidity."

"Ah, exactly; that is what Geoffrey does," said Maurice. It was what she had imagined of him. "And such cleverness is, to you, a very ugly thing," he added.

"Oh; I don't know." Felicia flushed a little, realizing that they were going rather far since it was of his friend they were talking. "It would depend, wouldn't it, on what he wanted to get out of their stupidity?"

"He wants to get power."

"Well, there again, for what end?"

"Isn't power an end in itself?"

"I should think it ought to have an aim."

"Such as making the stupid less stupid? raising the masses? all that sort of thing?"

"It is the part of the powerful person to say that."

Maurice continued smilingly to look at her. "You won't like Geoffrey," he observed. "But though he hasn't ideals I will say of him that he is dear of the usual reproach of the politician--he claims none. Now Lady Angela does," he went on, in a sequence that again gave Felicia that rather alarming sense of sudden intimacy. "She lives under tremendously high pressure, you know." They had passed down the uninteresting avenue, its trees marking sections of flat, green

country, and as the house was reached Felicia felt the moment deferred for learning more precisely in what this pressure consisted.

CHAPTER V

MRS. MERRICK'S drawing-room overflowed with aesthetic intentions. Such intentions had come to her late in life, and, as a result, Middle Victorian warred with Morris and final, disconcerting notes of *Art Nouveau*. Circular plush seats enclosed lofty palms; sofas and chairs weirdly suggested vegetable forms; on walls and draperies was an obsession of pattern. Photographs, in heavy silver frames, in frames of painted glass, in screens and in hanging fan-shaped receptacles, swarmed like a pest of locusts. Mrs. Merrick's painfully acquired taste had not had the courage of its new convictions; there were accretions, no eliminations, and the room seemed gasping with surfeit.

She sat among her possessions, near the tea-table, her head and shoulders dark against a window. Felicia, on entering the ugly room, always felt the sense of latent hostility; to-day it was more than ever apparent, perhaps in contrast to the new, warm sympathy beside her. Mrs. Merrick gave her a cold kiss, one or two cool questions, and a tepid cup of tea, and left her to dispose of herself as best she might, while she herself turned her quick, tight smile on Maurice Wynne. Carrying her tea-cup, Felicia went across the room to a solitary seat under the tallest palm, amused as usual by her own contrast to the tropics above her and the upholstered respectability beneath. She put her cup on a small and intricately hideous table, perforated, heavily inlaid, with distorted bandy legs--a table, Felicia thought, that seemed to totter up to one, winking and leering with all its decorations--and drawing off her gloves, she looked about her, interested in the latest turn of her aunt's kaleidoscope.

Near Mrs. Merrick sat a stately young man; Felicia had felt that her adjective had found its subject on first entering the room, even before he had been named to her, and had risen gravely, tea-cup in hand; a young man of really oppressive good looks. His expression was not arrogant, showing, as he suavely surveyed his hostess, only a calm vacancy; but his profile was arrogantly perfect. One sought face and figure in vain for some humanizing defect, some deviation from Olympian completeness. He had the air, radiant and inflexible, of a sun-god. His height, too, was Olympian; his legs, terminating in long, slender shoes, were stretched out before him to quite a startling distance. Felicia's quickened sense of latent hostility found nothing hostile in this young man; he was merely magnificently indifferent. Her genial maliciousness found him, too, rather funny; not even a sun-god had a right to be so magnificent.

An obvious cause for that quickened sense met her eyes as they left Mr. Daunt and turned to a dim corner on the other side of the room, a corner from which all hint of Mid-Victorian had ebbed, leaving Liberty hangings and deep cushions, inviting to pensiveness, in full possession. The presence among the cushions was, she felt, Lady Angela, and she and Lady Angela were bound to dislike one another; a glance told her that. Mr. Daunt amused her, but Lady Angela made her uncomfortable.

She was leaning back, her arms folded, talking to a small, pallid man--Mr. Jones, Felicia placed him--and in appearance she was very long and curiously incorporeal. It was difficult to define the woman in the swathing lines of her diaphanous black gown that seemed to trail like a shadow across the cushions. Strange ornaments gleamed dimly on her; clasps of turquoise and opal, sombre rings, a chain of heavy gems that curved among the curves of her laces. Her head seemed to hold forward the melancholy smile of her half-parted lips; her eyes were pale, shadowed to mysterious depths by long eyelids; soft dust-coloured hair haloed a narrow face and a long throat, the face so narrow that all the delicate features looked disproportionately large. There was an almost spectre-like effect in this emphasis of the means of expression and the meagreness of setting, and the expression itself, thought Felicia, was like a cosmetic, cunningly applied. A "touched-up" spectre. Lady Angela certainly did not please--nor amuse her either. Their eyes met more than once while she drank her tea, and each time Lady Angela's seemed to rest on hers with a more insistent, more gentle pathos; they almost seemed to be consoling her for her isolation in a roomful of strangers, yet making her more conscious of isolation. It was with a sense of quick relief, pleasure, and, funnily, almost triumph, that she saw Maurice Wynne approaching her, his tea-cup in one hand, a plate of sandwiches in the other.

"You are being starved after your walk. I have been waiting for my opportunity to bring you something." His eyes smiling steadily, as if over the new bond they had found, said to her, "You don't like your aunt--nor do I. You are out of your *milieu* here. Nobody here is capable of appreciating you; but I appreciate you." The smile was so infinitely more delicate than any such words that it flattered no vanity in her, only made her happy afresh in that new reliance on an almost comrade.

As Maurice joined her, Mr. Geoffrey Daunt's head turned towards them, and he looked at the young lady in white under the palm tree, looked as though she had been another but more interesting palm-tree. He received a more perturbing impression than his imperturbable glance implied. He was displeased that Maurice should not be sitting beside Lady Angela, and displeased that the girl beside whom he was sitting should be so freshly young and pretty; and this dissatisfaction worked in him until he presently got up and went across the room to Lady Angela, interrupting her *tete-a-tete* with such an air of evident purpose that Mr. Jones arose and wandered away.

Daunt dropped into the vacant seat. "What have you been doing this afternoon?" he asked.

From his new position he could directly survey Felicia and Maurice; his eyes were upon them as he spoke.

"Writing to my friends," Angela answered in a soft voice. She was a great correspondent, and it was quite understood by their fortunate recipients that her letters were to be preserved; future publication was a probability; Angela looked upon herself as destined to influence her time, after as well as before her death, and her friends were of the same opinion.

That Geoffrey Daunt, however, did not share this conviction of her significance was shown by his next placid question, "What about?"--quite implying that an alternative of souls or satin was equally interesting to him.

Angela had long ago told herself that she must not expect to be understood by this worldly relative. It was with the mildness of an intelligent forbearance that, as softly as before, she answered, "About how I feel life--theirs and mine."

"You feel a good many things about it--don't you?" Geoffrey smiled, though not mockingly, indeed, with a cool kindness. Both smile and kindness were keenly offensive to Angela, but with greater mildness, "I believe in feeling," she returned.

"You and Maurice are alike in that."

"Yes; with a difference; Maurice is a subjectivist; his feeling is an end; mine is a means."

"For the good of others?" Geoffrey asked, and his tone denoted a perception of shades and meanings that his mask-like serenity did not imply. To be disturbed by the sinister smile of a Mona Lisa is one thing, but to suspect that the meditatively inclined head of a marble Hermes is gently quizzing one is a peculiarly baffling experience; it was one that Geoffrey often gave her. He was one of the few people, she told herself, who almost made her angry. She flushed now, ever so slightly, at the tone. Yet with a sweet patience that he should have felt as the turning of the other cheek, she answered, "I own that I try to live for others."

"And Maurice for himself. So that the difference between you is that he is selfish and you unselfish; that, I own, is a great difference."

Leaning her arm on the back of the sofa, Angela arranged the laces at her wrist.

"You have a talent for misinterpretation, Geoffrey;--wilful, isn't it?--perhaps a habit caught in the scuffles of debate. But certain attitudes make misinterpretations by some people inevitable. One accepts it."

"Misinterpret you, my dear Angela?" Geoffrey inquired, raising his eyebrows and looking not at her but at the young couple under the palm-tree. "I hope not. Surely I am right in assuming that to live for others is unselfish, and that you recognize it as being so."

"I have owned to an aim--not to an attainment. Why is it that those who do not aim cannot forgive those who do?--try always to smirch the effort in the eyes of those who make it? I hope that I am not self-righteous, Geoffrey--I frankly recognize your intimation--why not make it as frankly?"

Geoffrey at this was silent for a moment or two, evidently not at all abashed by her discerning humility, and evidently thinking it over very lightly, as he would have thought over any unimportant fact put before him. Looking round at her and again smiling, he observed, "I am sure that you are very clever, and I am sure that you are sure that you are very good. I confess that I like to test your conviction by teasing you a little."

"It would be better, Geoffrey, if, instead of ridiculing people, you were to sometimes try to help them by a little faith in them. Nothing is more maiming to an ideal not yet strong than ridicule; mine, happily, is strong, though I myself am weak."

Geoffrey looked down at his shoe, turning his foot a little as though to observe the hue of his silk sock. He was silent, placidly silent; but it was now as if his thought had passed away from her and her words, and his abrupt change of the subject when he again spoke, as of a large mind turning from a trivial encounter with a small one, was anything but flattering. "Who is that girl?" he inquired.

Angela's eyes followed his to Maurice and Felicia. She knew that Geoffrey's interest in her, his relative, was only because of his interest in Maurice, his friend; knew that the match which for some years had seemed so imminent, and that by her friends was regarded as the quite disastrously bad match for her, was merely regarded by Geoffrey as the good match for Maurice. Angela had always hoped that Geoffrey saw the delay in final measures as caused by her own hesitation; and that at times he had tried to urge her to a decision, she had fancied more than once, and always with a soothing sense of sustainment. He knew Maurice so well; the hesitation, then, could not be Maurice's, although to her weariness it so often seemed Maurice's indecision and not his fear of hers that kept them apart. Looking now at the girl under the palm--the obvious link that Geoffrey had turned the talk to--she said vaguely, "A niece--a cousin--I forget which Mrs. Merrick said. A poor relation; this her one yearly peep at the world--the world to her. Quaint, isn't it?"

"I shouldn't like to be a poor relation of Mrs. Merrick's," Geoffrey observed. "An ugly woman," he went on, adding, "The niece doesn't look provincial."

"No; oddly she doesn't; not physically; but provincial in soul I should think. A curious little face, Geoffrey;

ignorant, empty of all but a shallow joy in life. It hasn't suffered, isn't capable of much suffering. She looks like a soulless, sylvan creature; mocking, elusive, alluring."

Geoffrey passed over the question of soul and body, reflecting that it was natural that Angela should show this funny spite. Maurice was clearly allured.

"Her dress isn't provincial either," he said; "its simplicity is extremely sophisticated. The dryad has found a dressmaker in her woods. She is a young lady who knows, at all events, how to dress."

"And how to eat," mused Angela. "Dear child, it's really delightful to see such frank enjoyment of opportunity. That is her fourth sandwich."

"I beg your pardon, it is her fifth."

"You share Maurice's interest."

"Is Maurice so interested?"

"Isn't he?"

"While I automatically count her sandwiches he meditates making a sketch of her."

Again there was silence between them, and it was Angela who broke it with, "Why did you come here, Geoffrey?"

"Because Maurice came; I was glad of the chance of being with him in a quiet place where one can rest."

"And why did Maurice come?"

Geoffrey responded promptly. "To see you--in a quiet place where he *can* see you."

She let the assertion pass, forestalling a possible retort with--

"And I came for you and for Maurice and for Mrs. Merrick. I am fond of Mrs. Merrick."

"Of ugly Mrs. Merrick? Really?"

"Really indeed. My likings are not founded on alluring faces or sophisticated gowns. I saw a good deal of her in London. She is interested in many of my objects. She is trying to grow."

"And you are down here to help her. I hope that your efforts will bring something out. I confess that to me the plant looks dry and thorny."

"Ah! that is because she is in such an arid soil. I can help her. She made me feel that, and I never refuse help."

Her smile braved ironic retorts, but his answering smile was purely playful.

"Pray let me believe that you came solely for old friendship's sake," he said, "rather than for Mrs. Merrick's." And Angela was unable to repress an assenting though superficial lightness.

CHAPTER VI

GEOFFREY and Angela had a common ancestor from whom her father and his mother were descended. This person, in the reign of George III, was an obscure country solicitor, who, through a combination of happy inheritances, was able to aspire to and attain a marriage with an heiress of good family. Their wealth, his eagerness for advancement, her greater intelligence and more wily ambitions, signified power, and under the wife's guidance they rose rapidly. He bought an old country estate, a seat in Parliament, and, since his vote was unvaryingly at the Government's disposal, an Irish peerage soon rewarded him. He cringed and bullied his way to success; his wife schemed, coaxed and coquetted in the extremest forms of the latter term, if contemporary scandals were at all veracious.

Such an alliance was bound to prosper. Their wealth grew; their house in London was a social centre; their sons all well-placed, their daughters all well-married, inherited the father's heavy determination, the mother's nimble and remorseless dexterity. An English peerage crowned the edifice raised with such efforts, and the Earls of Glaston took their place among the more tawdry great names of England. They never distinguished the name, and after the first swift climb aspired to no further heights. They were wealthy, worldly, weighty. They held what they had, and held it firmly.

Angela's father was a lazy, well-mannered man; nothing further could be said of him. Her mother had been pretentious, ambitious, and sentimental. She had quarrelled with her husband to the verge of open rupture; flirted with anybody of any importance to the verge of open scandal, and written a flimsy political novel interesting only from its thinly veiled personalities; she long posed as the typical *femme incomprise*, and just before her death she became fervently religious.

Angela had scorned her mother, and had avoided her as much as possible, finding in her later epochs grotesque echoes of her own sublimities. She could never bear to look into the distorting mirror that her mother's character seemed absurdly to hold up to her.

Geoffrey's strain of Bagley blood, on the other hand, had reached to no such heights. His mother, descended from the first Lord Glaston, and connected again, by various unimportant intermarriages, with the elder branch, married a country parson, and her abilities had chafed against all manner of restrictions.

The Rev. John Daunt had been a scholar, almost a saint, and all his wife's tenacious worldliness had been unable to extract material success from these baffling qualities. But Mrs. Daunt, in spite of her Bagley blood, possessed the family characteristics in no petty or personal forms. The strain, in passing through the two or three generations of simple and dignified squires who had been her un-illustrious forbears, had run itself dear of its more vulgar elements. Mrs. Daunt had been as proud as she was eager. She would fight, but she would never cringe. She lived first in the hope of seeing her gentle husband rise to high places, and when, with not unkindly scorn, she realized his incapacity for self-advancement, she transferred her passionate and patient hopes to her son. For him she saved, slaved and battled. Geoffrey never learned, until shortly after his father's death, that his own opportunities were won not only by his mother's battlings, but by his father's martyrdom.

John Daunt, in the midst of a life of service to God and man, found, in a time of darkness and dismay, that his faith, in any orthodox sense, had deserted him. His was not the mind that could combine Christian ethics with a genial scepticism as to the Articles of the Church he belonged to. With sad and tender dignity he opened his heart to his wife. He accepted her amazed indignation. Mrs. Daunt would as little have dreamed of questioning the Articles of the Christian faith as of thinking about them—they were part of the ecclesiastical machinery that one accepted as one accepted the other probably irrational bases of life. He bowed before her scorn of his weakness; but he was not prepared for her absolute refusal to further his intention of leaving the Church.

How were they to live, pray? The Rev. John had hardly thought of that. His own private income was barely sufficient for his lesser charities. His wife owned a small property, and when the practical question was put before him, he supposed that they could manage to live on that, and he would find something to do.

"Find something to do? You? You will merely sink in the world, and we will all sink with you. What of Geoffrey?" Mrs. Daunt's eyes flashed fire as she asked this stinging question. Geoffrey was just entering the University, the honours of Eton thick upon him. He wished to ruin their child, then? The questions lashed him. He adored their child. She swept on: He, forsooth, would seek downfall for some morbid whim when men of ten times his significance managed to keep the peace between their conscience and their vows. And Mrs. Daunt was too clever to use the lash only; she turned to the ethical side of the question, the side on which alone he had looked, with such self-tormenting indecision. His influence; the love of his people for him; the light he held up among them;—what difference did the lamp make that held the flame?—the wrecking of others' faiths involved in his abandonment of a leaking ship—she would not say that it did leak; but if it did, was it the place of a captain to desert his crew because he could not see through the storm? And he yielded, as much to his own self-doubt as to her; yielded, and yet afterwards, in an undercurrent of anguish beneath the flow of unchanged life, felt himself a traitor.

Mrs. Daunt one day, after the father's death, told her son of the spiritual crisis that might have ruined his career, triumphant, though very tender towards her husband's memory, in the strength that had saved them all from his weakness.

Geoffrey, a silent, undemonstrative young man, grew white. "It shouldn't have happened had I known," he said; "I could have made my way."

"Made your way, my dear child!" cried Mrs. Daunt, angry in a moment, and yet more wounded than angered by this ingratitude. "Do you realize, I wonder, what it cost us to make you?—cost me, rather, for I did it all. Do you know how I have scraped and struggled? Do you know that every stick and stave I possess is mortgaged? You might have made your way, but it would not be the way you are in now. The height one starts from determines the height one attains."

"No; only the time one takes to get there. I would rather have taken longer. I will pay off the mortgages as soon as possible," said Geoffrey.

He was ungrateful, though never unkind. Even now, after this shock, for he had loved his father with the cold depth characteristic of him, he regained in a moment the decorous kindness due to a mother who had done an ugly thing for his sake; but he knew that it was decorous only.

Mrs. Daunt had never appealed for his tenderness, or worked for it; but when Geoffrey, after a merely stop-gap reading for the Bar, entered Parliament, and she saw all her desires for him realizing themselves, it was the lack of tenderness that, though she was scarcely conscious of it, poisoned all her happiness.

Living with him, laying the foundations of his effectiveness more firmly, seeing him, young as he was, a man of power and repute, she never recognized herself as a deeply loving mother, so absorbed were all her energies in the rapacities of maternity; but when she died it was with a dim yet bitter sense of failure; for Geoffrey had seen the rapacities only.

Apart from this essential failure, Mrs. Daunt knew only one other.

The match she had hoped for between Geoffrey and his cousin Angela could not be effected. She had not traced the causes of this failure further than a mutual indifference, almost an antagonism.

Even as a boy Geoffrey had said, when she probed him once as to his sentiments towards this significant young relative, "I don't like her. She is an unpleasant girl, I think. I wish you wouldn't ask her here any more."

Mrs. Daunt had hoped that ambition, if not affection, would overcome this blunt, boyish aversion, for with Angela's fortune to back him, Geoffrey's career was sure of utmost brilliancy; but neither motive seemed forthcoming.

She died before seeing that Angela's affections were centred on Maurice Wynne. She could hardly have suspected Angela of such folly, seeing Maurice as a charming young nobody, a mere satellite of Geoffrey's, who had known him at Oxford and Eton, travelled with him, and was devoted to him, a devotion unresented by the mother, a charming relaxation in her eyes towards the lesser man. Maurice was poor, indolent, distinguished only by his air of distinction and a few trivial sallies into various fields of art; he had no other claims. She could never have seen in him the barrier to her hopes.

At present, three years after his mother's death, Geoffrey's position in the House was conspicuous, if somewhat insecure. He was the foremost of a group of clever young men, independent and given to exquisite impertinence; but though the group was impertinent, their chief was grave; he needed no small weapons. Insecurity did not menace his constituency; his voters were completely under his thumb, and he let them see that they were. He chaffed them loftily, never flattered them, and showed an assurance that was completely contagious; the average man became sheep-like before its conviction of leadership by right of real supremacy.

The insecurity lay in his poverty. It had not yet pinched him. His small income sufficed for the bread and butter of existence, and Lord Glaston, the decorative director of various companies, was glad to lend a hand to his brilliant young relative. Sagacious speculation, and even his winnings at cards and at racing formed no inconsiderable part of his resources. Towards these rather undignified methods of replenishment he had an air of dignified indifference that was not at all assumed. Ingrained in Geoffrey's nature was the sense that power was his, and that money, the mere fuel of life, was a small matter upon which he could always count. This inflexible young man had a perfect faith in his own strength and in the plasticity of outward circumstance, a faith that had been thoroughly justified, as such faiths usually are, by his experience of life. He was ambitious, personally ambitious, yet the personality was no mean one. He believed in his own significance and in the beneficent ends that that significance, endued with power, could attain. The might of his will mocked at the minor aims for which smaller men might struggle. He intended to use the world for his own ends, and held, with all the ethics of evolution to back him--though Geoffrey did not appeal to these dubious sanctions--that in a great man's ends the world also found its best.

He had no humanitarian ideals to weaken his self-regarding purposes. He was highly sceptical as to the merits, or even the potentialities, of humanity; recognized self-interest as its ruling motive, and was never blinded by this motive's various disguises--idealistic, aesthetic, or philanthropic. That the disguises often deceived their wearers he quite owned; his kindness consisted in such cynical taking for granted; but he was keen to see the eternal greedy animal under the fine apparel, and tolerant towards the brother brute. He wished him well; thought it by all means advisable that he should wear fine apparel and be dull of sight; but his own gift of clear, dispassionate vision justified him, he would have said, had he ever sought to justify himself, in feeling towards the hoodwinked as towards tools that he could put to no better use than in using them for his own interest and for his nation's interest. He and his nation, on the whole, were fittest, and he intended that each should survive to the best of its ability.

So far only outer circumstances had opposed him--and been walked through. He knew no inner antagonists. He was neither sensitive nor sentimental. His imagination pointed out pitfalls, but laid no snares for him.

Coolly critical of women, they aroused no illusions in him. Their feathers and furbelows in the way of feelings were often finer than the masculine decorations; but he suspected the little animal underneath of even meaner though more labyrinthine egotisms. Such a little animal, most exquisitely furbelowed--he granted her good taste in spiritual trappings--he considered Angela to be, and he was anxious that his friend should profit by her trappings, material as well as spiritual.

Oddly enough, he had never applied the animal simile to Maurice; this affection was boxed off, as it were, in a secure bit of heart, safely out of reach of reason, though he and Maurice had little in common. Art was Maurice's object; his attitude that of the spectator at the drama of life. Geoffrey observed only that he might act; though not altogether inappreciative, art was to him the decoration only of life, the arabesque on the blade with which one fought; one might contemplate the arabesque in moments of leisure.

Maurice did not fight beside him; but he was an affectionate troubadour, who looked on at the combat and chanted it, often with friendly irony. He was much like a dependent and devoted younger brother. Geoffrey did not argue about him, and was fonder of him than of anything else in the world. He was glad of the restful week after a fatiguing session, and looked to see Maurice's future settled, the arabesque engraved upon a good, solid blade of prosperity, before he left Trensme Hall.

CHAPTER VII

FELICIA was up early in the morning after her arrival, and while she made a leisurely toilet she was thinking, smiling as she thought, about the last evening. An altogether novel one in her experience.

She had never before been conscious of being interested in so many people, and, especially, she had never before been conscious of interesting anybody. Now she was almost sure that last night she had much interested one person. The brightest spot in this consciousness had been after her own performance at the piano. Various young women played and sang; Felicia's place among them was an unimportant one. Miss Bulmer, as usual, distinguished herself in a passionate ballad, her eyes fixed on the cornice, her meagre white satin form swayed by emotions strangely out of keeping with the appearance of the singer. Miss Bulmer's shouts of despair and yearning stirred, as usual, all the enthusiasm of which her audience was capable; and Felicia, when she sat down to the piano, was accustomed to the subsequent torpor, to the undercurrent of talk while she played, and to having Miss Bulmer, flushed and generous in her own triumph, lean over her and watch her fingering with an air of much benignity. But it was a new experience when she rose, among cool expressions of pleasure, while Miss Bulmer said, "You really do improve so much," to have some one, some one who knew, and that some one Maurice Wynne, come forward all radiant with recognition, clapping his hands and crying, "Magnificent, simply magnificent! Where did you learn to play Brahms like that? I didn't know that you really were a musician--I thought you merely played the piano!"

He stood, excited, delighted, smiling at her, and his enthusiasm went, an uncomprehended thrill round the room. Every eye turned on Felicia with a new discernment.

"But you mustn't stop," said Maurice; "she mustn't stop, must she, Mrs. Merrick? Why didn't you prepare us for this treat? You never told us that your niece was a genius."

Mrs. Merrick, her square of pale mauve bosom, in its frame of yellow satin, deepening its tint, hastened to add her urgency to Maurice's. "Is she not wonderful? We expect great things of her," she said, for Mrs. Merrick was quick at adjustments.

Felicia's placid eyes dwelt on her for a moment.

Maurice had taken Miss Bulmer's place, for even Miss Bulmer felt that benignity was misapplied, and had looked at Felicia, not at her fingering, while she played.

It had been to Felicia a delightful, almost a bewildering experience.

Now when she was dressed she went to the window and leaned out. This view from Trensme Hall--the lawns frosted with dew, the near trees framing a long strip of sky, the early sunlight sparkling on jewel-like bands of flowers--was sweet and intimate. And hardly had she breathed in the chill freshness of the young day when her eyes met Maurice Wynne's.

He was strolling below, finding evidently her own enjoyment. He waved his hand, smiling his good-morning, and Felicia, leaning out to smile at him, white among the creepers, felt the picturesque fitness of this beginning to a day, surely to be a happy one.

"Come down," said Maurice. "How good of you to be up early. Let us have a walk before breakfast; we have heaps of time."

Felicia needed no urging. She had intended to walk by herself, but a walk with this companion would be as different from ordinary walks as playing to him had been from playing to her accustomed audience. He was waiting for her at the small side-door, and they crossed the wet lawns and the glittering shrubberies, and left formality behind them in the deep lanes that led to the woods and that smelt of the damp, sweet earth. As they went he talked, mainly about himself, with an altogether un-English ease and equally without awkwardness or vanity. He talked of his work, of his friends, of his travels and point of view--as far as he could be said to have one. He seemed to be turning under her eyes the pages of a tender, whimsical, very modern book; counting so wonderfully upon her understanding. He took things very easily, at least thought most things only worth easy taking; yet there was something in that reckless eye, a restlessness, and, under its caressing smile, a melancholy, that made her think that something, perhaps, he might take hard.

"Do you ever have moods of despondency--despair?" he asked her, as they went through a winding path among the woods. Despair and despondency were black and alien things to speak of here, where the very shadows were happy, and where there was ecstasy in the sunlit vault of blue seen far above, beyond the sparkling green.

"Moods? No; I don't think so," said Felicia; "but I am sometimes horribly discontented--and when I am I can't imagine anything that would content me."

"Not anything?"

"Not anything--except everything. I mean being sure that everything is significant, worth while."

"But it is worth while as long as it lasts."

"But it doesn't last!" She smiled round at him, for she was leading the way in the narrow path, and the white flounces of her dress brushed wet grasses on either side. "The sense of impermanence often poisons the worth." She added, "Do you have moods?"

"Oh! frightful fits of the blues. It's funny that I should talk to you about it; no, not funny that I should talk about it to you, but that there should be a you that made it possible. No one suspects me of blues except Geoffrey. I give him a

glimpse now and then. That is really the way our friendship began. I was in a frightful state of mind one term at Eton, sinking in depths of scepticism and horror, and Geoffrey hauled me out, put me on my feet, and, once I'd done gasping, set me running, as it were, got up my circulation. He didn't argue; but he wonderfully understood, and he promptly acted."

"And do you have them, the moods, because things don't last?" Felicia asked, looking ahead into the wood's translucent green.

"No; not so much that as that things don't come. I want so much more than I ever get. I want to feel everything--to the uttermost. I never get a chance to exercise my capacity for feeling. It is lack, you see, rather than loss that I dread."

They had come to the edge of the wood where, beyond a stile, were meadows of tall grasses. Larks sang overhead. Maurice vaulted over the stile and held out his hand to her. Her eyes, looking down at him, showed a gravity, a little perplexity. "You don't understand that?" he asked, when she stepped down beside him.

"No; I dread both."

"I am awfully human," said Maurice; "and I want the whole human gamut--but that's all I ask."

"But what is the human gamut?"

"That question from your father's daughter! Your father, I hear, is a great positivist."

"Well, his daughter asks the question."

They walked on through the meadow, white with the lacey disks of tall field flowers.

"Do you know," he asked, "how, after this, I shall always personify faith to myself?"

"Faith?"

"Yes. I shall see her as a smiling girl dressed in white, and walking among white flowers in the sunlight. I have guessed you, you see. The key-note of your life is a question."

"Do you call the asking of a question, faith?" Felicia smiled.

"It's faith to think it worth asking."

Geoffrey Daunt was strolling in front of the house when they reached it. He looked at the two young people as they approached him with his observant, impersonal gaze. Felicia, in a mingled state of mind, happy, yet touched, even troubled, felt, as she met his gaze, a quick leap of almost antagonism. There was no criticism in it, no surprise or displeasure, yet her intuition told her that something in it commented unfavourably upon her companionship with Maurice. And with the intuition came a delightful throb of power. He was her friend, and she would keep him so. Already this first step into life seemed to have brought her among dumb contests. She would stand staunch and keep what was hers. Really, Mr. Daunt's head, so high against the blue sky, with its classic white and gold, was ridiculously handsome. She nodded a smiling *au revoir* to Maurice and left them.

The two young men walked slowly along the gravel path towards the garden. Maurice was silent. With his head thrown back, his hands clasped behind him, he smiled as though over some grave, delightful secret. Reticence was an unusual symptom in Maurice.

"That's a very pretty girl," Geoffrey observed, reflecting on the symptom.

Maurice's shoulders drew together with a gesture of irritable repudiation.

"Pretty! Don't be so trivial!"

"Well--what was it Angela called her yesterday?--alluring, elusive?"

"Only as outdoor nature is. On Angela's lips the terms would savour too much of a boudoir atmosphere; lace tea-gowns and languor. This child is a wild rose open to the sky, dewy, *un peu sauvage*; anything less alluring in Angela's sense of the word was never seen."

Geoffrey, who had heard a multitude of wild-rose raptures, received this one with composure.

"I assure you, Geoffrey," Maurice went on, growing the more confidential for his momentary reticence, "I assure you that if I could afford it I would fall in love with that enchanting girl."

"And since you can't afford it, pray do nothing so nonsensical. Meanwhile, what of Angela?"

"You are really rather gross, my dear Geoffrey. Why meanwhile? Why drag in Angela?"

"Because, to speak grossly, she can afford to fall in love with you. Don't flirt with this girl and risk trying Angela's affection too far."

Maurice again shrugged his shoulders irritably.

"My dear Geoffrey, Miss Merrick isn't that sort. One flirts in the boudoir--not in the breezes of a heath. And then there is nothing to risk; I have no right to suppose that I have Angela's affection."

"Rot! my dear Maurice. You have done your best to win it. What has this last year of dallying meant?"

"Dallying, pure and simple, to both of us."

"Yet you came down here----?"

"To go on dallying. I own it. But I've never yet made up my mind to find my culminating romance in Angela, and I haven't any reason to believe that she hopes to find hers in me. We both enjoy dallying. We both do it rather nicely." Maurice spoke now with his recovered light gaiety, and as though by holding the matter at arm's length he were keeping it from the crude touch of bad taste with which Geoffrey threatened it.

The latter's composure remained unruffled, but after a pause he said, "Frankly, Maurice, you will be a great ass if you don't find the culminating romance in Angela. You know the importance of material considerations as well as I do, so I'll not urge them, but add to them the fact that for some years you have been more or less in love with Angela and have led her and everybody else to suppose it--and they might help a very hard-up young man like yourself to a decision."

"Not at all; they confuse all decisions. Don't show me the nuggets under the flowers. The flowers alone must be the attraction--must charm me into forgetfulness of the nuggets. There might be some reason in my urging you to marry for money. Poverty in your life is a drag that my Bohemianism can throw off. You do want a rich wife badly; and treating marriage as an unemotional business episode wouldn't jar upon you as it would upon me. When it's got to be done I want to do it thoroughly; to fall in love so completely that I shan't be able to write a sonnet about it. Now, I've written several sonnets to Angela."

Geoffrey, who received these remarks imperturbably, now looked at his watch and observed that they must be going in to breakfast, adding, "I don't urge an unemotional episode upon you. Your feeling for Angela is, I am quite sure, more than that. I only suggest that you don't allow an emotional episode to interfere with more important matters. You've had quite enough of these experiments in feeling."

"Ah! but suppose--suppose," laughed Maurice, happy excitement in the laugh, again throwing back his head, again clasping his hands behind him, "suppose that this were the permanent emotion."

"In that case," Geoffrey answered, "I should be very sorry for you, and for Angela and for the wild rose."

CHAPTER VIII

"**Y**OU and Mr. Wynne seem to be great friends, Felicia," Mrs. Merrick said to her niece on the following day. She was laying the papers and magazines on a small table in more even rows, the occupation a cover for a conversation significant, Felicia felt at once, but feigning desultoriness. Mrs. Merrick's mind was of the order that infers matrimonial projects from the smallest indications, and to her vision the indications here were not small. Walks, talks, practisings on piano and violin--whatever Mr. Wynne's projects, Felicia ought not to count upon them. Mrs. Merrick felt a certain acrid interest in her niece's worldly welfare. A too sumptuous match might, indeed, have distressed her more deeply than a disastrous one; but Mr. Wynne was in no sense a good match, although he might be a luxury to which Lady Angela could treat herself. Marriage for Felicia must be a more serious matter, not quite of bread and butter, but of, at all events, a decent and secure establishment.

These were Mrs. Merrick's thoughts while she sorted the papers and remarked upon the rapid friendship. "You know," she said, laying the one magazine upon the other, "that he is very poor. I fancy he has no settled income at all."

It had come, the inevitable grunt in the midst of the pastoral. Even in her displeasure, Felicia could feel some amusement in the sudden simile that suggested Aunt Kate as the unobserved pig in its pig-sty among the orchards and rose-hedges where she had been happily strolling. She could almost see a flexible, inquiring snout pushing between the palings, above it the scrutiny of an observant eye. The simile so softened the displeasure that her voice had all its indolent mildness as she asked, "What has his poverty got to do with his friendship, Aunt Kate?" After all, it was easy to lean over the palings, and with a stick, indulgently to scratch the creature's back.

"Ah! nothing--nothing at all, no doubt, especially since it is said that he is all but engaged to Lady Angela. He has admired her for years."

"And what then? Are any of his friendships a menace to his engagement do you think?"

"Of course not, Felicia. You jump at such odd conclusions. And I did not say that he was engaged, merely that he had admired her for years. It's improbable that Lady Angela would accept him."

"At all events, a friendship of two days' standing can hardly be affected by anything you may or may not have heard. *You* mustn't jump at odd conclusions, Aunt Kate." Felicia could not repress this as she put her book under her arm and stepped from the window on to the lawn. In spite of the lightness of her tone, the grunt had come as an ugly interruption in a melodious mood. To hear such things did affect the two days' friendship, though she did not believe them. She had known him for only two days, but the two days had been hers so exclusively that any other "admiration" must mean very little. Not that the two days meant much to either of them, she assured herself. They had only strolled among rose-hedges. A pity, though, that the pig-sty had to be faced.

On the lawn coming towards her were Angela, Maurice and Geoffrey. They personified the new life into which she seemed to have entered. To see them together pushed her back once more into the place of spectator. Felicia had time

to recognize her own hurt and almost angry mood as she approached them and smiled at them in passing. But Angela, with a winning hand held out, detained her. "You are so fond of walking. Won't you come with us? Just about the grounds?" she said. She drew Felicia's hand within her arm. "I am not very strong, so I can't make magnificent expeditions as you do--Maurice tells me--with him before breakfast. But even a little walk has twice the value if it's a talking walk, don't you think?"

"I suppose it has," said Felicia, feeling a slight confusion as she walked between them.

"Though a silent walk, with a companion one cares for, has even more, perhaps," Angela added. "Don't you love silence?"

"I have had so much of it," said Felicia.

"So much silence; how exquisite! Isn't that a picture, Maurice, that she makes for us! Much silence ought to mean much peace, much happiness, much growth. You and your father on your hill-top; Maurice has told me of it." Again she smiled from him to Felicia, the gentle link between them. "Do you understand one another so well that you need talk very little?"

"Oh! we talk a good deal, though we understand one another, I hope. I only meant that there was no one else to talk to, and that one could have so much silence as not to care much about it."

Lady Angela made her feel immature and irritable; and could the shrinking irritability be simply--she asked it of herself with quite a pang of self-disgust--a latent sense of contrast, of jealousy? But it was prior to, deeper than, any possible jealousy; she could exonerate herself from the pettiness, though wondering if the deeper cause were more creditable. What creditable cause could there be for disliking Lady Angela, so exquisite, so tender, holding her hand so closely within hers as they walked? Yet she knew that she wanted, like a rude child, to push her away; and though that rudimentary instinct must be controlled, her eye in going over her went with something of a child's large coldness.

Angela wore, on the hot summer afternoon, a trailing dress of white. A scarf of gauze and lace fell from her shoulders to her feet. Her arms and breast glimmered through dim old laces. Enfolded as she was with transparent whiteness, she looked exquisitely undressed--a wan Aphrodite rising through faint foam. Ridiculous, indeed, Felicia thought, that this spiritual creature should arouse in her a Puritanic rigour, so that she was glad of the crisp creak of her own linen frock, stiff with much laundering, quite badly cut, she unregretfully knew--a frock simply, and in no sense an ornament. She was glad that she had not put on her better dress, the white lawn, with its flutter and its charm. Let the contrast be as obvious as possible--as unbecoming to herself as possible.

"You must let me come and see you on your hill-top some day when I am here again," Angela went on; "may I? I can't tell you how people interest me. I have always loved to look at other people's lives--haven't I, Maurice?" Geoffrey walked a little apart, smoking; none of her pretty appeals included him.

"To meddle as well as look, you think--don't you?" and her smile was now half sad in its humour.

"Oh, you meddle quite nicely," Maurice said; "Let her meddle with you, Miss Merrick, if she longs to; it will give her lots of pleasure and do you no harm."

"Rather scant encouragement for you!" laughed Angela, looking down, for she was the taller of the two, at Felicia; "but may I? What I really want of you is your help in a little general meddling here. I have been talking with your aunt about the village people. There seems so much to be done; and so much apathy, so much deadness. I am afraid it is a struggle for your poor aunt, and of course she has not the gift, the grace, the charm that you could bring to the struggle. What charities are you interested in? What do you suggest? You mustn't think me a Don Quixote--tilting at other people's windmills; but wherever I go I confess I try to do something. I want to help people. What else is there to live for?"

"I don't help anybody," said Felicia, nerving herself to resoluteness, for she disliked putting a smudge beside the flowing loveliness of Lady Angela's signature; "I don't know anything about the charities here. We never go to church, and the charities are connected with that. We are quite the black sheep of the parish, and black sheep can't be of much use, except as warnings, I suppose."

It was ugly, it was uncouth; Lady Angela made her feel both; and after the smudge was made there was silence for quite a long moment while they turned among the laurels of the shrubbery, she, Angela and Maurice still abreast, while Mr. Daunt and his cigar came behind them.

The fragrance of the cigar was pleasant to Felicia, gave emphasis to her reckless little sense of satisfaction in doing for herself in all their eyes, if need be. After all, they were not her life, and for having fancied herself a part, perhaps a rather important part, of one of their lives she needed, no doubt, this smart little dose of self-mortification.

But Angela, with a closer pressure of the hand, was speaking. "May I help *you*, then, to be of more use?" she said; "I know how circumstances--material circumstances--interfere. You live so far from the village, and your father's interests, your interests, are intellectual, not ethical. You haven't had an opportunity for thinking about all the responsibilities of this difficult life of ours. I should love to talk to you about it all--the giving of oneself, the life for others, which is the only true living. You haven't seen the spiritual and practical side of things--for practical and

spiritual are one in reality. We know, only to do."

They had emerged once more upon the lawn, and Felicia was now between Angela and Geoffrey Daunt, who still strolled a little apart, looking at the tree-tops. Maurice smiled first at her and then at Angela, as though finding a whimsical humour in the situation. He must sympathize with Angela. How could he not? Did not she herself sympathize? Were not these thoughts her own familiar thoughts? Yet her one impulse was to disown them when put before her in that soft, rapt voice; she found herself contemplating them with no sense of communion, with a dull, hard indifference, rather. She almost thought that she preferred pigs behind their palings to seraphs in laces.

"I know very little," she said; "I certainly do nothing."

"Oh, come now!" Maurice broke in. "You talk to your father; you make a beautiful garden; you play magnificently. Do you call that doing nothing? And you were telling me last evening of the teas you loved giving in the garden to the village children--pets of yours. I have no doubt your teas give more pleasure than heaps of highly organized charities."

"Ah! you do interest yourself then!" Angela turned on her a look of bright reproach. "How can you say you do nothing? I am so *glad* you have the children--so glad that you don't shut yourself away in a palace of art; nothing is more dangerous than that."

"That's a hit at me," Maurice declared; "I inhabit the dangerous palace, and don't intend to come out of it, either, although Angela is always sounding her trumpet at its gate."

Geoffrey, flicking the ash from his cigar, now asked, "Might not a shrine, conceivably, be sometimes as dangerous as a palace?"

The tide, Felicia felt, as far as it had a direction, was with her and against Angela; but the fact only heightened her angry discomposure. She would not be drawn into a contest with Angela; she would not bid for approbation. That she seemed to have gained it made her angrier. Mr. Daunt was a half-insolent coxcomb, and she did not want Maurice to defend her motives.

Angela's eyes turned in a long gaze upon Geoffrey, who had asked his light question as casually as he blew smoke rings into the air. "My dear Geoffrey," she said, "you say things at times that make me wonder whether you have not very delicate perceptions as well as a ruthless will. I don't quite know what, to your mind, your meaning may be, but to mine it is deep. Any height that separates us from life is dangerous; is that it? Yet may not the shrine be brought amidst the turmoil, the suffering of life--so that those who see it may touch it and be healed?"

"It depends upon what's in it, my dear Angela." Geoffrey watched his last, and very perfect ring, float softly against the blue.

"A shrine implies some sanctified presence."

"I am afraid that I haven't much faith in miraculous healings."

"In anything, Geoffrey?"

"In no words," the Olympian answered. The sun glittered upon his golden head as he turned to smile at Angela with, Felicia felt, implacable indifference. Their walk had brought them near the house again.

"I must go and finish my book," said Felicia; "after these shrines and palaces I shall feel that I am creeping into a ditch when I return to it. I hope that ditches aren't dangerous, too."

"Why do you also pretend not to be clever?" Angela asked her softly, suddenly, smiling closely into her eyes. "What is the book?" She bent her head to the title, looking up at once gravely. "You like him?"

"I said it was like creeping into a ditch. But there is a certain splendour to be found even in ditches--he shows it to one, I think."

Angela put a hand on her arm; "Don't read him. A lily should not look at ditches."

"I am going to crawl to the very end of mine--muddy ordeal though it is," Felicia declared, trying to keep defiance from her smile, and aware that the Olympian was looking at her and that she was flushing. Her detached student's interest was probably branded in all their eyes with some crude and ugly interpretation. Well, let them think what they liked of her. She turned and went into the house. This had not been a melodious afternoon.

"Poor child!" sighed Angela, "poor child! What a *milieu*! An infidel papa and decadent literature."

"Well, it has raised a lily, you see," Maurice remarked.

"Has it?" said Angela. "Poor child. I long to help her."

CHAPTER IX

ANGELA BAGLEY wore her idealism with conviction, so at home in it that she only saw herself dressed in its becoming lines and colours. But it was an idealism purely intellectual, a husk that hardly touched her inner life. Her thoughts dwelt upon lofty towers; her motives and actions often scuffled in the dust. Her meagre, self-intent nature grasped at power and prominence through the decorative spirituality, like the clutch, from precious laces, of a

covetous hand. The scaffolding of her life had raised her above crude or coarse desires; she did not need to scheme for social gains and recognitions; but her sympathy, her tenderness, her claiming of highest aims were tools to her--though she did not know that they were only tools--tools in a complex modern world weary of hardness and cynicism; altruistic tools used always for an egotistic end.

In this quiet corner of the country there was no challenging of her effectiveness, but another, perhaps a deeper need, seemed threatened.

Angela was helplessly in love with Maurice Wynne. For years he had charmed her, baffled her, wrung her heart. She told herself that she would be the noblest influence in his life, not knowing that to gain that influence she would abase herself to any ignobility. Again and again she had almost thrown herself at his head--oh! ugly phrase!--Angela did not use it--shown him her heart, rather, though with a dexterity in the presentation of it that allowed her to feign only the giving of deep friendship if other givings were ignored. Again and again Maurice had retreated, though always with outstretched hands, hands that kept the clasp of friendship, a smile that salved her pride by recognizing only friendship in her smile. And now upon the devotion, the self-immolation of this love--for Angela was well aware of its romantic indifference to vulgar considerations--now when she was almost sure that she and Maurice were upon the verge of a final understanding, almost sure that at last she was to devote herself, immolate herself, and lift and redeem Maurice in so doing, now came this fear warning her against Felicia.

She had seen Maurice through many flirtations, and she was able to tell herself that this was no more than one; Maurice never concealed his raptures; his very frankness had consoled; but a deep distrust now whispered in her heart, and she armed herself.

The girl was blunt; she could be made to appear rude; she was ungracious, and could be made to appear ugly in her ungraciousness. And while fully conscious of the nobility of her own attitude in its stooping to the shallow little girl, in its rebuffed sweetness, she was by no means conscious that she had armed herself and that the attitude was her weapon.

The weapon was suddenly sharpened by the arrival next morning of Mr. Merrick.

Angela saw at once, in her first glance at the man, that Mr. Merrick might make his daughter appear very badly indeed. She saw it in his good looks, his complacency, his self-reference; in Geoffrey's calm gaze at him, in Maurice's kind, swift adapting of himself to the older man's genial patronage--an adaptation, Angela knew, brimming with amusement; she saw these things in relation to Felicia's attitude towards them, her placing of herself in a position where she could evade no weapons. Any that struck her father would strike her. She not only stood beside him, she stood before him. Angela in a swift simile saw her so standing, a funny, female, little Saint Sebastian, struck all over with shafts of lightly feathered irony. She could not help the simile, though thrusting away the satisfaction it gave her and lingering with a dissatisfaction that she would not analyze upon the possible nobility of this target attitude, a nobility that others, too, might see. Relief, as unanalyzed, came with the thought that there would be no beauty in Felicia's stubborn yet unemphatic fidelity; no claim for sympathy. She could rely upon her to be thoroughly undecorative and without the glimmer of a halo.

"How kind you are, dear Mrs. Merrick," Angela said to her hostess; "I see so the difficulty of your situation. Your brother-in-law is an intelligent man, with an altogether out-of-date intelligence, petrified in its funny pride. But what a character! What grotesque vanity! How he must jar upon you and your husband--could I fail to see it? And yet how kind you are to him and his untrained, untutored little girl. You are, I suppose, their only outlook on life."

Mrs. Merrick saw Austin collapsing into a foolish insignificance, and where she had never before been able to feel him as insignificant was now enabled to see him with Lady Angela's clearer vision. She saw herself, too, as very kind indeed.

To Maurice Angela spoke with a mere word and shrug. "What a type! That's what isolation does to a shallow-pated egotist. Ballooned assurance! His mind is a mince-meat of little scraps from all the lesser thinkers of the century!" Since coming into the country she had not been so near Maurice as when they laughed together over the new-comer.

"He encouraged me magnificently this morning," Maurice in his mirth confessed. Angela made no allusion to the daughter. Felicia, meanwhile, understood it all, finding her own lightness in comprehension slipping from her. The youthful indifference in which she used to seek refuge was failing her; she couldn't tell herself with truth that she was indifferent, nor turn angry scorn into a laugh. Her aunt's derivative discrimination made anger seethe too fiercely for a laugh, and her new little air of competent disapproval; her aunt, as incapable of judging as of appreciating him.

Felicia understood when Geoffrey Daunt, as her father took the floor--he was always taking the floor--got up and strolled away, quite as if he were in the House and a bore was speaking; understood Lady Angela's sad and vacant eyes, and Maurice's deft turning of the talk. Yes, her father was a bore, especially when he was treated as one; and, baffled by an unfamiliar atmosphere, conscious of the presence of new standards, he became flushed, foolish, sententious. In her feeling for her father was the maternal, protective instinct, and she saw him, now, among those too stupid to recognize his worth, too ungenerous to help his failings, a child bewildered by cold eyes and alien voices; and like a child he strutted, and shouted, and made himself lamentably conspicuous.

Since the grunt from Aunt Kate, since that discomposing walk in the garden, Felicia had avoided Maurice, though unsuccessfully, for the sense of his pursuing comradeship enveloped her, the anger that repulsed them all felt itself helpless, unjust, before his intently smiling eye that, seeing through her evasions, said, "I understand everything. Command me, you charming friend." To keep silence towards him, to escape for solitary walks, or to shut herself into her room for her readings was not to evade that sense of comradeship shining in the sudden gloom.

It warmly irradiated gloom on the day after her father's arrival, while at lunch she tried to talk about roses with Mr. Jones, and to hear her father monologuing, almost haranguing, at the other end of the table.

Uncle Cuthbert, rosy, good-tempered, loud-laughing, had succumbed to his brother's vehemence, and watched him with an air of cheerful immovability. Gloom was upon Felicia and beneath it that heave of anger, ready to bubble up.

Maurice's eyes meeting hers once or twice, was the one ray of light, strong, gay, sustaining. He was, indeed he was with her, however much against her all the rest.

"It's an age of sham, of conformity," Mr. Austin announced. "There seem no fighters left. The pseudo-believers have it all their own way, since apparently there is no genuine belief to oppose them. The spectacle is revolting. We have our political figure-heads cynically dissolving old faiths into vaporous metaphors--metaphors accepted literally by the masses. We have science tottering to a ruinous alliance with metaphysics. We have a church engaged in a dignified tug of war over a candlestick--the rival camps spattering one another with mud or holy water!" His audience was silent and Mr. Merrick, pushing back his plate and leaning his arm on the table as he sat sideways to it, continued in even more impressive tones, "Don't, my dear Cuthbert, speak to me of faith, blind faith. Faith is a sort of intellectual suicide. With a fixed subjective faith one is cut off from all objective truth as, I think, Guyau said."

He might as well have been talking Greek as far as the cheerful squire was concerned; had better, for tattered remnants of youthful learning still lurked in his wholesomely disencumbered mind.

"Ah well," said Mr. Cuthbert, "all that's beside the mark. One must have custom, you know, one must have conformity to keep things from going to pieces. Godersham gave us an excellent sermon on faith last week," he added, looking genially around the table.

"Ah yes; then you advise a good deal of cutting," Mr. Jones went on to Felicia, after the patient pause with which he had allowed the thunder of Mr. Merrick's denunciations to roll by.

"Godersham on faith. I've no doubt of it." The thunder rolled again. "You will always find material prosperity buttressed by conformity. As for the country going to pieces, that's rubbish. It shrivels in its stiff shell."

"I have the greatest regard for Godersham--the very greatest," Mr. Cuthbert said temperately.

"I am not attacking individuals, my dear Cuthbert, but principles. You don't follow me. I will put it as simply as may be. What I mean is that I despise the man who tells me that he believes, putting his own facile interpretation on the word, in the Thirty-nine Articles, who receives the benefits that such beliefs confer, while possessing a good deal less theism than Voltaire--let us say. I consider such a man morally culpable, and a system that perpetuates such dishonesty I consider a menace to the national welfare."

Everybody was listening now, except, perhaps, Mr. Jones, whose mind still ran on his roses, and who, seeing Felicia's attention turned from him, waited for a lull, his head bowed, frowning a little at the interruption. Lady Angela, leaning her brow on her hand, was smiling a wan smile of weariness and softest disdain. Mrs. Merrick looked her acid impatience. Maurice Wynne kept kindly eyes of comprehension upon Mr. Merrick's flushed insistence. But it was Geoffrey Daunt's face that arrested Felicia's attention.

Leaning back in his chair, a long hand playing with his bread, he looked at her father with a look of indifferent yet keenly observant sarcasm. To Felicia the look was like a sudden slap upon her own cheek. She felt herself grow pale with anger. After all, what her father said was true, true, at all events, of most of those who heard him, comfortable conformists who would bow to any creed that insured comfort. And she did not care whether it were true or not. He was alone, and they were all against him. In the pause, awkward and hostile, that followed his tirade, she said, clearly, with a light defiance, tossing the words at all of them. "Hear! hear! papa." She flung into the emptiness a flaming little banner of revolt. Geoffrey looked swiftly from her father to her. Her eyes had been on him while she spoke and now met his. In her face, steely in its steadiness as a drawn sword, he saw the whole drama of her thoughts and read the deeper defiance towards himself. It was at him the sword was pointed. For a long moment they looked at each other across the table. Geoffrey's hand continued automatically to break his bread.

"Hear! hear! Miss Merrick." Maurice echoed; he leaned forward, drawing her eyes from Geoffrey's. "I put your glove in my helmet. But really, you know, Mr. Merrick--" his smile, graceful, healing, turned from the almost ardour with which it had assured her of championship--"we shall plunge into such metaphysical depths if we are going to argue about faith."

"Metaphysics!" Mr. Merrick ejaculated with impatience. He had glanced at Felicia's banner rather fretfully, and saw now her banner, rather than his own bomb-shells, attracting the general attention. Turning his shoulder upon the trivial crew, he addressed himself once more to the task of forcing a way into his brother's comprehension--overlaid

with "crusts of custom."

"A shallow infidelity is a very foolish thing, Felicia," said Mrs. Merrick.

"Miss Merrick isn't an infidel; she's only a loyalist," said Maurice.

Mrs. Merrick, not quite sure whether the highest culture as represented by Lady Angela required of her belief or scepticism, continued--

"Don't you fancy, Lady Angela, that the Church will outlast all attacks?"

"I think more of the spirit than of the form, perhaps," said Angela, who still leaned on her hand and still looked down; "but to me mere disbelief, especially when founded on egotistic self-assertion, is more repellent, since more crude and embittered, than the lowest forms of belief. Any symbol, however rudimentary, that enables the self to lose itself, is sacred to me."

She was in the right, as she would always be in the right, Felicia felt; yet as she sat silent now, and not looking at Angela, she knew that the scorn she felt was not the impotent spite of mere wrongness.

Mrs. Merrick, murmuring her gratitude for this enlightenment, rose, and Lady Angela, her hand on her shoulder, walked beside her out on to the lawn. Felicia went into the drawing-room.

She could have wept with fury; but taking up a book, she read, intently, clearly conscious of every word, turning swift pages.

Presently she looked up. Angela had entered the room. Going to a desk near Felicia, she sat down and wrote. They were alone. Felicia read on. Suddenly, laying down her pen, smiling, Angela turned to her. "You *were* more a loyalist than an infidel--I understood. Only your father pained me so. My faiths, you see, are deep. I did not, through my pain, pain you?"

Felicia looked up from her book to meet this speech. Her face, over amazement, still kept the look of steely steadiness. "I am sorry that any one should think my father crude or egotistic; but a stranger's opinion of him could hardly give me pain."

This, Angela felt, was not pleasant. It was not what she had expected. She regretted her little speech at the table which, to quick intelligence, might savour of meanness--a stroke under cover of darkness; and Felicia must not suspect her of stooping to any contest; indeed, Angela did not suspect herself. And now Felicia seemed to drag her down into open warfare. It was not at all pleasant.

"You count me a stranger, Miss Merrick?" There was a real quiver in her voice.

"Do you count me as more?" Felicia asked.

"I want to count you as a great deal more."

A rebuff, especially an open rebuff, was intolerable to Angela. She smiled now in her determination to win allegiance, even if an unwilling one, and, as she leaned across the desk, smiling, Geoffrey and Maurice came in. The moment could not have been more propitious; her loveliness of attitude and look must, she felt, contrast most advantageously with Felicia's sullen stiffness. She let it tell for a moment and then slipped over to Felicia's sofa, taking her hand and turning the smile, now, on the two men.

"I am telling Miss Merrick how splendid she was," she said; "we all understood, didn't we?"

Felicia, in dismayed astonishment, felt a net thrown round her. She broke through it, regardless of rents. "I don't understand," she declared. She rose, drawing her hand from Angela's, confronting them. "I think trivial things had best be left alone." With this, picking up her hat, she went to a mirror and deliberately tied it on, feeling a full composure over her hurry of angry thoughts. She did not care how uncouth she seemed. Angela should not force her to seeming trust when she felt only deepest distrust. Her eyes, in the mirror, met Maurice's. Before she was conscious of the impulse she found that she had commanded him as a woman commands the man of whose obedience she is assured. At once he understood and answered.

"May I come too?" he asked.

"Do. I am going for a walk."

This, then, must seem the reality that underlay it all; the struggle of two women over a man. Felicia's face kept its hardness as she and Maurice went out. She had never struggled, yet her certainty of him, the fact that her departure with him had been a triumph, made her feel as if she had. She did not like the triumph, and walking silently over the lawn, Maurice beside her, she regretted the command. It implied a great deal; it accepted all that his eyes had implied to her. Smarting under this sense of humiliation, she could show no suavity to her companion, and the acute young man suspected that he had served his purpose in merely following her.

Maurice's tact, as delicate as a woman's, forced no sympathy upon her by an allusion to the scene they had just left. He talked lightly as they went through the shrubberies into the garden, for Felicia, forgetting the intention of her departure, did not speak of a long walk, and went slowly along the flower-beds, past the warm walls where fruit was ripening. She responded with grave smiles to his talk.

"Do you know," he said presently, stopping before her in a narrow path where small fruit-trees cast shadows upon them, "to-day you are not a bit a Watteau, but a Romney? The shade your hat makes across your brows and eyes is all Romney--Romney at his best. Do you mind being told that you only remind me of beautiful things?"

Felicia, finding him, for the first time, almost tactless, made no reply. She picked a small pear from the tree beside her. "Now *do* you consider such a remark impertinent?" Maurice demanded. "You frighten me, you know. I feel in you such a *farouche* fastidiousness. Our idealist in the drawing-room, now, can accept positively blaring compliments."

"Well, your appreciation of the shadow my hat makes could hardly be called that," said Felicia, biting into her pear; "I suppose I hardly know how to accept compliments gracefully--never having had any made me before."

"It's too funny! But you know that I am incapable of blaring before you. You know that, don't you?"

"How can I tell? I have known you just five days."

"Still--you do know me."

"Doesn't Lady Angela know you too? and does she know that you consider your compliments to her blaring?" Felicia, over her pear, was smiling at him now with her dryad-like malice.

"Ergo, if she is deceived in me you must be, and I am not at all trustworthy."

"No, no," Felicia protested.

"No, no, indeed. Lady Angela doesn't know me as well as you do--in spite of your nipping reference to five days--and for the simple reason that she doesn't know herself; that inner blindness blurs all one's outer vision, you know. I am fond of her, really fond of her--she is, on the whole, a very good sort. But she seldom means what she thinks she means--and that's so disconcerting. Now you always mean just what you intend to mean."

The memory of Aunt Kate's grunt, dimmed already, was effaced by this frank analysis of his relation with Angela. Felicia hardly knew how deep was her own relief, but only glad that she was wresting no possession from anybody. When she came in after the subsequent talk, glancing and desultory as it had superficially seemed, her perturbation was of a new order. It was as if he had walked in upon her own particular garden--finding, during her momentary confusion, its gate ajar--had made its paths his own and, as it almost seemed, smoked a cigarette among its roses. Yet, with the perturbation, there was something perversely pleasing in the delicate desecration.

This alien fragrance flattered and fluttered her. She was becoming very intimate with Maurice Wynne, certainly not against her will, yet not altogether with it. Her will did not seem to count. It was such a new thing for her to talk about herself with somebody, her instinct was to hide behind her hedges; but Maurice found her every time, and she felt delight at being found. It seemed inevitable that she should like him, should know that he liked her, and tell him anything he asked.

And Felicia was becoming aware that there might be something more than liking. She looked quickly away from the suggestion, yet it charmed, intoxicated her a little to feel her power over this sympathetic young man. She could not pause to ask herself whether he embodied her ideals, whether, fundamentally, his meaning chimed with hers. His meaning seemed all in his smile, his understanding; and his shaft of real light, strong and sunny, made ideals pale, ineffectual. Life itself was hurrying her on and there was no time to pause, to analyze, to weigh her heart. She only surely knew that she was perplexed, happy, fascinated and a little frightened. If this were the fairy-prince he was not the grave one she had imagined, and if he were not the fairy-prince she would not in the least break her heart over it. No depths were touched; yet the heart might ache at the loss of the dear companion.

Meanwhile, his feeling for her made of all life a new and vivid thing.

CHAPTER X

THERE must be no more evasions. Felicia must see how much she counted with him, must recognize him as her champion, though championship might endanger more than he could allow her to guess. He didn't much care what it endangered. To shut out the future and keep the present moment golden was Maurice's philosophy.

He found Felicia in the library next morning, sitting high on the library steps, a pile of dusty volumes on her knees. Mr. Merrick was meditating an article on credulity and had asked her to find for him the eighteenth-century deists, for whom she had looked through rows of long undisturbed volumes. Felicia smiled somewhat grimly as she clapped together the covers of Bolingbroke and Shaftesbury. Her father's articles rarely got beyond this initial stage of the accumulation of material. German idealism had been abandoned. "Why attack these castles of sand?" said Mr. Merrick.

From dust and the arid pages through which she glanced she looked down at Maurice.

"To-day you are not to escape me," he declared. "I claim all to-day. You will practise?"

"I will. Why do you say I escape you?" She had to smile at his acuteness.

"Since the other day--in the garden--you have. Angela irritated you, Geoffrey irritated you, and I was included in the irritation. Isn't it a little true?" He leaned against her steps, answering her smile.

"Perhaps a little," Felicia owned. "I felt, perhaps, rather out of it."

"So you are--out of it, with me." His words were light, too, but she felt the underlying emphasis. "You see we feel things in the same way, see them in the same way; that sets us apart. It was unkind of you to bar me away from you--even for a day or two--and two days is a frightfully long time in a mere week." His voice lifted itself from the almost gravity to which it had sunken; happily and sweetly, differences looked at and effaced, he went on. "I've something here I want you to see and feel with me." He showed her the volume he held, Maeterlinck--delightful dreamer.

"At first he had nightmares, but now his dreams are sane; that's an unusual quality for dreams. They seemed dreamed in sunlight, too, rather than in darkness."

"This isn't nightmare, but it's not a sunny dream either. Sad dawn perhaps--or perhaps twilight; you must say."

"I saw Mr. Daunt pass outside just then. He always spends the morning here. Shall we read it somewhere else?"

"Ah--let Geoffrey share it. I should rather like to see how Geoffrey would take it." Maurice was reflecting that read to her alone the twilight dream might carry him too far. "You dislike him? Really?"

"Frankly, I don't like him--but I don't want to exclude him from the reading. We are hostile elements, you see. Anything so self-assured makes me feel frivolous, and yet, I do see something admirable in him. He was walking on the lawn, in the moonlight, last night, and he made me think, strange as it may seem, of Sir Galahad."

"Ah!" Maurice beamed his delight at her perception. "You have seen the best thing in Geoffrey--the single-minded directness of his quest--its object is no Holy Grail; but his resolute advance has its beauty."

"And he is very fond of you, I see that too. It's a touch of human tenderness that makes him less chilling."

"Yes, dear old Geoff; I think that I appeal to his one aesthetic fibre. I think he feels towards me as though I were a bit of very nice Limoges hanging on his wall. The colour pleases his eye. He would be sorry if I got broken."

"No, no; you touch a deeper fibre than the aesthetic. I don't believe he has any aesthetic fibres at all, or sees the colour in anything. How grey and rigid his life must be." Geoffrey walked in as she said it.

Maurice greeted his friend gaily. "Just in time, Geoffrey, to hear a bit of poetry. I'm going to try its effect on you and Miss Merrick at once." He turned his pages.

Geoffrey, laying down the morning paper he held in his hand, came to Felicia's side.

"You are fond of poetry, Miss Merrick?"

Felicia had already observed his manner of humorous tolerance towards women. He smiled and made a remark as though offering a child a lollipop--and without consulting the child's preference as to size, shape or colour.

"Sometimes," she answered, looking down at him from her high seat on the steps. Their eyes had not met since that look of the day before. "Not too often."

"I thought it could not be too often for the modern cultured young woman. Surely you can't get too much of--Browning for instance?" and Geoffrey smiled up at her. She felt that a very large bull's-eye was being kindly offered.

"Easily," she retorted; "but let's hear Maeterlinck, who has been waiting for you."

Maurice had found the page. Leaning his elbow on the steps, he read--

Et s'il revenait un jour,
Que faut-il lui dire?
--Dites-lui qu'on l'attendit
Jusqu'a s'en mourir--

Et s'il m'interroge encore
Sans me reconnaître?
--Parlez-lui comme une soeur,
Il souffre peutetre--

Et s'il demande ou vous etes,
Que faut-il repondre?
--Donnez-lui mon anneau d'or
Sans rien lui repondre.

Et s'il veut savoir pourquoi
La salle est deserte?
--Montrez-lui la lampe eteinte
Et la porte ouverte.

Et s'il m'interroge alors
Sur la derniere heure?

--Dites-lui qui j'ai souri
De peur qu'il ne pleure.

Felicia, bending over her lapful of books, her elbows on her knees, looked at him, and Geoffrey looked at her.

He would have liked her eyes to turn gently upon him. Her eyes were like deep limpid water; they made him think of a still pool under sunny, autumnal trees. Felicia's manner towards Maurice during these last days had entirely allayed his anxieties on his friend's behalf. His newer impressions of her removed her from any conceptions of wild-rose flirtations. Her quiet air, now, of intelligent comradeship defined and limited the unsubstantiality of Maurice's hopes. But that she smiled upon Maurice, that Maurice pleased her, was evident. And Geoffrey was sorry that he had not pleased her. She would not forget that silent mischance of the day before.

A vision of her father rose; a half-baked person; an absurd person; but he was sorry that the daughter should have seen that he thought him so, for he wanted the daughter to smile at him. He hardly knew that he wanted it, hardly knew that he was sorry, hardly thought at all as he stood, his hand on the shelf near Felicia's shoulder, vaguely listening to pathetic words and looking at Felicia's half-averted profile. He was conscious only of a curious feeling about Felicia, a feeling like the soft stretch into the present of a distant memory, an awakening, dim and touched.

Once when he was a boy, rambling on a summer day in the woods, he had come, rather torn and breathless, through a thicket, upon the sweetest, sunny space, set round with tall, still trees, thick with deep grass and open to the sky. He had flung himself down in the warm grass and lain for long looking up at the far, blue sky with its calm, sailing squadrons of clouds. Something in himself, some quality deep and unrecognized, the quality that made him nearer to his saintly father than to his mother with her worldly energy, had quietly arisen, had seemed to mingle with all the peace and beauty, to draw him to the sky, or to draw all the sky down into his own irradiated and happy heart. He had never forgotten the sunny loneliness; and he had never found the spot again. Felicia made him think of it, of the sweet grass and the still trees and the sky. And when he looked at her he seemed to have struggled through thickets to a sudden, an almost startling peace. But the poem was finished, and she was still looking at Maurice.

"Isn't that the very heart of love?" Maurice asked.

She paused; she was touched; she did not wish to show how much.

"I should have wanted him to cry," she said.

"No; I think that if I loved a woman," Maurice turned the leaves of his book, "I should want her to smile."

"I don't believe it. I believe that you would rather she cried dreadfully."

"You don't think me capable of these heights of self-abnegation?"

"I was thinking of the heart--as it is. Now, I might have said it all--only, oh! how I should hope that he might be listening at the door!"

The slight tension in Maurice's voice and look yielded to her swallow-like darts and skimmings; over deep waters perhaps.

"Base girl!" he cried, laughing.

"Base and natural. Isn't the heart of love the longing to be loved? How could one miss such a chance--even if it meant more suffering for the loved one? Besides, it would be better for him that he should suffer."

But Maurice persisted, his eyes on his book, "If I were dying, and suffering through her fault, I would rather she were ignorant of it--rather she smiled."

"But you would rob her then of her right to suffer--of her right to love you more." Felicia turned her eyes on Geoffrey. "What would you wish? Don't say that you are as inhumanly noble as Mr. Wynne."

"I don't think we can in the least tell what we would wish."

"So that my selfishness and Mr. Wynne's magnanimity may both be illusory?"

"You are nearer the truth, I imagine. The poem seems to me rather mawkish," Geoffrey added.

Felicia, laughing, stood up, handing her books to Maurice. "Papa goes this morning and wants these; I must take them to him. You have cleared the rather foggy atmosphere, Mr. Daunt, though I don't think the poem mawkish."

Before Geoffrey, Felicia might smile with reassuring composure, and Maurice seem intent only on the psychology of a love poem; but to both of them there had been deeper meanings, deeper recognitions under the little scene. The sense of tension had strained at both hearts. In Felicia was that more vivid sense of life--of an approaching crisis; in Maurice an open owning to himself that he was desperately in love. More desperately than he had ever been with anybody; and yet--what was he to do about it? He knew that Felicia could bring him nothing, or next to nothing; he himself was frightfully in debt, and unless some book or picture would write or paint itself into astonishing remunerativeness he could see no prospect of independence. Angela was certainly there; odd to realize, and rather humiliating, how, in spite of all his talk against marrying for money she had always been there, a comfortable cushion in his thoughts for anxiety to flop on and find ease. But then he had really been half in love with Angela; the refuge had never been a distasteful one; only some inner impetus was needed to make it really alluring; and it was with a new

sense of insecurity that he realized that falling desperately in love with Felicia made the refuge impossible--as far as any real comfort in it went. There was an added fear in the thought that a new attitude in Angela might have made the refuge inaccessible.

Angela must feel herself neglected, though neglected only for a flirtation. Such a flirtation would leave their half-friendly, half-sentimental intimacy untouched, leave the path to the refuge clear; but did she guess that it was not a flirtation?--see that it was neither so little nor so much? And might she not, her long patience exhausted, marry somebody else? It was a painful thought. Maurice could hardly see himself without that vision of the cushion to flop on. Robbed of that final refuge, life offered ugly wastes of effort.

He scorned himself as he turned from these thoughts, turned resolutely to both the pain and joy of others. But Maurice could not dwell for long looking at pain. He would not look so far. The mere present was beautiful. If only one could keep it so; there was the difficulty; one couldn't stand still; time shoved one, however unwilling, along, and at the end of the sunny vista was--pain; the flowers and trees that led to it could only bring a momentary forgetfulness. It would be base to make serious love to Felicia; and would she enhance the present? would she flirt? did he want her to flirt? The Watteau element in Felicia, her colouring and manner of knotting her hair encouraged these futile surmises as to whether the resemblance would extend to a permission of half-artificial, half-sincere coquetries. If she would be the Dresden shepherdess to his Dresden shepherd for the day or two remaining of their companionship--but he shook off such vagrant fancies with a real pang. Such fancies, after letting her know--she must know--that he would suffer so that she might smile! A deeper note had sounded. It would not in the least satisfy him to be her Dresden shepherd; she would never be his shepherdess; the Watteau resemblance went no further than that superficial frivolity. And the question that underlay all others was the one he had no right seriously to ask: Did she--could she--love him?

CHAPTER XI

HE had no right to ask it, and yet Maurice thought of it persistently and the next morning ushered in a most auspicious comment on such thoughts. He received quite a solid cheque for an article he had recently written--a cheque large enough to buy his boots for a whole year--and Maurice was fastidious about his boots; but not therefore logically large enough to make uncomfortable realities recede, as they did, behind a golden haze. Maurice's moods easily alternated between golden hazes and black fogs.

Geoffrey went away on that morning--that, too, was the receding of an uncomfortable reality, for Geoffrey seemed to hold him by the shoulders, like a naughty, unreasonable child, and make him look at things he didn't want to look at. He himself was to go on the next day. There was a familiar element of recklessness in the mood as he practised the violin with Felicia in the sunny, ugly morning-room. He was overstrung and happy, and the music they played, by its sadness, made happiness more blissful.

"I sometimes think," he said, laying down his violin and leaning his arm on the piano, while Felicia still sat in her place, "that sadness is the most beautiful thing in life."

In response to such moods Felicia usually became rather matter-of-fact, as now, when she said, "To look at, to listen to, not to live, perhaps."

"But we shouldn't be able to see or hear it if we hadn't lived it."

"It only becomes beauty, then, when we've outlived it, not while we are in it. People dress up their sorrows so," said Felicia, turning vaguely the pages of the music before her; "they always remind me of the king in the fairy-tale, who had clothes made of air and thought himself sumptuously apparelled when he was really naked."

"I believe you are right," laughed Maurice, "and that it is only when we are happy that we enjoy looking at sadness."

Felicia, though she smiled, was not feeling happy. She had waked to the realization that this and the next were the last days with Maurice, and there was a pang in the realization. She saw suddenly before her the empty months. To re-enter the old monotony after this flashing week was a prospect sad with a sadness that could not deck itself in illusion. But she did not want Maurice to know that she was sad; indeed, was it life or was it loss that made her so? She could not say.

"And since it's a happy morning, shall we have some more sadness?" she asked.

"Not quite yet." Maurice still leaned near her and looked at her. The golden haze was about them; it shut off everything else. She must love him; only that would content him. Why not find out, and let the future take care of itself? It probably would--her father could probably give them something. He would take to portrait-painting in earnest, write a lot of articles--very incoherent thoughts went through his mind as he contemplated Felicia and hesitated.

In the midst of this hesitation--*could* he risk a cramping poverty?--would it be base to find out whether she loved him--to make her love him--with no intention of taking such a risk? Felicia raised grave eyes to him. In their unconsciousness of such craven hesitations they seemed to sweep them from him. The clouded intentness of his blue

eyes resolved itself--as if a wind had blown bare the sunny ardour of the sky--into a gaze of frankest adoration. He smiled at her silently, and the smile said, "I love you. You are near me. That is why I am happy."

But Felicia, feeling only a strange fear, looked away.

"Felicia, dearest Felicia," said Maurice. He took her hand. "I do so adore you. Tell me that you can love me?"

Was it fear or rapture? She did not know. She confessed;

"I suppose it must be that."

"You do love me?"

"I suppose I do."

"Oh!--darling!" he exclaimed. He put his arms around her, and, while she still kept her look of almost frightened gravity, he kissed at last his Dresden shepherdess.

It was altogether like an *Embarquement pour Cythere*, Maurice thought, with the one little corner of his mind that could still see enhancing similes. They were setting sail in the golden haze--what need to ask where bound--to something happy it must be. And, flushed like a wild-rose from his kiss, Felicia felt, too, that swift sailing away into a sunny mist, felt, like the soft speeding through shining waves, relief at the leaving of hostile shores, delightful ease, the soothing of the ruffled frightened heart, afraid of life and of its own loneliness. Life, then, was good, since he loved her. The deliciousness of being loved, after that first shock of wonder--that slipping from the shore to the unknown sea, sang through her like the sea about a prow. Her new trust in life was like a wind bearing her on; with sails all set she went to meet its meaning.

"I almost felt that you loved me--I did not really guess it--but I felt, though it seemed so strange," she said. She drew away from him a little--her hands folded on his breast--so that she might look at him.

"From the first moment I saw you; from the moment you came round that turning in the lane. You can't claim any such pedigree of feeling!" He put his hands over hers. Their looks were deep, under the light smiles and the lightness of their words.

"I can see no other beginning--unless just now is one."

"You did not know--not one bit--until just now."

"Can one fall in love so suddenly?" she wondered.

"Yes, if one has been feeling love near one for so long."

"And you really--really knew?"

"From the meeting in the lane. Something inside me said: Here--here at last she is. There was a bird singing near us--do you remember, darling? The bird seemed to say it, too. I was like an awakened Siegfried."

"Oh--dear Maurice, it is too beautiful," said Felicia, almost sighing. "Is this my empty life suddenly brimming over?"

She rose, leaving her hand in his, and they walked up and down the long room.

"Do you know you are the only person who has ever loved me?" she said. "Does that make me seem of less value?"

Maurice laughed his joyous laugh. "It only makes me seem of more; it is my *metier*, that--to find, to recognize, to love rare and precious things. Who that has ever known you *could* have loved you, pray? Who could even have recognized you? But, dearest, that is my only value, that seeing it in others."

The gravity, the wondering sweetness of her eyes were lifting him above even the joyous mood. He paused in their walk, looking back at her with a gravity almost sad.

"Idealize me, always idealize me, and I shall perhaps grow into some real value myself--for the reality now is so thin, so weak, so unstable. Something in you almost frightens me, Felicia." And as he spoke she saw in his eyes a strange and sudden darkness.

"Something in me!" The appeal was too near and dear. It was she, now, who put her arms about him, who kissed him, bending his forehead down to her lips, saying, "Nothing in me shall ever frighten you. You will come to me to lose your fears."

It was then that the wonder left her; then, in that moment of sudden appeal and her response to it, that she felt her own love as more than the taking of joy, and understood that in him was some deep need of her, and in herself the power to answer it.

Later on they were able in their happiness to laugh over the ridiculous suddenness of it all. Only a week! To fall in love in one week! What could they know of one another? Felicia teasingly asked him.

"What indeed!" Maurice retorted. They knew everything was the assurance underlying these playful scepticisms. And Felicia also asked--

"You never did care for Lady Angela?"

"Never--never--never!" said Maurice. In the light of his love for Felicia, casting all past fancies into shadow, the words were sincere. Not so sincere, but that could not be helped, was his answer to the next question--

"Nor she for you--not really, I hope?"

"Not really; not a scrap, really. She wants disciples, not lovers."

Angela, watching them, her wan smile unchanged, through the last two days--the days of the happy secret--wondered, a poignancy in the wonder, if this were not less but more than a flirtation. A hateful supposition, hateful too the thought that it was upon Maurice's common-sense only that she could count. She asked Felicia in the afternoon to walk with her about the garden, and she played her part with an exaltation that made it almost a reality to Felicia as well as to herself. She would love this girl who was rending her heart, and she would win her love. Once or twice a sad little commentary on Maurice slipped out--the emotionalism that made his moods independable, his purely aesthetic standards. Such comments were quite sincere. These characteristics in Maurice had often troubled her; she only hoped to lift this hard little girl who had enchanted him to a higher point of view than that of mere conquest--to see the responsibilities that followed it, to intimate, as it was only kind to do, that such conquest could not well be permanent. The bitter, unrecognized thought was that it might be Felicia who was entrapped, not Maurice. She could talk with magnanimity to an inferior nature, but candour and a pride more stainless than her own humility Angela could not forgive--and did not know she could not. She talked herself, however, into an almost tearful self-contentment, pressed Felicia's unwilling hand, and told her how glad she was that they had met. "I hope it will all bear fruit. I believe that anything real does, you know." Felicia was left in a state of some perturbation and confusion. She did not trust, but she was almost touched. It was after this talk that she asked Maurice the question about Angela, a question slightly tremulous; she felt that Angela might deserve pity.

Angela went to her room and knelt down before the serene and beautiful head of a Christ that she always carried with her.

"I have lived to my highest!--oh! I have," she murmured; and at the sound of her own rapt and suffering voice the tears, long repressed, came.

"This agony must lift us both. He is the instrument on which to try my soul. Love must win, and I will win him; and keep him and redeem him; and I will redeem that poor flippant child who is able, just because she is so small, so blind, to blunder so among my heart-strings--to hurt me so."

The love that swelled her heart at this moment was self-love. She did not know that she hated Felicia.

CHAPTER XII

MAURICE and Felicia walked along the lane where they had first met; she was going home and he to go that evening. It was a farewell walk. On the hill-top, in the garden he was at last to see, they were to say good-bye--good-bye for a little while. Felicia, in her new and blissful confidence, did not even think of asking for how long, it seemed sure to be so short. But Maurice was already asking himself the question, battling creeping doubts with passionate asseverations. And better than passionate asseverations was the meeting of such doubts by holding her more closely in the deep, lonely lane, dispelling shadows from his mind with a kiss. To hold her, to kiss her, was to keep alight a flame of joy within him, a flame that drooped and flickered when those sad thoughts blew over it; and without was sadness too; the fragrance of the white traveller's-joy in the hedges seemed a sigh; the soft evening, the pale clouded sky, were grey-habited nuns, whispering of the crumbling of earthly hopes.

That Felicia heard no such whispers, no such sighs, her pensive but steadily gazing profile showed. The pensiveness was a dove brooding on a secure peace; her eyes, gazing ahead, had the gravity of a child's seeing happy visions. He felt a pang of envy. Or was it ignorance that kept fear from her? Again he turned her face, white flower that it was, to him, bending his lips to hers. Only so he found some of her peace, her serenity.

Felicia, after the kiss, still looked at him. "I would do anything for you--suffer anything," she said.

"I don't want you ever to suffer for me."

"I would almost rather. It would make even deeper roots."

"And if the suffering were poverty, grinding poverty?--I am very poor, Felicia"--Maurice's voice hurried, broke a little--"I have nothing."

"I should like showing you how little I mind. We can both work. I have always thought that I might make something by giving lessons in music--or translating; I am a good linguist." Her realism was a new aspect of her. Her steadiness, then, had not faced mere visions. But such realism perplexed, almost dismayed him. A laborious union had never entered his mind. Her words conjured up a grey picture of unrelieved effort, a wife striving beside him in obscurity. It hurt him more for her than for himself, though for himself it gave a tremor of shrinking.

"You work, darling! Absurd! Besides, London swarms with music-teachers, with translators. No, no; something will turn up for me. I can put such heaps of irons in the fire. I may suddenly become a popular portrait-painter--charge a

thousand apiece for my pictures; two or three a year would keep us going beautifully. Or I may write a book."

"Papa and I live on as many hundreds!" Felicia ejaculated, in her smile a touch of maternal tolerance for such improbabilities.

In his strong reaction from that grim picture she had so calmly drawn he could laugh at the thought of the little hundreds. Yet that even those base rungs of the ladder were not beneath his feet gave him a chill.

Among the pines, as they began to climb, the wind sighed, and the sun, far below and far away over the grey wastes of evening, made only a sullenly smouldering line of embers on a cloud-barred horizon. They paused to look back at it.

"How one feels the autumn--almost like winter already," said Felicia, leaning against him. "It is like our music of yesterday morning, isn't it?--a sadness so beautiful to look at from our happiness."

But already Maurice's momentary energy had crumbled. The melancholy of the wind, the sunset, seized him like a presage.

"Oh! Felicia," he exclaimed, holding her closely, "will you always love me? You are so much stronger than I am."

"But Maurice--dear--the only strong thing in me is my love for you."

"No, no; not only that. You are not afraid so easily as I am. And this parting--you can bear it--with such calm!"

There was almost the sob of a reproach in his voice as he leaned his cheek to hers for comfort. The echo--as of an alien knock at the doors of her happiness, went through the peace, the radiance within. Tears sprang to her eyes.

"Why, Maurice!--calm! It's only that loving you--having you to love me is so great, so wonderful, that even yet I can only feel the thankfulness--the beauty. Don't you know that when you are gone my life will be only a waiting?" The tremor of pain in her, her trust in him, roused again a flare of his manliness.

"Not for long, dearest. Waiting isn't a keen enough word for what I shall feel. Longing, longing, until I see you again."

"Oh! it will be keener than mere waiting with me, too." She felt dimly that she must not shackle him in the fight he was going to make for her by showing him what pain to her would be in the waiting.

They walked on. As they neared the house Felicia said, in a voice that had regained its quiet, "We must tell papa."

Again in Maurice was that crumbling. The last embers of intoxication seemed, as she spoke, to die, to leave him looking at ashen realities. He would conquer poverty. Yes; but bind himself and her to face it--as yet menacing and unconquered? That would be to wrong her more deeply than she could understand. She must be free--free before the world; and fidelity to him merely a matter of feeling. And, thinking of freedom, his mind, with a pang of self-scorn, looked back for an ugly moment at the forfeited refuge--at Angela--not yet openly forfeited.

"No, dearest," he said, flushing in the twilight and feeling that, in spite of its loss of intoxication, his love for her had never been so strong as in its uprising over such thoughts, "Not yet. Let it be our secret. My affairs are in such a mess--I must not go to your father until they are really straightened. I really ought not to have told you until they were straight; but I could not help that. It seemed almost weak-spirited to go without telling you, for such a grubby little reason--a reason that can't touch us--but that must shut out others. Don't you think so? Darling, I have not hurt you--already?"

Nothing in the bent, listening profile told him so; the fear came with a sudden glimpse of a craven self, lest she should see it too. But the eyes raised to his held, with a new patience, no new vision of him. Her smile in its grave acceptance of burdens still found joy in the bearing of burdens for their love's sake. "No; how could it hurt me? I see that you are right. We will keep our secret to ourselves for a little while." It was now her trust that seemed to him almost as terrible as the dreaded lack of it had been. Cruel, he thought, that mere material circumstance should toss one's helpless mind like a shuttlecock from one fear to another. But--"Only a very little while," he said, nerving himself to be what she thought him.

Felicia, pushing open the garden gate, stepped inside; the gate swung to. She held his hand over it.

"So this is the garden. It is exquisite to leave you here among all these flowers; to think of you loving me and waiting for me in all this serenity." He smiled, looking quickly from her to the irises, the pansies, the roses. But the smile faded. "Ah! but how can I wait!--how can I bear to leave you!" His pain, his fear, surged up in the words. He hid his face on her shoulder, longing for a strength that would banish them; her trust in his strength hurt him too much to give it; but when she kissed him fear was soothed. Only--how would it be when she was no longer there to kiss him?

Her hand for a long moment had pressed his head to her breast; then she moved from him, saying, "You will be late for your train, dear Maurice, and I shall be late for my dinner. Papa must be waiting."

Maurice, to spend this last day with her, was to take an evening train that would get him to London in time to catch the Scotch express. He must go sandwiched but dinnerless. They had laughed over the sacrifice. He had now, again, to laugh, brokenly.

"How can you think of trains?"

"I am thinking most of the train that will bring you back." Once more her trust struck flame from him. "Ah!--soon! soon!" he said. They kissed silently. He saw the tears in her eyes and adored her for the strength that, for his sake, mastered pain and did not let her fear.

CHAPTER XIII

THE wonderful week seemed, as it receded into the past, to gain in wonder, to irradiate the present with ever-deepening meaning. Everything was beautiful; all relations beautified; for the unbeautiful ones she could feel no longer any bitterness. And into the superficial monotony of the old life Maurice's letters came like chimes of bells breaking the stillness. He wrote constantly, letters of a quite recovered gaiety, giving his impressions of the people, the places he saw, showing her life as he saw it--as she some day should see it, beside him; and through all went the ardour of his homage, his longing.

Felicia, in answering, felt that she could with him be so entirely her whole self that she need not show her whole self; it was easier for her to give him her soul dressed in tender humour, beribboned with quizzical freaks of fancy. It was his understanding of her, his consequent perfect possession, that lifted her life into the new sense of power and freedom, for was it not freedom and power when every faculty was effective, bore fruit in his responsiveness?

Not till late October was the beauty of the new life touched by a breath of doubt or sadness. A dejection, then, showed itself in Maurice's letters, a dejection that coincided with his return to London after his round of country visits, coincided with his taking stock, as it were, of his situation and looking his powers and resources in the face. The letters then became at once more passionate and more infrequent. He must not sadden his darling, and the analysis of his glooms could only sadden her. He was working--it gave him less time for writing--luckily for her. In her answers Felicia's courage steadily smiled, held out an unfaltering hand to help him over the morass of melancholy; but the melancholy, more and more, like a fog closing round him, seemed to shut him from her. Her apprehensions from vague became cutting. She did not know a touch of distrust, but the separation, the sadness, hurt too much. "Come and see me; spend a day. We can walk in the woods. It will give you strength and me too," she wrote.

Maurice only sorrowfully answered, in a letter like the slow rolling of big tears, that he must not; it wouldn't mean strength, it would mean disablement. He must wait until he had more right to see her. He begged her to love--love--love him. After the glory of golden days and thoughts, of deep, glad breathing in a crystal air, this change was like a labouring breath, and like the change in the year--the grey and amethyst of late autumn. The old loneliness returned again and again, but with a poignant stab that no former loneliness had known. Bereavement seemed to hover near her.

Gathering late roses in the garden one day she faced, for the first time, her own fears--saw that they were fears. She had not heard for a week from Maurice, and his last letter had been little more than a plaintive sigh of self-pity. For the first time Felicia was asking herself if joy was not to be a distant, a far distant thing. She saw more clearly the forces against him--forces that her young ardour had barely glanced at; she did not distrust his love--that would have been too horrible a wrenching of the new doubled life, but she distrusted his strength before such obstacles.

The roses were fragrant, fragile, white, the outer petals streaked with a hardy red. When she had filled her basket she went to the gate and leaned over it, looking vaguely down the road. The thought of that summer evening was with her, the life there had been in it--deep, sweet life--in the pain, the trust. The facing of a long, blank patience was almost death-like, almost like the shutting of the eyes, a yielding of oneself to the earth, with a faith in final resurrection--where?--when?--who knew?--for all light in a shrouded present. Felicia shook off the simile, with a fear that Maurice's plaintiveness was infecting her. He had more right to it--burdened fighter. Her love a burden?--again her heart dropped. She bent her face to the roses. Their sweetness went through her like a smile. She sighed, her eyes closed, over the relief of her own gratitude for such smiles. When she looked up again she saw a man's figure among the pines below. It was only for a moment that her heart could stand still with joyous questioning--joy so keen that it seemed to leave the heart it passed from bleeding; for in another she saw that it was not Maurice, and then, with a wholesome surprise, the staunching of the wound, that the wayfarer was Geoffrey Daunt. In knee-breeches, shooting-cap and coat, he looked a veritable Apollo straying, incongruously garbed, through a landscape beautiful enough to match him. Felicia, finding still that wholesome staunching in surprise, watched the nearing perfection appreciatively for some time before definitely wondering what brought it there. He himself, as he approached, showed no surprise. His eyes, as he doffed his cap, met hers calmly. He had quite the air of having come to find her and of having expected to find her leaning on the gate and watching him.

Felicia held out her hand. "Are you with Aunt Kate? Have you been shooting? You haven't lost your way?"

Geoffrey, while she asked these questions, held her hand over the gate and, though as unperturbed as ever, seemed somewhat at a loss for an answer. Dropping her hand, his eyes went from her to the house, the garden and away to the hills.

"You are high up here," he observed. "No, I haven't lost my way. I knew this road led past you. Yes, I am with your aunt for the week-end. I have been shooting."

"It is rather good shooting, I believe. Uncle Cuthbert prides himself on it, I know."

"Very good," he answered, with still his vagueness.

"Well, won't you come in and have some tea?" Felicia suggested, since the pause that followed grew long, and it suddenly occurred to her that however inimical she and Mr. Daunt might be there was yet a lack of even conventional hospitality in this survey of him over a closed gate.

"Thank you," said Geoffrey, pushing open the gate and coming in, quite as if this, also, were what he had expected. As he walked beside her up the path he made no customary remark on the charms of house and garden--for the garden, with its Michaelmas-daisies and roses was still charming. His lack of aesthetic appreciation she had guessed, and in his quiet glance now was a business-like discrimination, as though he merely recognized a certain oddity and were classifying it. Geoffrey, meanwhile, was not wondering that he had come, for he had definitely intended coming, but was wondering a little what, exactly, he had intended in coming. To see Felicia Merrick. No further object was defined in his definite mind, where objects were clear-cut. He therefore turned from wonder and rested upon the attainment of his object, looking now at Felicia, observing the details of her dress--her blue serge frock, her narrow white lawn collar, the black bow under her chin--observing the curves of her thick hair, the freshness of her cheek--not as an artist would have done, with a keen consciousness of the picture they made, but with a very vivid feeling about their significance to himself. They meant that sense of charm; and, when her eyes were raised to his, there came that sense of sudden peace.

She paused before the door. "Would you like tea now, or shall I show you our view? It's the proper routine--first view, then tea. There is a wonderful view up there from the top of the hill."

"You shall show me the view another day," said Geoffrey.

There quickly darted into her mind a strange query. Had Maurice sent him with some message? She said, summoning a smile, "Very well. And I don't believe you care much about views, do you?"

"I don't think I do; not much."

She ushered him into the little hall. It was panelled in light wood, and its faint woodland fragrance made him think of pagan incense in some primitive temple. There was a leaping fire in the sitting-room, and the white austerity trembled with rose and gold; branches of larch in tall bronze vases glowed like a delicate mist of light. The freshness, the fragrance, the simplicity, all spoke of Felicia. She rang for tea, and, while she filled a bowl with her white roses, could not repress that inner urgency.

"It is long since I saw any of you. How are Lady Angela--Mr. Wynne?"

Her eyes were on the roses; she spoke calmly, feeling hypocritical. Geoffrey, standing near the fire, placidly replied that he had seen very little of them.

Her hypocrisy was successful; he could have surmised nothing. The excitement died, and the lesser question of his meaning there hardly stirred her indifference. He wanted tea; perhaps he even wanted to see her, which was nice of him and very unexpected. A weariness was in her as she joined him at the fire and held out her cold hands to the blaze.

In the little silence the oddity of the situation perhaps struck him too. Felicia, looking up from the fire, saw in his pre-occupied gaze at her some inner cogitation. He hesitated a moment, and then with grave courtesy asked, "Your father is well, I hope?"

"Very well, thank you." She was still looking at him, and into both minds there flashed the memory of that silent drama at the table, and, seeing that he, too, remembered, Felicia was astonished, really touched, to see the Olympian suddenly flush deeply.

For a moment the dominating young man looked quite helplessly at her, and in this little silence something else passed between them; it refused analysis. Felicia could not have said whether pleasure or compunction were uppermost in her consciousness, she was so sorry for his discomposure, yet so pleased at his capacity for it. At all events enmity was over.

"About your caring for the view," she said, going to the tea-table and busying herself with the spirit-lamp and kettle; "it doesn't make you happy to look at beautiful things, does it? You haven't at all cultivated your senses of seeing or hearing, have you?"

Geoffrey took some moments to bring his mind back to this level. The shock of his own emotion before that memory, his pain that it should be, his desire that it should not count against him with her, were new elements in himself that he contemplated with some bewilderment. "No; I haven't had time for cultivating my senses," he said, after the evident adjustment. "I hardly believe that they would be worth cultivating. Does that seem a guilty negligence to you? You are awfully well up in all that sort of thing; I could see it."

"Indeed, I don't at all exaggerate the importance of that sort of thing"; she smiled her amusement at the idea of finding his negligence guilty.

"Certainly there are more important things in the world," Geoffrey answered, also with a smile. "I don't understand making feelings--however exquisite--the object of life."

"Nor do I--I hope you see that too."

"Oh, yes; I see that." He had evidently seen a good deal, and with the sense of groping for a new interpretation of him, Felicia asked--

"But what do you call the object of life?"

He was prompt, his eye echoing her amusement. "To express oneself actively; to do something; to succeed."

"The artist may do all that."

"The artist, yes; not the appreciator--the taster of life."

"Well, as to doing something--does not that rather depend on what the something is? It ought to be something for other people, oughtn't it?"

"You can't do much for other people unless you have done a great deal for yourself: you are of no use to them unless you have much personal meaning. In doing all you can for yourself you probably do your best for others."

Facing her beside the fire, he still smiled, but it was no longer the smile that offered a bull's-eye. He really waited to hear what she would say.

Felicia's eyes mused upon him for some silent moments; his cheerful conviction exercised a rather dissolving force upon her thoughts. Like sheep before the bark of a genial and business-like sheepdog she saw them scattering. It required an effort to arrest the silly dispersal.

"What wisdom and goodness the self should have that could dare say that," she found, adding with a laugh for her own vagueness before his certainty, "You seem like an embodiment of the cosmic process!"

The tea was made, and as he sat down near the table, opposite her, Geoffrey remarked: "In its merely phenomenal aspect you mean, I suppose; the cosmic process in any other includes the ethical, you know."

"Oh--I haven't called your wisdom and goodness into question."

She had never before, Geoffrey realized, shown him at once her malice and her kindness. Her smile, at last, was like the smiles at Maurice. He had the sense of sunny playfulness--reminiscent of childhood, and the big words they bandied were delightfully rebounding, gaily coloured balls.

"I must seem almost impertinent, I am afraid," Felicia went on, "but I have to be--to keep up my courage. I never gave tea to a great man before. I suppose that you are a great man--for I can't say that my littleness has any means of knowing. Impudence is the privilege of littleness, you see."

"But not satire; that's the privilege of equality or superiority; you have a perfect right to it. It's only potentially that I can be called a great man."

"Why, I see people reading whole columns of you--in the *Times*;--what is greatness, pray, if that isn't?"

"You never read my speeches?"

"Never," she confessed; "besides, you have only made one or two, you know, since I ever knew any thing about you."

"Politics don't interest you?"

"They might, if I came into any real contact with them. To read speeches is to see the flag without knowing what battles are going on under it."

"What *do* you do?" he asked.

"Since I don't read speeches? Not much, really. I am an embodiment of the dullest thing in nature--inertia. I exist--like the trees outside. Things happen to me; the seasons pass over me; perhaps I have a branch lopped off now and then. I express nothing that I can think of except indolent vegetation." She really liked him so much that she had allowed her voice to gather a bitterness from her undercurrent of thought as she went on. She laughed, though half sighing as she added, "I am matter, you see--and you are motion. It must be nice to be a force."

"Although you disapprove of the direction this force takes?"

"But I know nothing about its direction!" Felicia protested.

And presently, as from half-jesting their talk grew graver, she realized that the "force" was taking her into its confidence. It was as if he wanted to show her his direction--the battle under the flag. His whole visit had been an enigma; it now almost amazed her. She guessed how little sympathy was a necessity to him, and indeed he made no bid for sympathy. He sketched for her the political situation, his own attitude in it, the figures of his colleagues and their opponents, and calmly unravelled all the rather wilful knots her questions presented. She wondered, as his so unimpulsive frankness grew, whether he felt her at all as an individual, whether she were not, rather, a mere comfortable occasion on which he could take his ease and give himself the unwonted relief of thinking aloud. Whatever her office, she liked the force. He no doubt built with other people's ideals and intended himself to inhabit the completed palace; yet she liked him. It was already late, and he had been there for almost two hours, when Mr. Merrick came in.

Felicia saw on her father's face a mingling of amazement and gratification quickly composed into an over-emphatic dignity.

"I liked him ever so much," said Felicia; when Geoffrey had taken his departure; "he is so different from what I thought."

Gratification at the testimony to his daughter's attractiveness warred in Mr. Merrick with the repudiating dignity. He stood firmly on the latter as he answered--

"I don't care for the type. He does well enough for you to study"; and gratification rose again as he added: "That's the worth of our position. We stand apart and let others come to us. We discriminate, judge, taste the flavour of life."

"We certainly do little else!" said Felicia.

"Ah, my dear, what would you? What else for an awakened intelligence is there to do? You wouldn't have me blindfold myself and rush into the political arena like this young *ambitieux*?--poor automaton! The fly on the wheel, fancying he drives the coach. We at least know that we are flies, and watch the fated turnings of the wheel with an understanding of our powerlessness."

Felicia, wondering how he would manage such a rush, only murmured vaguely that she refused to believe herself a fly, and her father, tolerant of an accustomed flippancy, smiled, "Let us be duped by all means, but, as our exquisite Renan says, let us be knowing dupes." He settled Geoffrey, in the phrase, to his own satisfaction.

CHAPTER XIV

WHILE Maurice moved from country house to country house, this migratory season, stretching on until the late autumn, he found it easy to keep his spirits in the golden-haze atmosphere, and his letters to Felicia in harmony with his spirits. The impression Felicia had made was deep enough to carry him through several months at the same pitch of determination, a determination more stable than any he had mustered when in Felicia's presence; for Felicia made him face facts, and in these pleasant houses where he was appreciated and made much of, he faced only imaginations; it was easy to imagine himself potentially a rich man, when a rich environment put itself at his disposal, and when Felicia was no longer before him to make him feel that because he was not rich he must part from her. It was with a positive sense of injury that he met, when he came back to London, the brute facts. A terrific array of unpaid bills, a disconcerting army of duns, made the difference between actuality and imagination grotesquely apparent. He had to take several very deep steps into further involvements before the present ones were at all relieved, and present relief made a still more menacing future. Economy was certainly the first necessity, and after that work.

Maurice was quite convinced of his own willingness to dine off a chop when he had no invitation for dinner, yet it seemed far more fitting, when there was gold in his pocket, to think about an essay over a delicate little dinner at a first-rate restaurant. He had never found chops inspiring, and it was, though more costly, particularly inspiring when a friend was asked to share the delicate little dinner with him. He often thought of running down to Trensme Hall to see Felicia, but restrained the impulse with a self-control he could but find very magnanimous. It pained him still to write to her in a tone he felt to be hypocritical, yet he could not bring himself to tell her that all definiteness grew vaguer and vaguer, and that marriage was out of the question, for who knew how long. He would not say so yet, for who knew what might turn up? But what pained him most was to feel that the very pain of not seeing her was losing its poignancy. The impression she had made was deep, but it was being overlaid, effaced to a certain extent by others, for in his crowded life impressions were many. His easy, flexible, smiling nature followed almost inevitably the line of least resistance, and though when he thought of Felicia it was often with pangs of positively disintegrating gloom and self-reproach, he could but associate her, now that realities were before him, with a grey, drudging aspect of life that could certainly bring her no happiness. A hand-to-mouth existence was endurable only when unshared. Far kinder, for the present, to leave her dreaming of him on her lovely hill-top; kinder? It was necessary.

A few small orders momentarily padded the present, but the hard facts of the future were looming with a peculiar menace in the week that Angela came back to London in February.

Lord Glaston and his daughter installed themselves in the Eaton Square house that was part of Angela's large inheritance from her mother.

Maurice never felt his environment so absolutely adapted to the needs of his taste as in Angela's house, where nothing made bids for notice, and where the charmed spirit melted into mere acquiescence with surrounding harmony. He and Angela had together created much of the harmony, for the house had come to her frowning with Mid-Victorian rigours. They had sought furniture, pictures and porcelain together, and as he and Angela sat in the boudoir, with its pale eighteenth century tints, its subtly-carved furniture, and the mellow greys of its St. Aubins and Eisens, he felt that after a period of tumult and turmoil he was once more almost at home in an atmosphere all peace and suavity. A glance at the realities that prowled outside made this inner bower the quieter, and he could but remember that he had only to put out his hand to make it part of his life; had had only to put out his hand; he amended the slip loyally, yet lazily, too, as he leaned with Angela over a portfolio of old prints. Angela was at her best; gentle, unemphatic, and also a little lazy; not in her exalted mood that sometimes fatigued and made him satirical. She did not speak at all of Trensme Hall. It might have been a dream of no importance; it seemed indeed something like a dream to Maurice as he sat there, and a

dream in which he had played a foolish and an ugly part--as one sometimes does in dreams.

Angela was at her loveliest. Her delicate face most pleased him when least serious, and now, as her long eyes glanced round at him, the dim gold of her hair almost touched his cheek, he felt that it would be curiously easy to slip an arm around her (her tea-gown, too, was perfect, seemed to invite encircling)--kiss her and say "Let this go on." Of course he would not do it; Maurice wrinkled his brows a little as he looked at the print she held up.

"Do you know," said Angela, again glancing at him, and seeing that he was not thinking of the print, "I have a plan, Maurice. You have never painted my portrait. I am going to give you an order. You must paint my portrait. I want you to begin at once."

"That will be delightful," said Maurice. From a pecuniary point of view the order indeed was highly welcome; from other points of view not exactly unwelcome, only a little disquieting.

"You must come here to do it," Angela went on, patting the edges of the prints into place and closing the portfolio. "There is an excellent light in the music-room. I will wear white; I should like whiteness only on the dark of mere distance, an emerging soft and radiant from gloom. I do want you to make a success of it, Maurice; not only for my own sake, but for yours. You know, I think the time has come for you to strike some decisive blow. You diffuse yourself too much. You must write a great book, or paint a great picture. I want to be the picture,--selfish I!--I want to link myself, you see, with greatness." She still patted the edges of her prints, speaking with candid sweetness.

Maurice, as was often the case, was half-charmed into taking her at her own valuation, as all candour, all sweetness, and, guessing at the further feelings underlying the frankness, he felt it peculiarly generous. After all, there was something coarse and petty in caution. She claimed nothing; why imply that she did by any reticence on his part? How ugly such a reticence would be!

"Will you inspire the book too? It's my only chance for greatness," he asked, smiling.

"Who knows? Perhaps I may." Her answering smile was even lighter than his own. "But it can't be consciously. You must find; I can't give." She got up and walked to the fire, displaying a back flowing with faultless lines from the sloping shoulders, their fragile, exaggerated grace, to the curve of the long, lace train. Angela was intellectually ensconced in mountain fastnesses, where any appeal not purely spiritual was stonily regarded, but her very beautiful body was as keenly conscious of itself, of its every pose and movement, as that of the crudest coquette. Angela's coquetry was not crude; it wound itself through her mental attitude as pervasively, but as delicately, as the narrow black ribbons curved through the laces of her dress. It now said, "Look at me; follow me," and Maurice, after the startled moment where he surveyed that queer little speech as to his finding and her not giving--was it a very clever, a very courageous, a very pathetic speech?--looked at her, and followed, joined her at the fireplace, and as her hand rested on the mantelpiece he put his, in an impulse he was hardly conscious of, lightly upon it.

Angela said nothing, but she lifted her appealing eyes to him.

"If I could paint you so!" said Maurice, removing his hand and wondering at himself. He did not go further than this, but the things that she might well have expected him to say after it made him uncomfortable.

Angela felt more than discomfort; it was a real anguish of baffled hope. Yet she was almost sure, now, that he would go further.

And by imperceptible degrees, during the mornings that followed in the music-room, he did.

He definitely determined nothing; the facts of life seemed to bear him towards a definition over which his will had no control. There was the past, the golden haze, the sweet golden haze, and sweet Felicia; but the self that had wandered into it with her already seemed illusory. The present self, its crushing necessities, its really tempting escape from them, was too vivid a reality to make memory of much avail.

Felicia had charmed him more deeply than Angela could ever charm; yet, since the self which had so truly loved her was already dim, unseizable, Angela's half real, half artificial attraction counted for more than the dear impossible past.

The passionate sadness of the letters he sent to Felicia was sincere, for in writing to her he caught together all his memories, and they pressed on his heart with a great weight of regret. He wrote of hope deferred, of possible hopelessness, feeling courageous, and avoiding the worst pang of all--that dread of playing an ugly part in Felicia's eyes--that dread of her seeing cowardice instead of courage--by telling himself that finally to renounce her would show the truest love for her. From these crises of almost despair he drifted on to a long silence, a kind silence surely, from which she must draw her own conclusions. She would of course take time in doing so, give him the benefit--poor darling!--of every doubt, and if, at the last moment, anything did turn up he could still claim her and explain the impossibility of writing when there was only despair to write of.

During these weeks of drifting he saw little of Geoffrey, and when they met, Felicia was as unmentioned as though, to both, she had been the slightest, least significant of episodes. With all his confiding tendency, Maurice could not well confide to Geoffrey that the wild-rose flirtation had become a serious love affair, and, in the same breath that the long dallying with Angela was on the verge of becoming serious too. With all his hard common sense Geoffrey might

look unpleasantly askance at this taking on of a new love before the old was off, and until there was no chance at all of the old love being on again, Geoffrey might as well think him still engaged in undecisive dallying. The very fact of long intimacy, of the taking for granted of a closeness that made questionings unnecessary, kept their minds apart.

But on a morning in early March, Maurice, while putting the finishing touches to his portrait of Angela, was facing at once despair and an aching freedom. The day before had unchained at his heels a pack of howling debts; he had run before them to the only refuge; a letter, after a month of silence, that practically set Felicia free. He had wept in writing it, allowing the irrepressible tears to splash upon the paper, bitterly smiling at himself for the craven little consolation he recognized in this testimony to his grief. And, with the half appeal of the tears for pity, was another appeal--a spontaneous clutch at the brightness he must thrust from his life--for her love.

He would not clearly see that in so clinging he set himself--rather than Felicia--free. Heavy gloom had settled upon him, a gloom that filled the letter with dismal sincerity. That it had been sincere he felt to be proved by the fact that no sense of relief had followed its despatch. He was free, but free in a black world, and he felt, as a result, even less drawn to Angela than usual, even more unwilling to accept the now inevitable escape. But with the new sense of freedom was a new sense of recklessness, the sense that he had, in some untraceable way--(for what could he have done, disasters crowding thick upon him?) made himself only fit for the lower thing; so that, at all events, he might as well make the most of it.

Poor Angela! to be so accepted! The irony of it turned to pity for her as he looked at her sitting there in her white dress, pale, and with an air of deep weariness. She seemed to droop before him as she sat in the keen spring light; to droop, to appeal, and yet to be very proud, ready for resentment almost. Maurice saw all this, and his comprehension gave a touch of real emotion to his pity and to his recklessness. Pity for himself mingled with his pity for her. What a queer mess they were in--poor things!--both of them. His mind, sick with self-analysis, self-scorn and self-defence, lurched, exhausted, on to a longing for her to comfort him, to show him, in loving him, that he was not base, only fatally pursued by life.

When she stepped down from the stand that had been put at the end of the room, she did not, as usual, come to his side to see the progress he had made. She went to the window, her hands clasped behind her, a rigidity in the lines of her slender, half-swathed arms. Maurice painted for a moment, then looked at her, added another touch, stared at his palette, laid it down, and joined her.

She did not turn her head to him, and suddenly he guessed that there were tears in her eyes. His own grew wet again with that mingled pity. Her hand fell to her side. He took it in his. Still she did not look at him. She stood waiting, anything but proud, and yet ready in all the humiliation of her helpless avowal, to flash suddenly into scorn and anger. The something of splendour in this attitude gave Maurice the final impetus. He was glad to yield at last to feeling alone, to almost irresistible feeling. It was as though he had stood for long on the shore waiting for the tide, and that its slow rising had culminated in this sudden wave that just lifted him off his feet. Really she was lovely; she was piteous; and she could console him for being forced to take her. His arm went round her; he turned her head gently, saw the tears, and kissed her.

"Oh, Maurice!" her lips breathed under his, "how I love you!"

"And I----" he stammered. "Angela--it has been--you understood--you are so horribly rich, and I so horribly poor." He wanted her to console him for the fact that had tarnished everything, and the longing was so great that he grasped at this falsification of all his hesitation. It was rapture to Angela. He was transfigured by the avowal; and her heart, sick for so long with doubt, seemed to expand like a storm-beaten flower in sunlight. She herself was transfigured; saw that the starved, straining self she had known was a lower self, distorted, difficult to read clearly; this happy self was real at last. His arms were around her. She would be noble, beneficent to all the world. All who came near her would be the happier for her happiness. How weak she really was--who so needed love to lean on!

"I understood--I hoped it was that," she said in a trembling voice.

At a step outside they moved apart, yet not soon enough Maurice felt, but for the significance of the situation to be very obvious to Lord Glaston as he came briskly in.

If Lord Glaston had ever felt dismayed by his daughter's vagary he had long outworn the feeling. He was an easy-going man, cynical and tolerant; he liked Maurice. Angela could suit herself. He now threw Maurice a bright "Hullo!" hesitated for a moment, and, as nothing was said, he sauntered into the room and looked at the portrait. "Capital, really capital, Wynne," he asserted. "A little too thin and woe-begone, perhaps."

Maurice's mind was revolving like a kaleidoscope; the dominant thought was that he could not yet make it an open engagement. And Angela would understand that they must see one another again before admitting the world to their new knowledge. He longed to escape, to think. He made his farewells, smiled at Angela, and departed.

CHAPTER XV

ELICIA received the letter on that early spring morning, and after the weeks of anguish and humiliating fear felt, with her despair, the exquisite relief of pity. When he had been so cruelly silent the worst part of her pain had been the seeing of him as cruel—perhaps faithless. Now, as Maurice had hoped, she saw him beaten down, vanquished by fate. She was buried, dead, but in the darkness were no more struggles with nightmares. She read his letter quietly and did not weep, and after her morning duties were done, she went out—walked in her garden, in the woods, back through the garden to the road that led downwards among the pines. It was easier, as she walked mechanically in the fresh, chill, radiant day to grow one with her hopelessness, to accept the fact that the coffin-lid was really screwed down; easier to accept and not to think. She was afraid of sitting still alone.

Her head bent, her eyes followed the line of young grass that bordered the little footpath. Above, the pine branches still sparkled with moisture, and a tiny stream, a braided radiance ran singing a clear, shrill note beside her. Her life would go on, creeping in its narrow limits, like the footpath, with its bordering of green, no doubt; she could not see it yet, but it would grow. The sanity of the simile, after that screwing down of the coffin-lid on dead hope, was part of its bitterness. A sorrow like this would kill all great hope, cripple one, yet leave a capacity for trivial, monotonous alleviations that meant nothing. Yet as she told herself that she must try to see the ironic and sane aspect of the case, the fact of the grass border, the fact that tragedy would not keep its tragic demeanour, must try to see even the deeper sanity of the fact that the daily fulfilling of duty might come to sing a song like that of the thread-like brook beside the path, her eyes were filling at last with tears, and they were slowly rolling down her cheeks as she looked up to find Geoffrey Daunt confronting her.

Geoffrey was as unexpected, as handsome, and, apparently, as composed as ever. Three former visits had given to the unexpected a certain happy familiarity. She had been glad to see him, and although, as she looked at him through tears, she could not say that she was glad to see him now, there was relief in the sight, almost comfort in the sense of momentary escape from the crushing weight of full realization.

She was too well sunken in sorrow to feel minor embarrassments, and while she held out her hand she wiped away her tears with no explanatory word or look.

"How nice to see you. Are you again at Aunt Kate's?" she asked.

Geoffrey, with an openness neither inquisitive nor indifferent, watched her dry her tears. She felt that he would have wiped away his own with as quiet a candour—imagine Geoffrey Daunt in tears!—and have taken it for granted that no one would ask questions. She could count upon his reticence. Already there were bonds of understanding between them.

He hesitated, however, for a moment before saying, "No; I came down to see you. Have you time for me?—time for a walk, I mean?"

She said that she had come out for a walk, and that he could have all the time he wanted, wondering if her changed looks struck him too forcibly. She knew that during these past weeks she had come to look very ghostly. Perhaps his way of turning his eyes from her now was part of the reticence.

"Where is the view you spoke of when I first came?" he asked. "You have never showed it to me yet."

She answered, "I am glad that you remember that there is a view. We can reach it more quickly by going through the pine woods."

They entered the grave, scented silences.

Geoffrey had not seen her for a month, and, more than she could have guessed, he found her changed. It had been with a conscious steadying of his countenance that he met her tear-filled eyes, and now, as with bent head she walked beside him, he looked at her fragile profile.

She was horribly changed, and her smile had shocked him more than her tears; it had the alien sweetness of death. What sudden sorrow had come into her life? What had happened to her? The new wonder mingled with the old one, the wonder that had been with him for months and that now knew itself.

The longing to help her grief and to speak his own new knowledge was like a cry in him, but he did not speak as they walked upward through the solemn aisles. He felt as if he and Felicia, she with her sorrow, he with his wonderful knowledge, were walking in some sublime cathedral where in their mutual ignorance they were yet secretly near each other. In his hard, strong heart was a trembling sense of consecration.

Suddenly, from the dimness, they were out upon the open hill-top. Pale sunshine, an azure sky, swept them around. They were high above all the surrounding country. Beneath them were the blue-black pine-woods, slopes of pale dun and green, the shadow and sunlight of hill and valley, and all the delicate tracery of tree and earth still unveiled. Among the vague purples of the lower woods the roads ran like white ribbons. Here on the hill-top the wind blew steadily, sadly, in spite of all the gold and azure. Felicia's long black scarf fluttered against it, and she put her hand to her hat, standing looking away to the horizon, a slender silhouette of black, almost forgetting her companion, conscious only of her aching bereavement. She turned at last to Geoffrey, and found from the almost dreamy intentness of his gaze that he had been as absorbed in her as she in her own sad consciousness.

"How ill you look," he said.

"I have been rather fagged this winter; sad; some branches have been lopped off; do you remember?" She did not want to talk with any nearness of her sadness; to speak of it, except at arm's length, would bring her to the verge of tears. She owned to it frankly, yet with a lightness that went like a bird, luring him from the nest where sadness was hidden; but, unfalteringly, with no reticence now, he went toward it.

"Do you know that I care, deeply, that you should be sad?"

"I know how kind you are," she said, feeling herself at a loss before the difference in voice and look. "So much kinder," she urged herself on to say, grasping at her old rallying attitude, "than I had ever suspected you of being. Do you know, I didn't imagine when I first met you that you were very kind. But don't bother about my sadness. It's of no importance."

Under his eyes her lightness was lamentably out of tune. She paused with the sense of graceless discord.

"You don't at all know why I have come to-day, do you?" he said. A tremor was in his voice, his look; the tremor, not of weakness, but of intense strength nerving itself. His beautiful face against the clear spring sky was white. He was not appealing; she felt in a moment that he would never appeal; but all the Olympian had suddenly become human and humanly shaken in its strength.

In a flash of deep astonishment she knew why he had come, and in her startled, gazing eyes he read her recognition.

"You see--you see--what I have come to ask. Wait--don't answer. I don't want to ask you anything yet. I want to tell you that you have changed all my life. I don't mean that I care less about the things I have cared for. I care more, only differently.

"From the first, I felt you, hardly knowing what it was; you made me feel things I had hardly believed in. I came back to you, hardly knowing why I came, and then knowing that I loved you. Wait; let me say all this: it's like breathing after stifling to tell you. Yes, it's like light and air; you mean that to me. If you were my wife I could make life great--for you--with you. It would be a new world with you beside me. Wait, don't speak--I see that I hurt you. You don't care about me--yet. Unless there is somebody else, you shall care. But I want you to see, and believe that whether you love me or not, I shall always be there. As long as I live I shall be there. You must always call upon me. You must always trust me."

He had spoken quickly, yet with a steadiness that had pushed aside the protests of her wonder, her gratitude, her pain. And even in the pause where he drew the long breath of his full avowal, his eyes on hers held her to silence.

"Now, will you tell me where I stand with you?" he said.

"What can I say," she faltered. "You are so beautiful to me; I see it all--I believe it all. I can only hurt you."

His question flashed upon her faltering. "There is some one else?"

"I love some one else."

Geoffrey did not speak, and a deep flush went over his face.

He had been prepared, she saw, for long and patient fighting; not for this abrupt defeat.

"What can I say?" she repeated. Tears sprang to her eyes. His suffering struck like a blow on her own suffering. Her own heart answered the inarticulate anguish that his must hold.

"Don't let us say anything," Geoffrey replied. "Let us walk on a little."

The longing to comfort him struggled with the cruel necessity for further truth. To speak it now seemed brutal. She was thankful for the respite his silence gave her. They had not gone toward the pines, but down the long, bare slopes to a little wood where the sunlight flickered among young birches and the promise of green breathed through the white and gold.

"One gets one's breath like this," said Geoffrey. He had not looked at her while they walked. Now, as they paused in the heart of the woods, he bent his eyes upon her. She saw that he had got his breath only to pick up again a weapon. A hope, stern in its determination, hardly concealed itself.

"Don't think me impertinent," he said; "you understand that one must grasp at anything. This some one; you are engaged to him?"

The world, with the question, reeled suddenly to Felicia. She was alone. She must say that she was alone. But at the clear seeing of her despair--the seeing of it stripped to him--her self-control gave way.

She leaned against a tree, hiding her face in her arm, and broke into helpless sobs. "I am not engaged," she said.

"Ah!--then----," She heard Geoffrey's voice near her, above her, a voice whose compassion did not conceal a bird-of-prey quality--soaring, noble, yet seeing from afar a triumph.

That he should think her free because she was alone hurt her for him. She must shoot down that soaring hope.

And when she had said swiftly, on in-drawn breaths, "The some one is Maurice--we cannot marry--we love each other," the silence near her was, indeed, like a slow throbbing to death.

She went on, monotonously, still with her hidden face: "Last autumn when he was here, we became engaged. It was a secret. He was too poor, and I have nothing. This morning I heard from him. He says that he is hopeless. He sets me free." Her sobbing shook her again, and again the thought of what Geoffrey's suffering must be smote too unendurably upon her own wound. "Forgive me--I am selfish. But to have you ask me that--this morning. I had hardly known what I felt until you asked me. And I feel as if it must kill me. I cannot bear it. I cannot!"

From her head, leaning against the tree, Geoffrey looked around at the sunlit wood. Her strength had broken to emotion. The disintegrating emotion that he had felt was rapidly solidifying into strength again. And, oddly enough, after hearing who the some one was; above all, after hearing--sharp on its indrawn breath--that "We love each other," not a flutter of hope remained in him. The sincerity of her young, despairing passion put insurmountable barriers between them. He was able, so shut away from her, to think clearly of Maurice; Maurice's situation--verging on the desperate as he well knew;--of Felicia; of their love for each other; not consciously crushing back the thought of his own disaster, but feeling it, under the thought for her, like the sea's deep moan in caverns, far beneath the ground where he must tread firmly.

Felicia wept on: "If I could only see him!--it's been so long. If I could only appeal to him!--I know--I know it's for my sake; but if only I could make him see that I would rather starve with him than go on without him."

Geoffrey looked back at her. Her hat and arm hid her face. The stillness of her attitude strangely contrasted with the shaken, passionate protest of her words.

A strand of her hair had caught in the bark of the birch tree. Geoffrey observed the shining loop for a moment while he thought. His love as well as his Olympian quality was being rapidly humanized. He felt now in her weakness, the selfish recklessness of youthful love. Something illusory in his own adoration made it already seem far away. Yet it was hardly that he adored her less, but that he loved more nearly and with a new understanding of the child in her, the childishness that made her in her ignorance, her passion, dearer to him than when he had seen in her only splendid truth and courage.

Half automatically, seeing that she would hurt herself, he released the strand of shining hair, so gently that she did not feel the touch.

"That is pure fairy-tale, you know," he said. "People can't marry on only the prospect of starvation. How could Maurice have spoken with only that prospect to offer? I am not blaming him. I only want to understand."

"We fell in love. How could he help speaking? To look was enough. We must have known that we adored each other. Oh, my poor Maurice! my darling Maurice! What he has suffered, too, I know--it is part of my own suffering--it aches and aches in me. But I would far rather suffer and die of suffering than not have known--not have had him tell me. At least now I have the memory. I know that we once were happy."

Geoffrey did not wince. He was glad to feel her trust in her loss of all reserve; but, with his new insight, he felt in it, too, the helpless abandonment of a nervous break-down. She leaned against the tree exhausted, hardly able to stand but for the support.

"Sit down here," he said, indicating a fallen tree-trunk, a felled and prostrate oak-tree whose shade had made the clearing where they stood. "All this has been too much for you. You are ill. I can see it."

She obeyed him blindly, stumbling to the seat, her hand before her face.

He sat down beside her and, his hands clasped as he leaned forward, his arms upon his knees, he stared at the ground.

The distant fluting of a bird, reiterating with delicate precision its little loop of clear, soft notes, the urgent rhythm of a brook, joyous, melancholy, a shiver of bells in loneliness, were the only sounds. Felicia dried her eyes and raised her head.

How fresh and keen and hopeless all memory became in the midst of that young renewal. Her longing was like a sword in her heart. To see Maurice! If only she could see him! If only it were Maurice beside her. Like yesterday, it seemed, that distant autumn evening; the dim flowers, the sad sunset, and Maurice's sad face.

The thought of the helpless longing near her, the useless love, brought a sudden self-reproach; it mastered the torment of recollection.

"See," she said, in a shaken but different voice, "the snowdrops; they are all out."

Geoffrey smiled. "I hadn't noticed them." He watched her as she stooped to pick the fragile white and green from the wet, black ground.

Her lovely, blighted face, pallid, wasted, looked among all the golden shimmer of the woods like death in the midst of life. A horrible fear went through him as she sat there, putting the snowdrops together, stem by stem. He had discovered his own former ignorance of life, of what feeling did to one. Could people die of disappointed love? With all his cynical knowledge of the world he found himself here, face to face with this broken-hearted love, a mere frightened boy, as ignorant as any boy of the life of feeling he had entered, groping, perplexed and astonished in his fear and adoration. Yet his man's training availed him. He could have cast himself upon his knees, imploring her to live, to love

him; at all events not to torture him by suffering; but above this immature aspect of his new self he kept all his air of resolute calm.

She had made a little nosegay of her flowers, winding a long grass around their stems, and now, turning to him, faintly smiling, she held them to him. "Will you have them?"

For a moment he held the hand and bent his head over it and the snowdrops. She felt the kiss among the flowers.

"I shall always think of you when I see them," she said, looking away from him. "And you, when you remember to-day, don't let it be a memory only of sadness; but of my gratitude--my wondering gratitude." She paused, and as he made no reply, added gently, "I never dreamed you cared for me."

"It came slowly--the knowledge that without you the world would be empty," said Geoffrey.

"And is it empty now?"

"Oh, no," he answered, raising his eyes to her; "you are here."

Tremulously, afraid of hurting him, yet the longing to find comfort for him--for herself--urging her, she asked, "But does loving me--knowing how deeply you have made me care for you--does that keep the pain from being too great?"

Geoffrey again had his half smile. "Ah, if I don't talk about it, you mustn't think it's not great. It would be less, too, if you were not so miserable."

"Do you mean that if I were happy--married to Maurice--you would be happier too?"

Geoffrey, looking away from her, did not speak for some moments. Her question hardly required an answer. It was of its further suggestions he was thinking.

"Do you think that Maurice would make you happy?" he asked.

"I wouldn't care. The word would mean such different things. Unhappiness with him would be happiness."

"You love him--you are sure--so much?"

"You know; you must see." She leaned her face into her palms, not weeping, with a weariness too deep for tears, and again her tragic sincerity made her seem far from him.

"You must have courage," said Geoffrey, after a little while. He had taken out his pocket-book and laid the snowdrops neatly away within it. "You are both young. Maurice has talent."

"Ah; how can I have courage if he has none? See how that embitters it all, even though I know that it is the truest courage in him to set me free. How can I hope when he tells me not to? For months I have had courage; for months I have hoped. Day after day when I woke I said to myself, 'He will come to-day; he must come to-day!' How I waited--how I hoped. And then came the time when the letters stopped. I don't know how I lived. But now, in looking back, it all seems rapture; the time when I could wait--and could hope."

Her long sighing breaths shook Geoffrey more than her sobbing.

"Ah! don't suffer so!" he pleaded.

"But I want to suffer," said Felicia. "The time will come when I won't mind. Haven't you that fear--the worst of all--that even the suffering will go? One does outlive everything one cares about. After a time there is only a dim regret. Life is so shrunk, that one can hardly remember larger hopes."

"No, no," said Geoffrey, as she raised her face; "you don't really believe that. Perhaps you will suffer less, but it won't be because you've grown littler. Things must come to you. You will keep things. And," he went on, smiling, and seeing an answering smile, sad, infinitely touched, dawn on her weary face, "you have your feeling for beauty to help you; you read poetry. You play so wonderfully. You see snowdrops."

Her eyes were on him while he spoke, while he smiled at her. She had a sense, startled, almost reverent, of losing herself in the contemplation of his beauty. Her mind, racked to a languor, could not clearly see the difference between her own passionately rebellious grief, self-centred in its longing for lost happiness, and his sorrow that over its slain hope knew a selfless suffering; but with the humility of dim recognitions came a dim peace. Her soul, like a storm-beaten ship, seemed entering a still harbour at evening.

"How you think of me. How dear you are," she said softly. She had that image of torn, drooping sails; of a deep, safe sea; quiet, encircling shores, and the evening star. "You make me ashamed. I have thought only of showing you my own unhappiness. I see you--really see you--for the first time."

She leaned toward him, and Geoffrey, in all the dreamy contemplation of her face, saw a yearning impulse to comfort, to atone, that looked a kiss, even guessed that in a moment she would kiss him; he had only to let that inner, sobbing self glance mutely from his eyes.

He rose, flushing a little. "Thanks," he said; "you won't forget me, I know."

She understood the abruptness; it awoke her to a sense of the greater pain her unconsciousness might have given. Saying that now she must go home, she, too, rose.

Her thoughts, as she walked beside him, were grey, vague, peaceful like an evening mist. All was dim; but the harbour was about her. The tattered sails could sleep.

They left the woods near Felicia's garden wall.

"And now I go back to those scuffles that don't interest you," said Geoffrey.

"But they do now, because of you."

"I may come again? I shall never trouble you--you know."

"Come whenever you can. I care so much, so much for you. I trust you so utterly. You are my dear friend."

Her face, looking up at him, had the patient sweetness of a dead face. He could not free his thoughts from that haunting fear of death, of a world empty without her. And over the fear and pain of his broken heart was the rising, resolute will that, whatever his sufferings, hers must be helped. And helped soon.

He had shrunken from her kiss. Now, as if in pledge of his resolve, taking her head between his hands, he stooped to her and kissed her on the forehead.

Felicia, standing still, watched him walk rapidly down the hill. When the turn in the road had taken him from sight, she went slowly into the garden and leaned on the gate, as she had done for so many years in moods of happy or of weary idleness, through child and girlhood; in parting; in waiting; or in dreams as now. But this was so new a dreaming, that from it all her life, yes, even the recent life of anguish, seemed to fall into a long past.

Geoffrey's kiss, Maurice's desolate, farewell face, were both far away. Only a softly breathing self, bereft of a past, ignorant of a future, stood in a strange place where sight, sound, even sadness, were veiled in sleep.

CHAPTER XVI

GEOFFREY, on getting back to London, wired to Maurice that he must see him at once, and at about nine Maurice appeared in his rooms. It was a Saturday night, and Geoffrey was free.

Maurice had passed an afternoon of most acute depression. He had accepted the finality of his position, even accepted the fact that Angela was going to be very dear to him; but now, after months of vagueness, Felicia's figure had again become vivid. He was pursued by the thought of her. What cruel tricks one's brain played upon one, and how little one could count upon the permanence of any mood. The dream-like, half-forgotten Felicia had been a mood, then; but this starting to life again of keenest memory might be more than another flicker of feeling; might, perhaps, show something permanent; and in such permanence what pain! Maurice had found, so far, that his experiences of life fell soon into pictures; his own ego seemed untouched by them once it had moulded them into aesthetic forms. Sometimes to himself he seemed a mere capacity for feeling and knowing, that passed through the symbols of life and kept nothing from the transit. While he was in the seeming reality no one could feel more keenly or apprehend more surely and delicately, but the self that had felt and known became as illusory as the rest when the experience was over. He had believed that he had passed through such an experience in his love affair with Felicia; an experience brief and beautiful that, for her as well as for him, would make a sad, sweet memory, a picture that he could turn and look at without pain; a memory, after all, how far more precious than the ugly crudities that life together would probably have forced upon them. But for once his theories failed him. This experience would not arrange itself into a picture; it horribly started into life, smiled, appealed, made him agonizingly one with the life he had broken with. He saw in his conduct the stringent law of necessity--in Maurice's philosophy all past fact became necessity--and not self-reproach so much as helpless longing tormented him.

There was relief in the sight of Geoffrey; in his severe practical room, with its rows of books, its piles of pamphlets and papers, its incongruous yet, in ultimate effect, sober, decorations of old racing and hunting prints, a mezzotint or two, some odd little landscapes from his boyhood's home, sentimental rigid water-colours by grandmothers and great-grandmothers.

Maurice was feeling life so black and difficult that the air of sanity and composure, Geoffrey's quiet glance and the undemonstrative nod with which he greeted him, looking up from some papers as he sat at his spacious and orderly writing table, steadied his nerves and made things seem at once more normal and more superficial. After all, to be normal, to live at all, one must keep on the surface, Maurice reflected. There lay Geoffrey's strength.

"Sit down, Maurice," said Geoffrey; "I want a talk with you." He still held his papers, to which his eyes returned, and while he sorted them into several drawers, Maurice was more than ever inclined to feel that he had been feeble in giving way to such despondency. Things did adjust themselves. He would no doubt find sweetness in life again.

He wondered if he should speak of his engagement to Angela; it really was hardly less. Maurice had felt that their new relation must be kept secret, for a month or two at all events, for what could Felicia think if its announcement followed at once his despairing letter of renouncement, not of indifference, to her? But Geoffrey would keep secrets--though he would not understand his necessity for secrecy--how he should explain the necessity to Angela was already a perplexing question; and when Geoffrey's matter was over, he might as well tell him that the culminating romance had at last been achieved.

The papers were arranged. Geoffrey locked a drawer, rose, and going to the fireplace, stood there facing his friend.

Maurice had just decided that Angela herself could easily be drawn to a desire for secrecy; he could take for granted her shrinking from the world's prying eyes; her love of the sweet intimacy and mystery their knowledge of each other surrounded by ignorance would give. In this more easy frame of mind he leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands above his head, and looked up at Geoffrey with an alertness partly affected, but also a relief. Anything that took him out of himself was a relief.

"Maurice," Geoffrey said deliberately, "I went to see Felicia Merrick this morning."

Maurice at once changed colour; he said nothing; he did not move; but his gaze became a stare. Geoffrey, noting these indications of emotion, and turning his eyes from them for a moment, went on. "I have seen her several times this winter; I have gone down for the purpose of seeing her. This morning I went to ask her to marry me."

Maurice was aware, even in the instant of tumultuous sensation, that he ought to feel relief at this announcement as at a solving of all the strained situation; a healing irony for the swift resolving of the sad-sweet love-story into purest commonplace, might follow such relief; but, instead, his resentment and dismay were so overwhelming that he could almost have burst into tears. Geoffrey to marry Felicia--*his* Felicia? He could say nothing, and his face took on a rigid look of suspense.

"I had not seen her for over a month. I was shocked when I saw her." Geoffrey allowed another slight pause to intervene between his sentences. "She is terribly changed. She looks to me as though she would not live; but that, no doubt, is a temporary result of what she has suffered. She told me, Maurice, that she could not marry me, and that she loved you."

Maurice was white to the lips. In the light of Felicia's faith his own faithlessness, seen suddenly in all its craven ugliness, stopped the beating of his heart.

"She said that you loved her, and could not marry her, and had set her free. Do you love her?" Geoffrey asked.

"My God!" Maurice exclaimed, still staring at his friend. Suddenly turning aside, he cast his arms upon the table, bent his head upon them, and burst into loud weeping.

Geoffrey looked at him for some minutes, then, turning away, he gazed down into the fire. He steadily saw a mean desire, the only foothold his hope had clung to, that Maurice's attitude would show some obvious unworthiness, some triviality, a surprised and kindly consternation that would make of Felicia's love a misplaced, girlish dream. He now seemed to watch that desire shrivelling in the flames, Maurice, too, suffered. There was simply no more hope.

Presently in choked tones Maurice spoke: "I adore her; I have from the beginning. Don't you remember?" Through his grief the resentment showed itself.

"Yes, I do. At the time I thought it was unimportant. Later on, even had I not forgotten it, I should have thought it unimportant. You never spoke of it again. And had she been as indifferent to you as I thought, our friendship, yours and mine, Maurice, wouldn't have stood for a moment between my wishes and her." Before this firmness Maurice's resentment, convicted of helpless folly, resolved itself into sobs again.

"You adore her, and you give her up?" Geoffrey asked.

"What can I do? Why do you ask? I am up to my neck in debt. I am worse than penniless. How could I let her hope on? How can I ask her to marry me?"

"Why did you ask her?"

"Don't turn the knife in the wound, Geoffrey. Don't be ungenerous. I was a fool, a weak, cruel fool, no doubt; but I loved her, and I couldn't help myself. I hoped that something might turn up."

"Why don't you still hope?"

"I can't, in the face of facts. I am unfit to earn my own living--far more hers. The only atonement I could make for my cruelty to her was to be crueller to myself, to set her free. You say that she is changed? Looks terribly----?"

Maurice had raised his head now, and with his arms still cast out upon the table, turned haggard eyes upon his friend.

"She looks terribly ill."

"And she sticks to me, the little darling!"

"She certainly stuck to you," said Geoffrey, still looking down into the fire. He had almost a half laugh as he presently added, "You surely would not have expected her not to! No, Maurice; you wouldn't be here this evening if I had seen any hope of her not sticking."

For any further meaning in these words as to his presence Maurice had no ear; they too disagreeably emphasized that sense of contrast with which his sorrowing mind was occupied. They made him involuntarily droop his head as he sat shifting the pens and ink-pot. The thought of Angela went with a shuddering sickness through him. In this silence came Geoffrey's voice again, its mocking quality gone. Gravely now he said, "Maurice, do you want to marry her?"

At this Maurice started to his feet. "What are you talking towards, Geoffrey? Why did you ask me to come here? You love her yourself. Tell me the truth--do you hope to marry her?"

"I told you that I wouldn't have asked you to come if I'd had any hope."

"To marry her I'd sacrifice anything and everything," said Maurice, altogether believing in what he said. At last he seemed to have seized hold of a real self. He and Felicia; all the rest was a dream.

Geoffrey still looked in the fire. He spoke musingly, with obviously no consciousness of superiority in his claim.

"To make her happy I would sacrifice a great deal. Maurice," he said; "I will help you to marry her. That is the only way in which I can make her happy."

Maurice stood stricken with stupor. His delicate skin turned from red to white. "Geoffrey," he gasped.

"*Will* you make her happy?" asked Geoffrey, now turning his eyes upon him and looking at him steadily. A steadiness as great and, it seemed, as sincere, leaped to meet it in the other man's responsive soul.

"Before God I will," he said.

In silence Geoffrey took his head and shook it. He went back to the table and sat down at it again. "I can pay off your debts--I have made some lucky hits lately on the Stock Exchange, and I can raise some money on my property--its value has gone up a good deal in the last years. Out of my income we can set aside enough to help support you and your wife; what you have now, once it's free, will do the rest, and her father no doubt can allow her something. If you are ever able with ease, to pay me back, well and good; but don't bother over it. I shall get on well enough on my official salary and the rest of my income. And I am always lucky with my speculations; I shan't be pinched."

"Do you mean it, Geoffrey?" All that was best in Maurice rose in the solemn gratitude, the boyish, loving wonder of the question.

With this possibility breaking in a sudden dawn upon him the half-passionate, half-frivolous, half-tempted and half-unwilling dallying of the past months lost its dubious enchantment. It was the difference between Angela's boudoir and a country meadow in spring. Freed from its pain, the thought of Felicia swept over him like music, Felicia, who not only seemed to embody the dew and the earliest lark and all things sweet and young, but Felicia, who called out all that was really best in him--his courage, his manliness, his willingness to face risks, Felicia so human, so dear, so understanding. Angela seemed an orchid, touched with drooping and promising no perfume, with her faded spiritual poses, her conscious spontaneity, her looking-glass idealism. He saw Angela as she was, with not even the glamour of her pathos to veil her.

Geoffrey had answered with an "Of course I mean it," while Maurice's mind whirled with the ecstatic contrast. "But how--how can I accept all this from you, Geoffrey?" he said at last; "it is splendid of you; it's a magnificent thing to do. You are radiant and I am dingy. How can I accept it?"

"As I do it, my dear Maurice; and without any splendour on either side--for her sake."

"And not for mine a bit, dear old boy?" Maurice asked with a half-sad, half-whimsical smile.

"Perhaps a little for you. If I didn't care for you, didn't think you worth her caring for, I wouldn't do it; but that would probably be for her sake again. Candidly, I don't feel for you much just now, or think much of you, except in your relation to her happiness. You understand that, of course, in another lover."

"But it's in another lover that I can hardly think of any of it. It is that that stupefies me. And in you, Geoffrey! You are the last man I should have thought capable of such self-immolating idealism."

"It's the best thing I can do for myself, isn't it?" said Geoffrey, with, again, his smile that made light of high motives. "I wouldn't do it if I had any hope of winning her from you. It is only natural that I would rather have her happy than miserable."

"But, dearest Geoffrey"--the tears again rose to Maurice's eyes as the wretchedness of a further possibility smote even his joy--"how can you tell that--with time--you couldn't have hoped? People do outgrow their griefs; I might have flopped down to some second-best thing--she would have seen that I wasn't really worthy--and have recognized that you were." That it was, apart from Felicia's future attitude, a fact already, not a mere possibility, came as a truth to Maurice with his own words. He saw Geoffrey sacrificing that possible future to an illusion; for he, Maurice, was unworthy, if he had told Geoffrey of Angela--ignoring, as he would have done, the love affair with Felicia--this happiness would never have come to him. By a chance that was half a cheat he had gained it, and a sob again rose in his throat, breaking his voice.

Geoffrey had winced at the words; he himself had thought of that future possibility. He answered Maurice's inner fear and his own inner regret with a brief "She might die before she outgrew it."

The fact soothed Maurice's qualms. "Dear, dear old Geoffrey," he said brokenly. "How we will both love you. It won't hurt you, I hope, to see a lot of us."

"I'm not such fragile material. I hope to see a great deal of you. But, one thing more, Maurice, she must never know about this; it's between you and me. I lend you the money, let us say; she need only think it a lucky speculation, a legacy--what you will. Her father will expect nothing definite from an uncertain genius like you. I've thought about it, and this seems definitely best to me. There must be no bitterness in her cup." He put his hand on Maurice's shoulder as the young man stood beside him: "Come early to-morrow morning, and we will talk over details. And, Maurice, the

sooner you go to her the better."

CHAPTER XVII

AND Angela? This was Maurice's first waking thought. In the bewildered joy and gratitude of the night before he had put Angela aside with the thankful reflection that Lord Glaston's opportune entrance had saved him from actually proposing or actually being accepted. In this fact lay his escape--and hers. But with the day Angela's personality unpleasantly reasserted its claim. His pity could but turn from Felicia, who no longer needed it, to Angela, an even greater pity, since the humiliation of her position was incomparably greater than Felicia's had been. Indeed, for Felicia there had been no real humiliation; she had always had his heart, and only his poverty had prevented him from claiming her; but the unhappy Angela had been more wooer than wooed and he must leave her from motives infinitely more heart-rending to her than those of material necessity. What he should say to her was the thought that now harassed him; how tell her that for all his dallying he did not intend to marry her? How tell her that, when, in reality, he had intended marrying her, and she must have felt that he so intended? Above all, how was he to add that he was going to marry the woman he had loved since first seeing her? It was with a sickness of pity that he asked himself these questions. His cheek burned when he thought of the figure he would cut in Angela's eyes, for she would see too clearly that if he loved Felicia he had behaved outrageously, only yesterday, to herself, in kissing her, accepting her avowal.

By the time that he went to Geoffrey's he had decided in a definite recoil from the pain and humiliation--for both of them--that he simply could not see Angela. He was, in reality, going to jilt her, and he must not see her face to face when she learned the fact--this despite an undefined resolution at the back of his mind that she must not know that he had jilted her. She must be spared as much as possible.

He clung now to the thought of her idealism and magnanimity; they had never been very convincing qualities to him before, but he found himself insisting upon them now; they would surely shield him from too much scorn; she would understand and forgive. But what was she to understand?

The hour with Geoffrey was like a poultice on his wound--so mild and unemphatic was it. He left it with his prostrate fortunes set upon their feet, and the assurance of a very small but secure income irradiating the future. He suspected that Geoffrey's future, in consequence, had become uncertain, but under the circumstances submission only was open to him; besides, the Government was securely seated in the saddle; there was no danger of Geoffrey's losing office.

When Maurice was on the point of leaving--he had been slightly ill at ease during the interview, and Geoffrey's calm perhaps a little forced--the latter said, detaining him with a hand on his arm, "I wrote to her last night. I wanted to make things easy for all of us. Here is the copy."

Maurice, flushing deeply, read--

"MY DEAR MISS MERRICK,--

"I have seen Maurice. His affairs have suddenly taken the happiest turn, and your days of misfortune are over. I told him of my interview with you, as reticence on the subject might have been awkward for all of us; we are all to be the best of friends, you know. Everything, now, is all right.

"Yours devotedly,
"G. DAUNT."

"I'll go at once," Maurice murmured, tears in his eyes. "My dear old Geoff."

"You mustn't make me ridiculous by your gratitude," said Geoffrey. "And, my dear Maurice, I'm not altogether selfish. Your happiness does make me happy." He looked at him as he spoke with the boyish, older-brother look of affection that Maurice knew so well.

But before he could go he must write to Angela. Yes, there was the wound opening again as he drove away from Geoffrey's, and on reaching his rooms he found himself confronted by an envelope, a familiar, small, pale grey envelope, addressed in a familiar hand--Angela's oddly large and demonstrative hand, that seemed to flourish banners of welcome or appeal. Maurice looked at it as though it had been a viper coiled on his mantelpiece. Its contents must, however, point out some decisive attitude for him; he must bear the venom. He tore it open and read, while a faint fragrance, like a sigh, rose from the delicate sheet--

"DEAREST, DEAREST MAURICE (can one say more than dearest?)--

"Will you not come to me this evening? Papa is going out, and you and I will be quite alone together and talk of so much. I find now how much I needed happiness.

Maurice stood stonily while reading this, and for some moments after its quick perusal. Then he rang for a district messenger--for even in the extremity of his difficulties, Maurice found these luxuries necessities, and sat down to his loathsome task. In his blinding self-disgust, his mind confused with pity for her and for himself, he almost wished that Geoffrey had not been so generous nor Felicia so loveable, so loving.

He took up the pen, feeling that no further delay was possible; at all events he would not see her face; and--

"My dear Angela," he wrote; then, hesitating, thinking of the pathetic trust of her "dearest," tore the sheet across, took another and began again with--

"Dearest Angela, I cannot come to-night. I am sure of your sympathy and comprehension in all things, and I must show what I feel for you by my utter frankness with you. I am going to marry Felicia Merrick." Maurice paused when he had written this, and the vision of yesterday morning--Angela's tears, the kiss, the embrace--surged over him. "I did not know this yesterday," he went on, writing rapidly. "We must forget yesterday. You remember last autumn, at Trensome Hall, how immensely she fascinated me. You know, alas! since you have watched my weaknesses for so many years, my miserable impressionability. I find that I took my irresponsible love-making more lightly than she did. I find that where I thought I was behaving frivolously I was behaving abominably. She doesn't take things lightly; she is a dear, simple little girl, and half serious trifling is not to her what it is to us."

Maurice's forehead burned as he wrote this. He was still thinking of Angela. She, though not a "dear, simple little girl," did not take things lightly either, transcending the worldly, the frivolous standard by knowledge, not by ignorance; he knew that, and she knew that he knew it. But she would accept the escape his dexterity offered her, would see at once that in such acceptance lay the only escape from humiliation; and that all she could do was to own that she, unlike Felicia, had known half-serious trifling at its own worth and had known that Maurice was incapable of more than momentary seriousness. But having so smoothed her way--and at Felicia's expense--stabbed Maurice with an intolerable sense of baseness. He stared for some moments at the page, then took it, again to tear it. At the same moment he heard the messenger's ring. The sound brought cold reason once more to the surface. After all, Angela was the real sufferer. He laid down the sheet and thought. What could he say? Would it be even true brutally to tell her that he had loved Felicia all this time? Wasn't what he had said really truer than that? Had not Felicia's dear image grown dim? Was it not Felicia's feeling (darling Felicia!) that took him from Angela? Did he not, after all, accept dependence and poverty for Felicia's sake? Yes, it was ugly to think it, and only true on the surface, but if one went below the surface, where indeed in life was any truth to be found? He must face the ugliness of his own situation; and if in it he himself were ugly, it was the situation that had rubbed off on him. When one was in a sooty atmosphere one couldn't escape smudges. By degrees the deeper truth would come to Angela; she would feel that his greatest love was, had always been, for Felicia; but the realization would come quietly, enduringly; not in a hideous shock of awakening. And, for Felicia's sake, he would be brutal enough, yes, he would--to intimate this even now.

He took up his pen and went on doggedly, though his hand trembled. "You must know that I should have allowed myself to be altogether serious had she not been penniless, and I, a sorry beggar. But in looking back it is difficult to see what one would have felt in different circumstances; I judged her from my own trivial standard and did not know her capable of a strength and gravity of feeling before which I am abashed. It is Geoffrey who has revealed the truth to me, and Geoffrey who has removed the obstacle of poverty that stood between us. Geoffrey has been wonderful. He loves her, and has made her happiness his object, and I am necessary to her happiness--perhaps to her very life. Geoffrey tells me that she seems to him almost dying. I never dreamed she cared so much. I am ashamed, bitterly ashamed, I am cured of triviality for ever.

"Dear friend, you will read between these lines, and, with all your goodness and understanding, feel for me, and know my sincerity when I call myself

"Ever your devoted friend,

"M. WYNNE.

"PS.--Your sympathy for my hateful position will make you, I know, at once destroy this record of it."

Five hours afterwards he was walking up the hill that led to Felicia. The journey had been a lethargy, and now, under the sweet spring sky, he felt his spirits rise at every stride. He paused, with an almost tremulous smile, at that turning in the lane where first they had met. How he had hungered for a sight of her in all these months of parting; he realized that now. After all, he could claim a little heroism for the self-control that had kept him from her. Smudges and heroism!--how oddly things got mixed in life! But smudges must be resolutely forgotten; he would live them down; he had already lived them down in the very determination never again to get smudged. In this environment that spoke only of Felicia, the thought of Angela was far away. When it drew near he turned from it with impatience--almost with resentment.

In Felicia's garden the trees showed a frail web of green against the sky. A slender almond tree, in bloom, looked to Maurice like a little angel at the gates of Paradise. Life had exquisite, atoning moments; the joy of this one in its

poignancy seized his throat in a choking sob so that he could scarcely breathe, and there was pain in the rapture.

The maid told him that Miss Merrick was in the sitting-room. Maurice pushed before her and entered, closing the door behind him.

Felicia sat near the window. She had changed terribly; yet she was more beautiful than ever. He understood her look of blankness; the greatness of her emotion drew all expression from her face.

A wave of adoration swept over him, and with it the thought of smudges, of his unworthiness, of her love and suffering struck through him, shattering his baser self. He stumbled forward and fell at her knees.

They were together, and for her--for him--the past was forgotten. Yet as Felicia leaned to him, happy with a gladness too deep for tears or smiles, dimly there drifted over her that sense of a dream, and in it, like a vivid start that comes in sleep, the thought of Geoffrey. It hurt her, and, again like the striving in a dream to recall, to grasp at, a meaning that sinks from us, she felt, dimly, for the hurt; was it for him?--for herself? The love in Maurice's eyes drew her from dreams; yet in clasping him, loving him, she seemed to clasp and love some other cherished being; as a mother, holding her living child, feels in her heart an aching, shrouded love for the child that died before it breathed.

PART II

CHAPTER I

MRS. CUTHBERT MERRICK looked about the little room with a scrutiny cautious and acute. Almost a year had passed since Felicia's marriage, but the summer and winter had been a prolonged honeymoon abroad, and the young couple were only just installed in their new home. This was a small, high flat in Chelsea, overlooking the river, and the smallness of the flat, its height, and the rather sullen aspect of the farther shore it overlooked satisfied Mrs. Merrick of a very limited income. Mr. Wynne's income seemed wrapped in a Bohemian mystery; but the drawing-room offended her, as Felicia's garden had done. She could sympathize with a limited income, but to forgive the graceful ease derived from it was, once more, a difficult task, so difficult that Mrs. Merrick felt shrewd suspicions as to extravagance. An interior, fresh and spotless as a white sea-shell, the austere suavity of eighteenth-century furniture, old prints and old porcelain, were perhaps Bohemian, but they were not economical. The drawing-room was crowded with people too, and a further offence lay in the fact that Mrs. Merrick surmised in the crowd a latent distinction. There was only a dubious consolation in the dowdiness of some of Felicia's guests; Mrs. Merrick knew that duchesses had disconcerting capacities for dowdiness; but at all events, with one or two exceptions, the crowd could hardly be called "smart." It was a word holding for Mrs. Merrick a significance at once distressing and alluring, and she ate her sandwich with more gratification after deciding that it did not apply here.

Familiarity entered in the person of Geoffrey Daunt, who, after a pause beside Maurice, made his way directly to Felicia's tea-table, and Mrs. Merrick was glad to see that Felicia had at all events the good grace to flush slightly as she greeted him. That Felicia had in all probability been indifferent to this brilliant match was as much of an affront as her furniture. Mrs. Merrick's brain had bubbled with conjecture during those winter visits; she had found herself regarding Felicia with almost a sense of awe, and springs of eager affection had sprung up to welcome Geoffrey Daunt's potential bride. A certain contempt had replaced the awe; only sheer love-sickness could have led to a refusal; a refusal perhaps to be regretted when love-sickness wore off and reality grew plain again; yet Mrs. Merrick felt herself at a disadvantage before the bewildering indifference. At all events Felicia did flush.

Shortly following Geoffrey, Lady Angela came, with her soft unobtrusiveness that yet drew all eyes upon her, and, almost over-setting her tea-cup in her eagerness to greet and claim her friend, Mrs. Merrick sprang to meet her.

"Yes, this is my first sight of them. Isn't it very charming, very exquisite?" said Angela, looking vaguely about her. She had not flushed in greeting Maurice; a smile, a clasp of the hand, and she had glided past him. "Are they not a most fortunate young couple? I am so thankful to have my dear Maurice so happily settled. His roving irresolutions were a pain to me. Ah! Geoffrey is here already, I see. I had hoped, in coming late, to find them alone; people are going. Are you for long in London, dear Mrs. Merrick? Will you come and see me soon?" She detached herself suavely, and Mrs. Merrick was presently joined by a dull country neighbour who pinned her in a corner with tiresome church talk.

People were going--only a group remained about Maurice at the other end of the room, and in the midst of farewells to them, Geoffrey and Felicia's first meeting since her marriage took place as episodically as the departure of the least significant of guests. He was rather glad that it should be so bulwarked by conventionality. He stood beside her and watched her in her new character of wife and hostess. She was both very girlishly; indeed she was little changed, though changed from the death-like Felicia of the walk that seemed so long ago. She was the girl he had first known, her face expressing only with more emphasis both its old gaiety and a deeper gravity. She was the same, emphasized rather than changed, and that her old air of easy indolence was touched now, as she smiled and talked, and shook hands, by a little awkwardness and abruptness was due, Geoffrey guessed, to her wish to have people gone, really to see and speak to him.

When Angela, among departing guests, appeared, Felicia had another, a deeper flush.

"Is this your first meeting, too?" asked Angela, looking from Geoffrey to Felicia, as she held the latter's hand. "Geoffrey has become a greater man than ever while you have been away, Mrs. Wynne; but you are no doubt *au courant* of all his news?"

"Yes; he kept us posted," said Felicia. She and Geoffrey had written regularly and a little perfunctorily, letters of pleasant friendliness, making no allusion to depths.

"He hasn't kept *me* posted," said Angela, taking a chair beside Felicia, and leaning forward over her tea-cup, her arm on her knee, in an attitude habitual with her--an attitude at once sibylline and saint-like. "I have seen so little of you, Geoffrey--only heard of you. How are you?"

"All right. And you?"

"Wearing out my scabbard," she said with a fatigue that made no attempt at lightness. "That is the fate of all of us

who dedicate our lives to anything, isn't it? It does one good to see these young people, doesn't it, Geoffrey? Life smiles on them, doesn't it? It does one good," she repeated, while her eyes went from him to Felicia.

Angela always bored her cousin; to-day she irritated him, especially when she took a chair and the sibylline attitude. His talk with Felicia was obviously and indefinitely postponed. If not the irritation, the boredom, at all events, showed itself in his "To be with people who aren't wearing out their scabbards."

"Yes,"--Angela did not look up from her tea-cup--"people who have in their lives what one longs to put into everybody's life."

"You mean that we are dedicated merely to happiness?" Felicia smiled, a little disturbed, as she remembered she had long ago been, by Geoffrey's manner of mild ridicule.

"No, no; only that it has dedicated itself to you. You must let me come often and look at you. You must let an old friendship like mine and Maurice's be included in the new relationship. I am included, am I not? just as Geoffrey, I feel sure, is. You, too, must think of me as an old friend, Mrs. Wynne. You must make use of me if there are any things you want to do, any people you want to meet. You must let me help you in your quest. I can hand on to you a good many of the toys that make a London season enjoyable."

Felicia felt her old hostility rising; for the sake of a pathos she surmised in Angela, she controlled it, asking, still lightly, as she arranged her tea-cups, "What quest do you mean?"

"Why, the quest of youth and happiness--success in life. It is a pity that it should be seen as a toy before the time comes for a sad seeing of things. I always think of you as the lover of life personified, always see you crowned with roses and walking under sunny skies."

Felicia, re-filling Geoffrey's cup and helping herself to a slice of bread and butter, made no comment on this vision. But Geoffrey did not let it pass. "What do you mean by life?" he asked.

Angela still seemed to muse. "Oh, in this instance, I don't mean life in its sense of expansion through self-sacrifice, of self-achievement through renunciation, but in the happy, finite sense, the illusion through which we must rise to reality, the rose and sunlight sense, the bread-and-butter sense, in fact," she added, raising her eyes to Felicia and smiling.

"Why not *pate de foie gras* sandwiches?" asked Felicia; "they are even happier. Do have one."

"Yes, the *pate de foie gras* sense, too. My first impression of you was that--None for me, thanks. Do you remember, Geoffrey, we first saw Mrs. Wynne eating sandwiches?--five, I think you made the number--and isn't it right and fitting that she should have sandwiches and roses? I want her to let me give her all I may."

Felicia now leaned back in her chair, folded her arms, and fixed on Angela a look both firm and gay. "Why do you think such things of me?" she asked.

"Things?--what things?" Angela's smile was neither firm nor gay. She felt suddenly confronted, before a witness, too, and she remembered Felicia's crude disposition for forcing issues just when one most intended avoiding them. Geoffrey's cold, unvarying eye was upon her. It was a married hostility she had before her, and, in the little moment of confusion, she saw clearly her hatred of Maurice's wife. Yes, she was again face to face with hate; but they pushed her to it; for she had come as love personified, as a most magnanimous angel, and she had the right to scorn both Maurice and his wife if Maurice's letter had spoken the truth--if Felicia's love and Geoffrey's charity had forced him into marriage. But had it spoken the truth? Had it? That question had beaten in her brain for months. And the suspicion that Maurice, still talking in his group at the other side of the room, avoided her, filled her with an added bitterness which only an exaggeration of her outward self enabled her to hide.

"What things?" she repeated, conscious that she seemed to blink before something blinding.

"Horrid things!" Felicia decisively, though still gaily, answered.

"My dear child!" Angela breathed with a long sigh. "What have you been thinking of *me*? What do *you* mean?"

"I haven't set out on a quest for roses and sandwiches. I don't ask for either. You don't really know me at all, so please don't talk about me as if you did."

Her manner, that put the episode on a half-playful footing, completed Angela's discomfiture. Unless she showed her hate, what should she say? Flight was safer than possibility of shameful exposure. She rose to go, murmuring, as she took Felicia's hand: "I am sorry--sorry. You have not understood."

"It seemed to me that you did not."

Maurice was approaching them at last, and, the impulse of flight arrested, Angela rejoined: "I am afraid that you hardly want me to understand." Maurice was beside her; she could safely say it, sheltered from rejoinder by his eagerness.

"You are not going, my dear Angela?" He took her hand, speaking very quickly. "I haven't seen you. Do stay." Meeting his eyes where a shallow sincerity seemed to glitter over depths he could not show, Angela recovered herself and could again take up a weapon.

"I am afraid that I am not really wanted, my dear Maurice," she said, standing between husband and wife, still holding Felicia's hand as he held hers, smiling from one to the other, a brave, kind smile. "I am afraid that I am a quite unnecessary fourth here. Our old trio has another head. I had hoped that I might, as a friendly hangeron, not be in the way; but I am. I feel that I am."

"Trio? Oh, you mean Geoffrey?" Maurice was perplexed, yet spoke with a gallant lightness--the concealing glitter emphasized, while Geoffrey, all placidity, queried--

"Was I ever one of a trio? That's news to me."

Angela turned her head to glance at him.

"So you will forsake me--even in the past? Well, I abdicate all claims."

"But we don't--we don't, my dear Angela! We don't abdicate our claims to you. It's not a trio," said Maurice, "it's a circle--isn't it, Felicia? Let us all join hands. Come in, Geoffrey."

"No, no," Angela softly echoed his laugh. "I will come again--and look at you all. But indeed I abdicate all my tiny claims. Remember me, my dear Mrs. Wynne, if I can ever be of any use." She pressed Felicia's hand and turned away. Maurice went with her into the hall. Her wrap lay there and he held it for her.

"You may trust me, Maurice, for ever," she whispered, as she slid into it. She did not meet his glance of helpless confusion; but she knew that all glitter had left him.

Driving away in her carriage, she leaned her head back in the corner, where she shrank and burst into tears.

In the drawing-room the last people were going, Mrs. Cuthbert among them. "I hear your father is coming to live with you, Felicia," she said.

"Yes. It is too lonely for him now."

"He won't be able to let the house, I fear."

"For the present the house is to be shut up, and we may go down to it for week-ends."

"It is always a rather dangerous experiment, you know, Felicia, a third person between a young couple."

"We must risk it," Felicia laughed.

When, after this final grunt, her aunt had gone, she and Geoffrey were alone.

He was standing at the window, and she joined him there and looked out at the silver river with a slow russet sail upon it. The sense of peace and confidence, felt on the day of their last meeting, was with her; but it was more easy to speak with perfect openness since she need not speak of themselves.

She repressed the impulsive "How she dislikes me!" that might seem to claim his sympathy for her painful part in the recent little drama; she need never claim his sympathy; and a curious sense of loyalty to Angela made her substitute, "How I dislike her. You must know it, so I may as well say it."

"That explains her unpleasantness, you think?" Geoffrey's voice was as detached and impartial as if he were questioning the validity of a dubious clause in a dubious bill.

"Yes, if she feels my dislike even when I try not to show it. Perhaps she didn't mean to be unpleasant."

"Perhaps she didn't know that she meant it."

"But it's pitiful--if she thinks she has lost friends."

"Pretty brazen of Angela--that assumption."

"But aren't you rather cruel?" She tried to smile, but a glance at her face showed him how hurt, how tossed by conjecture and regret she was. Geoffrey did not speak his own crueller thought, a thought in which he recognized a complacent vindictiveness--"She is furiously jealous of you." Accepting her reproach he merely said, "Angela makes me cruel. I enjoy showing her her own real meaning."

"That is indeed cruel--to enjoy it. I hate showing her, and yet I feel forced to let her know what her meaning seems to me. But I'm more sorry than I can say for it all--for her being in my life in any way. Yet she is in it. She is the centre of Maurice's old life. Most of his friends are hers, and she was his nearest friend--next to you. She blights everything." Her voice had a tremor.

"That is tremendously exaggerating her importance. I shouldn't have suspected you of such weakness. She doesn't really make you sad?"

"She does, rather."

"Only on her own account then--not on your own."

Felicia again recognized the acuteness in him that she had at first been so blind to. Yet even to him she must pass in silence over Angela's deepest pathos. "Oh, on my own, too," she said. "I am quite weak enough for that." She added: "You always make me show my weakness. I seem to find strength in showing it to you--your strength, I suppose."

"Do you? Thanks." Geoffrey looked at her. "You do remember, then, that I'm always there?"

"Always." She looked back at him.

Nothing had changed between them since, in that long, still, strange moment, he had kissed her good-bye.

The little silence that followed her "always," was unbroken when Maurice entered. Maurice, since making automatic farewells to his last guests, had stood perfectly still in the hall where Angela had left him, looking down.

Her words, spoken before Geoffrey and Felicia, had impressed him but lightly, unable as he was to grasp their context, in comparison with the words she had said to him at the door--words how well left unspoken! Their apparent magnanimity had been almost ignoble; he felt it, and the recognition of ignobility in her roused in him a sudden tempest of fear and self-reproach.

For, actually, during the last wonderful months, he had forgotten Angela. Hardly had she done more than hover in his thoughts once or twice, a memory at once pathetic and poisonous. It had always vanished, like a dark alien bird, fading in the depths of a noonday sky. He was no longer the hunted, unstable--yes, the base man who had written that letter. He was Felicia's husband. He was in a new life, clear, fresh, radiant, and the old one was a strange, soiled dream.

When Angela had entered the room it had been like seeing a ghost arise. He had felt a throb almost of terror. The sweet and new actuality enabled him to master it, to glance at the past and accept the fact that he still was slightly linked to it, in Angela's consciousness if not in his own. The acceptance enabled him to look at the link with more equanimity. After all, Angela's very coming proved how such fruitless episodes dropped away from people; she, too, accepted the comfortable, everyday interpretation, that of a half-emotional trifling that had come to nothing and was, by now, nothing to either of them. But all the same he had, at first, found it really impossible to go and talk to her. He had not seen her since that morning in the music-room, since he had seen tears in her eyes and kissed her--it had not been then, with her at all events, a half-emotional trifling. The realization, like a physical sensation, still trembled, startled, under all his coerced confidence, while he had talked and laughed. He had glanced constantly at Felicia while he talked, Felicia sitting between Geoffrey and Angela; his Felicia! A creature so free from any smudge. And he had smudged her--for Angela's sake, and for his own. The cowardly letter was an eternal barrier between him and Angela. And now her reassuring words fastened his fear and self-disgust upon him. Not fear of Angela betraying him, Angela was not base; besides, she could gain nothing by betraying him; besides, the letter was destroyed: it was a vague ominous fear of something indefinable and dangerous.

He stood in the little hall, and the thought of the last year's sunshine almost smote tears to his eyes, looked back at from this sudden blackness. He threw back his head and shoulders, seeming with the physical gesture to shake it off, defined it as one of his moods, rose defiantly above it, and, when in the drawing-room he joined his wife and friend, came between them, putting a hand on the shoulder of each, returning peace, a sense of protection and happy certitude, made him take a long breath.

"How good this is!" he said.

They both smiled at him.

Dear, best old Geoffrey. He stepped perfectly into his place, neither holding back from it nor making it over-significant. The thought of his astonishing debt to Geoffrey brought no heartache; gratitude was for Felicia as well as for himself, for Felicia, too, was so happy. To show Geoffrey the happiness he had created was the only return he could make him; to show it frankly could give no pain to such magnanimity. That the magnanimity had its tragic element a soul quick to divine and sympathize like Maurice's felt; but all he could do, now, was to keep his friend's tragedy beautiful. And he vowed he would. Geoffrey should never regret, for Felicia would never regret. There was almost a sob of thankfulness in him as with this welling up again of strength and confidence he stood between them, leaning on them, and looked out at the shining river.

CHAPTER II

FELICIA did not regret; she accepted the fact of an achieved happiness almost as unquestioningly as Maurice; but there had been for her a phase of questioning and readjustment, a phase of acute loneliness when, with stupefaction, she realized that she had married a man whom she hardly knew.

It had been a strange, and for a time a disintegrating experience to see on what slight bases she had built the fabric of her devotion--to see that she had loved his love for her and that him she had hardly seen at all. Afterwards, with a tender sanity and wisdom, she had pushed new foundations under the edifice of their common life, new and stronger, surer props, no longer relying upon her need of him but upon his of her. She had the faculty for holding happiness, and, with something of the serenity and strength of nature, for making it over again when the first hold proved to be on something illusory. And, in this re-making, what had seemed illusion became real, once more, with a deeper reality. Understanding him, and loving him for himself, his love for her regained its value. But from the readjustment to life a new sense of gravity, of the risks one ran, had come to her. In looking back on her despair when she had almost lost him, she saw the something passionate and reckless, the quality of desperateness that must always make danger. Had

Maurice not proved loveable her own vehemence would have been the cause of disaster, and since that fatal disaster was escaped, she felt herself strong enough to face any others, to adjust herself to any painful requirements of life.

The clear-sighted seeing of her husband had in it this element of pain. It was as if in all the outer courts of life she had found indeed the happiest companionship, but in the inmost temple a deeper loneliness, a loneliness that now--and this was the secret of achievement--meant strength and not weakness.

In all the tests of life he depended upon her, and his setting of his clock by her time frightened her sometimes, lest that inner strength should fail them both. She was the upholder; Maurice responded; he never inspired. She had moments--and in them the loneliness was ghastly--of seeing him as unsubstantial, elusive, almost parasitical in his charm; but the charm itself, his clasping and exquisite response, was too near and dear for these moments to be more than mere flashes. She brought from them a maternal gentleness of tolerance, and her own joy in being loved was still too deep for her to feel weariness. She had not yet clearly seen, with all her understanding, that beyond this sunny domain of his adoration she would always be alone.

A dissatisfaction that was hardly a pain was the purposelessness of their lives; it was a life of appreciation merely, appreciation of themselves, their friends, books, music, pictures.

"Darling, we have heaps and heaps of time for doing things; let's just enjoy them now--while we are young and can. You don't want me to be a County Councillor, do you? You don't want, yourself, to sit on committees and be useful--like Angela, do you? There are such quantities of useful people in the world."

Felicia had not suggested County Councils or committees, though she did attack his laziness, for Maurice had never been more lazy.

The goad was gone--the goad of obvious and pressing need, and, as if on a summer day of rowing, another hand had taken the sculls, he lay back in the boat and looked happily, thankfully, at the sky and woods and water.

"I shall work, then," Felicia declared; "it's only fair that I should. You have a right to lounge, but I, who have lounged all my life, must prove to you that I meant what I said--do you remember?"

Their tiny income just sufficed. "If a pinch comes I'll set to," Maurice affirmed. But Felicia said that she didn't need to be pinched; she wanted to set to as a preventive to pinches. She was a good linguist and she found some translating to do. Through Maurice's numerous literary relations there was quite a nice little field of endeavour open to her, and she persisted in ploughing it. Maurice laughed at the determination with which she shut herself up every morning.

"You must wait for inspiration," she retorted; "but there is no reason why this hack-work of mine shouldn't keep off a pinch for ever."

Adjustment to a constant and growing anxiety was necessary when her father arrived for his long visit, a visit whose length, Maurice eagerly insisted, must be indefinite. He saw that his insistence, generous as she must feel it in a lover, gave pleasure to Felicia, and he pressed Mr. Merrick for a promise of indefiniteness.

But Felicia felt at once that her father, as usual, jarred. She had no need to explain her father to Maurice; understanding was Maurice's strong point; very cheerfully he found her father a bore. Unfortunately, though quick, Mr. Merrick could not be expected to grasp the unflattering impression nor to suspect from Maurice's attitude of bright acquiescence that Maurice found in acquiescence the easiest way of getting rid of him. Mr. Merrick's dogmatic intolerance could only weary or amuse a mind so fundamentally sceptical. Felicia realized that it was for her sake that Maurice smiled and acquiesced, but she felt it, in consequence, incumbent on her to be very exact in acquiescence, with the really funny result that it was, at first, more and more upon Maurice that Mr. Merrick counted. It was the knowledge that he counted upon an unreality that made the anxiety, the pain, for Felicia. The little tangles of silent misconceptions on one side, of discernments on the other, drew constantly into knots, and Felicia found herself contemplating such a knot with discomfort one day after a talk with her father.

She went into Maurice's studio at the back of the flat, finding, in his ease over a volume of French verse, an added cause for irritation.

"Maurice, have you encouraged papa to publish that article on 'Credulity'?" she asked.

"It is *vieux jeu*, you know," Maurice confessed, glad of the occasion for frankness, and putting his arm around her as she stood beside his deep chair.

"Do I know?" said Felicia, smiling irrepressibly, though unwillingly, as she met the limpid blue of his eyes.

"It is all true enough, as far as it goes," said Maurice, hardly recognizing her vexation and wishing to be consolatory. "Sit down on the arm of the chair, dear, and don't stand so still, so stiff, so disapproving."

"All that is true in it has been said a hundred times; the rest is as shallow, as trivial as possible."

She yielded to his pull and sat down on the chair-arm.

"He takes a very crude view of religion," Maurice owned. "One doesn't approach it from that point of view nowadays; the whole ground of contest has been shifted."

"Exactly. Why didn't you tell him so?"

"Tell him, dearest? Hurt him? How could I be so brutal? Wouldn't that have hurt you?"

"Not so much as your encouraging him to do a thing that you know to be foolish," said Felicia, looking over Maurice's head and feeling that vexation could easily express itself in tears. With a quick change of tone, looking up in sudden alarm at the eyes that had not met his, he said: "You are displeased with me?"

Alarm was such a new note that Felicia's breast echoed it, transforming it to instant compunction. Her eyes dropped to his.

"Have I been horrid? I think I was displeased."

"Please forgive me," said Maurice gently, a smile of relief answering her smile and irradiating his face; "I thought you would like me to please him, to encourage him; upon my word I did."

"I know. I know you did it for me. But I don't like you to do anything that isn't absolutely----"

She hesitated, still smiling compunction upon him, and, still gently, as if with a little humorousness for the trite virtue of the word, Maurice supplied "True?"

"Well, yes; to yourself I mean. I mustn't be your standard. You must have your own."

"Ah, you mustn't ask that of me. I loved you, you know, for what I lacked."

"But I do ask it of you," said Felicia, and, leaning against his shoulder, glad to have him look with her at the well-unravell'd little knot, she went on: "You see, in your kindness you aren't really fair to him--nor to me either! He was quite cross with me just now when I tried to dissuade him--quoted your opinion of the article. And he has sent it to the magazine you recommended--oh, Maurice, I *was* displeased!"

She put her cheek against his head. To confess her displeasure seemed to efface its cause; especially when Maurice kissed her hand and repeated, with touching surrender to her fastidiousness, "Please forgive me. I'll never do it any more."

Perhaps, because of a certain individuality in its violence, the essay on "Credulity" was accepted, and Mr. Merrick's assurance, which had been rather pricked and ruffled since his arrival in London, was restored to its unstable placidity.

Felicia was conscious of a consequent triumph in his manner towards herself.

"The old sword isn't rusty yet," said Mr. Merrick; "it can still do execution. I fancy it has lopped the heads off a few more falsehoods."

Felicia was silent; she understood that Maurice perforce must smile; and with these necessary smiles, hostages to the past, went Maurice's new endeavour "not to do it again," that by degrees revealed to Mr. Merrick that Maurice, no more than Felicia, was to be counted upon.

Maurice's geniality deserted him one day when Mr. Merrick made an assault upon the non-rational elements in the faith of a Roman Catholic friend, and next morning Felicia, arranging some books in the studio, heard in the adjacent dining-room her father's pugnacious tones: "The fellow is merely an ass; I wonder you can tolerate him. I pinned him with his winking virgin!"

"My dear father," Maurice's voice returned, and she wondered whether her father felt to the full its cutting quality, "we are all of us asses to one another, so that the one virtue we should strive for is tolerance. I hope that in the future you will exercise it towards my guests and in my house."

"Oh, very well; by all means," said Mr. Merrick, resentful, but hesitating to express his full resentment. "I will merely vacate your drawing-room on such occasions, since I am not apt at falsity." The words were sunk in the large rustling of his newspaper.

"I should, if I were you, merely avoid taking a bludgeon to other people's beliefs; it's not a seemly thing--a bludgeon in a drawing-room."

Maurice, when Felicia entered, was cheerfully pouring his coffee after the cheerful remark, though there was in his eyes as he looked up at her, and then at Mr. Merrick, flushed and silent behind his newspaper, a touch of anxiety.

"Did you hear, darling?" he asked her, when, after breakfast, they were alone.

"Yes. I am so sorry. You will be patient, Maurice. He has got the habit of bludgeoning--he thinks it right."

"Patient, my sweetheart! Did I seem impatient? It was really for his sake I spoke. He gets himself so misjudged."

"Yes, yes. It was right of you to speak."

"Only I did not intend you to hear."

"Why not? You must always intend me to hear anything you say." She smiled at him, really happier in this more accurately seen situation than she had been for some time. It was easy to bear with slight discords if their own harmony were perfect.

But in consequence Mr. Merrick assumed his manner of the sulky child, and Felicia felt her husband's eye upon her as, in all his encounters with his father-in-law, he adjusted his attitude to what he imagined she desired of him.

CHAPTER III

"WHAT ages it is, Maurice, since we have really talked together!" said Angela. Maurice, indeed, had avoided meetings all the spring, and Felicia's unexpressed reluctance had made much adroitness in evasion unnecessary. His world was drifting away from Angela's world, and in the consequent shrinking he perhaps recognized how large a background she had put into his life; but a background with Angela standing out upon it was well lost; Maurice did not regret it.

But they had met at last, and he had taken her down to dinner, and she sat beside him now, her long eyes, steady, enigmatical, upon him, her mouth, stiffened a little with its smile; her white garments, as usual, seeming to slide away from her thin, white shoulders. That the shoulders were very thin, Maurice noticed, and then, on looking into her face, that it was almost haggard. The hint of delicate wrinklins was upon it, like a pool of wintry water when some desolate wind breathes over its first thin veil of ice.

For really the first time since he had put her out of his life with the letter, a swift, poignant pity went through him, followed by an eager clutch at the hope that pity, by now, was pure impertinence. And the letter, with all the sacrifices that it had made to her, had given him the right to put her out of his life. Following the short ease of the hope that she had ceased to love him was the thought that she might still believe that he loved her. With an ugly vividness some phrases of the letter flashed into his mind, and suddenly, under her steady eyes, he felt himself growing hot.

"No," he said, beginning to eat his soup, "we have both been busy, haven't we?"

"Have you, Maurice?" Angela also bent her head to a delicately raised spoon--eating seemed always a graceful concession in her, a charitable keeping in countenance of the grosser needs of others. "I haven't seen the great picture or the great book yet."

Though feeling that indolence in artistic production was not to be struggled against, the fact, freshly remembered, that Angela knew how that indolence had been made facile, gave Maurice a hotter sense of burning cheeks. "Not as I should have been," he confessed. His confusion was so apparent to himself that after a slight pause it seemed only natural to hear Angela say, in a low, unemphatic voice, as she played with her fork, "Do you mind this--so much? Don't on my account. I am completely seared, Maurice."

And as he could find no answer: "We must meet, you know. Can't you pretend calm, as I do?"

She had not accepted then the way of escape; the way of escape would have meant a miserable crouching. She would never pretend that it had been a trifling. She had loved him, and she would crouch to no pretence. She took for granted the bond of a mutual understanding between them.

"You make me feel like a felon," Maurice murmured.

"It must be, then, some wrong in yourself to make you feel that," Angela returned quietly; "the retaliating attitude is not mine, Maurice." Then, as the talk about them cloaked them less, "What have you and Mrs. Wynne been doing lately? I have been so sorry to have seen so little of her--so sorry that you could never come when I asked you. I have asked you twice this spring, you know. She is prettier than ever"--Angela leaned forward to look down the table--"and so Geoffrey evidently finds her. Is Geoffrey more fortunate than I? Does he see much of her?"

Though knowing Angela well, Maurice was not capable of suspecting her of treacherous little hints and warnings. "Not much," he answered; "he drops in to tea now and then. He really is busy, you know," Maurice added, "so we are not very fortunate in seeing him often, either."

"Geoffrey, without knowing it, is becoming more anxious for place than for power," said Angela, "and not only as a means to power but as an end in itself. It would be a rather black outlook for him, wouldn't it, if the Government were to go out? I suppose he could fall back on the Bar."

She spoke with a musing vagueness. Maurice was not looking at her, and her eyes were on his charming profile, on the quick colour that flamed again in his cheek. She suspected herself now of cruelty, knowing that her love sought ease in cruelty. His dear, enchanting profile! She looked at it with a turn of her sick heart, even while speaking the cruel, vague words.

"Dear Maurice!" she murmured, "I didn't mean that! Indeed, I forgot for a moment why office must be so important to him. There need be no pain in it for you--beyond the blundering frankness of my reference to what you let me know;-I can't get over that habit of frankness with you. But Geoffrey chose to so shackle his career."

"He knows," Maurice stammered, "that if he were to feel a shackle I would abandon----."

"Ah, but would you?" said Angela as he paused. "Though that is why, for your sake, more than his--I know your sensitiveness--that is why, dear friend, I had hoped that this year would be for you an incentive to energy rather than lethargy. You are more shackled than he is--I want to see you free. I wish--I wish," she smiled with quite her old sweet lightness now, "you would let me try to help you. Can I inspire no longer?"

But Maurice could feel no sweetness, or, if sweetness there were, it was to him poisonous. Had he, indeed, opened himself to this? He could find no words.

"Dear Maurice, how you distrust me," she murmured, "how you forget that such a friend as I know myself to be takes it too much for granted, perhaps, that she has all her old rights; the right to be true; the right to help. Forgive me, I have hurt you, I see. I couldn't hurt you if you trusted me. Is Mr. Merrick, here, too? Ah, yes, I see. I read to-day his article on 'Credulity.'"

In the turmoil of his feeling, helpless astonishment, distrust indeed, yet a self-reproachful pity pervading it, Maurice almost gasped with relief at the change of topic. She was speaking on normal levels where he could breathe; she was smiling kindly, no longer with that over-significant sweetness that stung and bewildered, and with a comprehension of his pain, she had turned from it.

"Isn't it appalling!" he laughed--he would have laughed at anything said in that normal voice--"it's unfortunate weakness of his, that beating of dead lions, to which Felicia and I have to yield." Angela also laughed. "My dear Maurice! I see it all. It is rather pretty. There's a pathos in it, so far as you and she are concerned."

"Of course, we were done with all that crude naturalism in the eighties," Maurice said. "I am afraid Felicia and I find the grotesqueness of his attack painful rather than pretty or pathetic;" and with the relieved sense of respite, of free breathing, he humorously enlarged upon this grotesque side of the situation.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the table, Geoffrey and Felicia talked with their sense of peaceful confidence. That she made the music of his life, the sad yet stirring music, she could but know: how much she was its object she had not guessed. But the time seemed far away when she had seen his object as a rather pompous ambition, symbolized in her roguish imagination by a statesman statue with roll of papers in hand, and commanding brow, set high and overlooking conquered territory.

She had become rather indifferent to his objects, the man himself was so staunch, so living, so moving onward.

They talked now of slightest things, the slightness proving how far intimacy had travelled, comparing childish memories. It was pretty to glance down these innocent vistas in each other's lives. Felicia told of the day when she had locked herself in the attic, intending to starve herself to death, in passionate resentment at some fancied wrong, and of how, unable to turn the key again when her fear overcame her longing for vengeance, too proud, in spite of fear to call for rescue, she had remained there through a night of lonely horror.

Geoffrey's reminiscences of naughtiness were more staid. He had never been very passionate or resentful. "I was a conceited little beggar and always kept cool." At a very early age, after a whipping from his mother, he had looked up at her, laughed and said, "Do you want to go on?" "I knew nothing would make her angrier: I must have been an exceedingly disagreeable child."

Both Maurice and Angela, during pauses in the dinner-table talk, were conscious of this happy rivulet, Maurice listening and finding some of its peace, until, seeing that Angela also listened, his peace was jarred upon.

After dinner, in the drawing-room, Geoffrey again joined Felicia, and Maurice, making his way half automatically to Angela, who sat turning pages in a corner, felt a sharper pang of shame. That Angela should know Geoffrey's secret was, in some inexplicable way, a baleful fact. He was conscious of a wish to ward off balefulness as he sat down beside her, and an impulse better than the merely self-protecting desire brought sudden, sincere words to his lips. "Angela, you have really forgiven me, haven't you?" he said. If she had really forgiven him he was safe, Felicia and Geoffrey were safe; Angela herself was freed of that baleful aura which his own sick conscience cast around her. She had put away her book. The light was dim and her face in shadow. He could not see the expression upon it as she sat silent for some moments, her hands turning, mechanically and quickly, the fan upon her knee; suddenly they were quiet and she said: "I have forgiven you--if what you said was true."

"True? How could it not be?" Maurice stammered, conscious at once that his impulse had been unwise.

"It could not be if you loved her most." He was silent, struggling with his thoughts.

"You love her most--now," Angela said with a distant, a tragic touch of questioning.

"She is--my wife."

"And therefore you love her most: for the past--loyalty to your wife must seal your lips. If it were so! Yet it is hard--hard to forgive, Maurice, not the pain, not the bewildered pain, but the crippling of my life, the blotting out--for a time--of my heaven. And how could I forgive if you robbed me of even my right to a memory? Of even my dead joy?"

"But--I told you--that I was unworthy--that I was undependable; that I couldn't depend on my own feeling----" Maurice stammered on.

"You tried to help me so," said Angela quickly, "and it was that that I could not forgive--your smirching of it all; but you told me, too, to read between the lines. I did; I believed what I read there."

Even there she had only read that he loved her; not that he loved her most. There was the intolerable, the unforgiveable. She rose, feeling that she must leave him or burst into sobs. "I understand," she said. "You must, for her sake, be loyal to the past. I won't ask further. Now I will go and talk to her." She went across the room to Geoffrey and Felicia, leaving Maurice in a miserable perplexity.

Should he have been bravely brutal? Told her that the first truth, of past and present, was his love for Felicia? Yet

the minor truth was there--the truth Angela clung to as her right--that he had loved her, too, if only for the moment; could he, in the name of the larger truth, rob her of it? He was not able clearly to see what he most wished or regretted--that he might never see Angela again, that he had ever seen her, were perhaps the clearest wish and regret.

Angela sank into a seat beside Felicia. She had still that sense of a strangled sob in her throat. A spiteful little comment floated, strawlike, upon the passionate sea of her thoughts; she grasped it, repeating to herself, "Cheap, alluring little creature." It helped her to evade the sob and to bear the contemplation of Felicia's beauty. Oh, yes, she had a certain beauty, a creamy childishness, the obvious charm of soft white and cloudy ambers that had brought Geoffrey to her and won her husband's shallow heart to constancy. Creaminess, childishness, cheapness would always count for most in this strange world of irony and pain.

"At last I can escape to you," she said. "You have been so surrounded all the evening, and Maurice and I have been reminiscing; I can never, it seems, find you quite alone"--she smiled at Geoffrey--"but Geoffrey hardly counts, does he? Isn't it odd--have you noticed it--that I have hardly spoken with you except before Geoffrey, and perhaps, with me, Geoffrey does count--a little uncomfortably? I seem to arouse all his cynicism, and it's difficult to be quite oneself in the face of even a friendly cynicism. I always fancy that we could really get at one another, Mrs. Wynne, if we could achieve a *tete-a-tete*."

"How selfish, my dear Angela." Geoffrey, stretching his long legs in a low chair, did not even offer to accept the open hint. "You don't get rid of me like that. I refuse to miss you."

"Isn't that a palpable evasion?" Angela turned her smile from him; "we must play Pyramus and Thisbe to his determined wall. Only please make allowances for acoustic disturbances; a voice heard through a wall may be misinterpreted."

Felicia, ready to be amused and to make things easy, laughed at the wall's stubborn presence. "I can't urge him to miss you. If he is cynical we will simply leave him--*plante la*. He is more the schoolboy, though, than the cynic."

"You find the kindest interpreter, Geoffrey. Well, as a schoolboy then, don't let him pull off my legs and wings for love of mischief. What have you been doing all this time?"

"Simply jogging on," said Felicia, finding in Angela's application of her simile a certain justice. There was, indeed, in Geoffrey's ruthlessness an element of cruel glee.

"Maurice tells me that he has been lazy. You must whip him up; you must spur him; it's fatal to Maurice to be allowed to jog. He must race neck-to-neck with some incentive or he soon falls to mere grazing. He is the racer type. But your father hasn't been jogging," Angela continued, telling herself before Felicia's not very responsive look that she must try some other interest--any allusion to Maurice would rouse the hostility of this jealous little wife. "What a gallop, indeed, his article on 'Credulity'!--Maurice and I have been talking about it."

Felicia's eyes turned on her father, who was standing in isolation and assumed indifference before the fire-place. She felt, in seeing him, that familiar throb of indignant pity. No one could realize more acutely than she the qualities in him that made for unpopularity; but it was his ineffectiveness more than his vanity, his lack of power more than his assumption of it, that made the world fall away from him. Her judgement of her father always passed, with a swift self-condemnation, into a judgement of human unkindness. She brought her eyes back to Angela, her good temper chilled; there was sudden hardness in her look as she said: "Have you?"

"Yes,"--Angela smiled tender comprehension upon her--"I do understand. Only I don't feel quite as you and Maurice do about it. I don't feel it either so grotesque or so painful. I like the combativeness of it, the way he hurls himself at windmills. You take it too seriously. It's a thing to smile over, not a thing to be distressed about."

Felicia's stare had become frozen, and before it she faltered, suddenly and gently.

"As an old friend of Maurice's--as a friend of yours--you allow me to understand--and be sorry for the pain, don't you?"

Felicia had risen, an instinctive recoil from something snake-like.

"No, I don't allow any pity that divides me from my father," she said. "You misunderstand my husband--and the privileges of your friendship for him."

She had not known what her intention was in rising; but now, looking at her father, she turned and went across the room to him.

Angela watched her in silence. With an effort she brought her eyes back to Geoffrey, who, still stretched out in his chair, met them with a sardonic smile. She felt as if Felicia had put a gash across her face and as if he were pitilessly jibing at it. Her hand, again turning her fan, trembled as she said, "Mrs. Wynne has a talent for *coups de theatre*."

"And you for carrying daggers up your sleeve, Angela. I perceive that walls might be useful."

"You are blinded, I know, to her cruelty. It is she who uses daggers. My sympathy was real--a sympathy that any friend might have expressed--I supposed, of course, that she felt with her husband. Her bitter misconception of me distorts every effort I make to touch her." The pathos and nobility of her words seemed to Angela her own nobility and pathos. Her eyes filled with sincerest tears.

"Dropping dramatic metaphors, Angela, I certainly think that since you can't speak to Mrs. Wynne without making yourself highly disagreeable, you'd better give up trying to speak at all."

Geoffrey rose. With something of the cheerful and inflexible mien of an Apollo, turning, bow-in-hand, from the slaughtered children of Niobe, he walked away.

CHAPTER IV

"WHAT did you and Angela have to say to one another?" Maurice asked. He and Felicia were driving down the polished sweep of Piccadilly alone, for Mr. Merrick disliked crowded hansoms, and the long silence had been unbroken. Leaning back in her corner, her cloak folded tightly around her, Felicia had gazed blankly at the powdery blue of the sky, the thickly sprinkled lights beneath it, her heart a chamber of angry misery. Maurice's question, its light curiosity like the aimless fumbling of a key, suddenly unlocked and threw open the door.

"Maurice--Maurice," she said under her breath, yet it was like a cry, "why did you talk to her about papa's essay?" Maurice's curiosity, had been a little less aimless than its lightness implied, but he felt now as if she had fired a pistol at his head.

"What did she say?" he asked quickly and sharply, revealing his fear.

"She said that she was sorry for us, and understood it--that you had told her we disliked the article."

"We did--you know," said Maurice after a moment, and, as he saw the pale oval of his wife's face turn upon him: "She spoke of it; I didn't think of concealing what we felt. I can't think that she meant to be impertinent." It struck him, even now, as odd that he should be venturing an excuse for Angela at the moment that his thoughts were assailing her with a passionate vindictiveness.

"Maurice, Maurice," Felicia repeated, in a voice empty now even of reproach. It was a deep, a weary astonishment.

"Dearest, don't misjudge me; don't make a mountain out of a mole-hill. You know how one slips into such things." He leaned forward on the apron of the cab to look his insistent supplication into her eyes, but hers refused to meet them. "And she is an old--old friend, my precious Felicia; one can't mistrust one's friends. It seemed perfectly natural to talk it over."

"Oh, Maurice, how miserable you have made me!" They were in the smaller streets nearing Chelsea, and she covered her face with her hands. In an agony of remorse he put an arm around her shoulders, beginning now to see his culpability with her eyes, exaggerating it with his magnified imagination of her contempt. He--who had encouraged his father-in-law to publish the wretched thing--he to jest about it with a woman whom he fundamentally distrusted! He could find no further words. They reached the house in silence. Mr. Merrick, who had arrived just before them, was inclined to talk, but, kissing him good-night with a certain vehemence, Felicia went at once to her own room and after a few moments Maurice followed her.

She had already taken off her dress, and, in a white dressing-gown, was hastily unpinning her wreath of hair. Maurice, in the mirror, met the deep look of her eyes. His face was pallid as he stood hesitatingly near the door, not guessing that anger was already gone and that the anguish at her heart was dread of loss of love for him, dread of some insurmountable barrier--would treacherous weakness be such a barrier?--coming between them. Now she turned, and seeing him standing there, white, not daring to supplicate, she stretched out her arms to him. He sprang to her.

"Oh, Maurice, don't--don't--don't," she stammered incoherently, not clearly knowing what she wished him not to do. She dropped her face upon his shoulder. "Don't let me ever--not love you. Hold me always."

"Felicia, you almost kill me."

His pallor, indeed, as she looked at him, shocked her. In the sudden realization of the torture he had suffered the thought of its cause grew dim and even trivial. What barrier could ever come between such a need, such love, and her?

"My poor Maurice, how unjust I have been. How hasty, how cruel. I do understand. With her one can't be straight. She led, you followed; how could you not? How could any one dear and trusting evade her? I do see it all. You are not to blame. Oh, Maurice, how pale you are!"

She sank into a chair, her arms around him, and he knelt beside her, leaning like a little child his head upon her breast.

"It is one of my horrors," he said. "For a moment I saw myself as you might see me. For a moment I thought I might lose you."

"Darling Maurice--never, never. I hated her so--that blinded me. I hate so to think that she was ever near you--has any claim. Perhaps it is almost a mean jealousy. Forgive me. Kiss me. Let us laugh at it."

In his mind a thought, almost an inarticulate sob of terror and longing, rose--rose and shook him. "Tell her now, tell her all." Terror quenched longing. How explain? How seem anything to her but unutterably base? He could never show her that craven spectre of the past. The real self that clung to her could not risk losing her. He could not smile. He

kissed her, his eyes still closed, saying, "Don't take your arms away until the horror is quite passed."

CHAPTER V

THE spring and summer were over and autumn already growing bleak when Geoffrey one afternoon drove to Chelsea. He drove there often, on his free Wednesdays and Saturdays, since the Wynnes, after their round of country visits, had returned to London, usually finding Felicia alone, for Maurice was really working at a portrait, and Mr. Merrick spent most of his time at his club, watching life from its windows with an ironic eye. At tea-time Maurice would appear, tired yet merry, from the studio; friends came in, the quiet shining hour broke into sparkling facets; but the hours alone with her were personal possessions to Geoffrey, jewels that strung themselves in a rosary through his weeks and months. They talked, or Felicia played to him, declaring that his taste for music grew; they often sat silent, she sewing and he watching her. The thickets had been thorny of late, he had discovered that a curtailed and uncertain income could make life curiously nagging and difficult, but from these brambles it was comforting to look at the atoning cause of them. The hours with her so justified his first groping simile of the sunny opening among trees, grass, clouds and sky. His confidence in her happiness irradiated his own problems.

This afternoon the confidence received a little shock. He came late, after tea-time, and walking before the maid into the drawing-room had time, before Felicia saw him, to grasp the disturbing significance of her attitude. She was sitting alone near the window, her elbows on her knees, her face in her hands. For a moment he thought that she was crying, and, like a pang, the memory of sunlight among young birches, snowdrops, a distant bird-song, went through him.

Felicia, however, was not crying; and as she looked round at him, he saw that the attitude might have been one of merely momentary weariness.

"I was almost asleep," she said.

Taking up a bit of sewing she began to talk about the political prospects. "I hear that you are not altogether in sympathy with the Government," she said.

"I'm not--not altogether."

"I even hear that you may resign."

"Perhaps I would," said Geoffrey, leaning back and smoothing his hand over his hair, "if I could afford it. I serve my own purposes better by remaining in office."

"Do you mean that you can't afford--financially--to risk failure?" Felicia asked. "I never associated you with compromise."

"It's not my own failure, but the failure of the policy I believe in that I might risk by refusing to compromise. One fights for one's cause in politics with all sorts of weapons. As for personal failure, I may not be put to too stringent a test; I may make enough money to float me to absolute independence. Did you know that I was a ferocious gambler--and not only on the Stock Exchange, but with cards?"

The placidity with which he showed her his faults always amused Felicia, even when she could not share it. He made no effort to win good opinion--not even hers.

"I have heard, and to tell you the truth I am sorry about the cards."

"Why?"

"I don't like the idea of a pastime becoming so significant. To say the least of it--it's not fitting."

"Well," said Geoffrey, laughing, "I won't do it any more. You are quite right."

"Oh, not on account of what I say, please," she protested, slightly flushing; "you must judge for yourself."

"So I do. I have judged. You may be sure I would never yield anything I believed in--even to please you. I have always disliked the significance cards might come to assume, so I yield, and gladly, since it does please you."

"That is a relief. I could not bear to be a standard. And I can't believe," she added, "that your winnings at cards can have any significance for your career."

"Ah, any stick counts in the raft that keeps one floated. But as for my career, if I've an object, you mustn't think it a career. I don't bother much about my career. I'm a converted character, you see."

"Converted! You? From what and to what?"

Felicia's face, on its background of sky and river, turned on him the look he loved--fond and mocking. He returned it, smiling, but gravely. "It is quite true. It's not that I care less for my ambitions, but differently. My goal has shifted, and everything is at once more simple and more complex; the aims are bigger and far simpler; the fight is bigger, too, but more complex than when the fight was personal. I shouldn't mind failure, really, or beginning over again. You converted me, you see."

"I?" said Felicia, with more sadness than surprise.

"Yes, you. Your courage, your sincerity, your faith, that wasn't the least blind but counted the costs and took the risk every time. Oh, don't protest; indeed, I hardly know how or why I felt it of you; merely my whole interpretation of things began to twirl on another axis. The idealistic philosophies of my college days came back to me--with all sorts of personal meanings in them. I began to trust life and its significance, since I trusted you so utterly."

"You almost terrify me," said Felicia; "would the world turn round the other way again if I proved horrid?"

"Oh, no, that is done with. If you proved horrid I would suffer, but the world would continue to turn in the right direction--despite your wrongness."

"Ah, that's a real conversion then." Felicia rose, laying down her work. She was touched, near tears. Standing beside him and looking down at him she said, "Shall I play to you?"

"Do," said Geoffrey, but taking her hand he held it for a moment, adding quietly, in almost a matter-of-fact voice, "Dear."

He had let go her hand as quietly when Angela was ushered in.

Angela and Felicia had not met since that night of the past spring, and the parting then made future meetings improbable.

Felicia had put Angela and Angela's meaning behind her, and had not doubted that Angela would acquiesce in mutual forgetfulness. It was astonishing and very disconcerting to see again this spectre rise, and rise, as always it seemed, in Geoffrey's presence.

She advanced into the room, smiling vaguely--vaguely hesitating, an intentness under the hesitation.

Felicia still stood beside Geoffrey, and before he, too, rose, and faced the unwelcome guest, their attitude almost implied the clasp of hands that Angela had not seen.

Her eyes fluttered quickly from one to the other and then fixed in a long gaze on Felicia.

"Dear Mrs. Wynne, I wanted to see you alone," she said.

Geoffrey, at this, turning his back, strolled to the window.

Angela's purpose swiftly put him aside, would not linger; "I won't wrangle with Geoffrey; besides, he really makes no difference," she said. "For such a long time I have wanted to see you--ever since that night--but you have been away, and so have I. I have been wretched about that night. I could not bear to think that you misunderstood me so cruelly. I have come to beg you to forgive me. It was presumptuous of me to think for a moment that you would care for what I thought or felt, or that my sympathy could be anything but indifferent to you. It was only a blunder. I did not realize that you disliked me so much."

Felicia's amazement struggled between a dim belief and a vivid disbelief. The uppermost feeling came out, but in a dismayed voice, for that half-belief plucked at her--"I think that you have always disliked me--really I do."

"I have longed to love you!" cried Angela; "longed to love you--if you would let me;" and, as she heard the intolerable beauty of these words, she burst into tears.

Felicia turned her eyes on Geoffrey; his back to the window, he leaned on the window-sill, folding his arms. Stupefied, Felicia's eyes questioned him, "Shall I believe her? Shall I put my arms around her?" It was her impulse, the quick response of her tenderness to suffering. But under the impulse something strong held her back, something that made it a false one, partaking of the falseness that aroused it; and Geoffrey's sombre look at her seconded the distrust. She stood silent and helpless.

Angela uncovered her eyes. "Don't you believe me?" she asked.

"I will try to," Felicia stammered, "if you will give me time--help me to----"

"You are very pitiless," said Angela in a voice that had caught back its full self-control. "Very hard and pitiless."

"What can I do? I cannot trust your affection; really I cannot. That is the truth."

"It is that that is hard and pitiless--to think of one's truth more than of another's pain."

"You always say the right thing," Felicia answered gravely; she could but recognize the other's seeming right; there was no irony in the words.

"I have come to you with love," said Angela, controlling an anger that made her voice tremble slightly, "and you have rejected me. I have given you my best. But sincerity and love shrivel before such cruel scepticism as yours. I am sad, sad for you, because to the sceptic all life must turn to ashes. You are the spirit that denies: I don't distrust my own flowers because when you look at them they die. I am sorry for you. You live in a world where I cannot breathe. Good-bye."

She had turned away, thrilling with her spiritual splendour. From apparent failure she sprang to triumph. And, with a final flashing vision of a Pilgrim's Chorus marching past Venusburg to a kingdom of the sky, she added, resting eyes of saintly solemnity on her antagonist: "God bless you."

She was gone; and not moving, not looking at Geoffrey, Felicia said, "I have been horrible. I could not help it."

"You are all right," said Geoffrey, coming from the window, "you seemed pretty horrible, and that gave her one of

the best times of her life. You positively buckled the wings on her shoulders. But she knows you're right, and she won't forgive you for it, either."

"To have a person who hates you say 'God bless you'--it frightens me."

"Nonsense. It was an ugly missile, I own; but it's the worst she can shy at you. Now come and play for me," said Geoffrey.

CHAPTER VI

ANGELA walked away breathing quickly. Her exaltation still floated her above her anger, but through the anger and through the exaltation a deep sense of injury and humiliation rose again and again, bringing tears to her eyes. And under what circumstances had Felicia rejected her outstretched hand, striking down its patient pitifulness? The suspicions of her first entrance into the room gathered around her, cloaked her warmly; there was a shiver in that sense of humiliation. Exaltation, too, was a cold thing if one suspected that others did not see one as exalted. Angela hardly knew that the hot currents of feeling that poured through her heart were those of hatred.

And hardly had she walked five minutes than she met Mr. Merrick, strolling in all his handsome dignity down the street.

There was no project in Angela; only the blind instinct to seize him, to use him; a weapon, perhaps an avenging weapon.

A fire was blazing in her, and by its glare through darkness she saw only fitfully her own desires. She held out her hand with a quick smile. "Dear Mr. Merrick, I had hoped to see you to-day. Will you walk back with me a little?"

She realized that Mr. Merrick's slight knowledge of her could not be a very friendly one, but she guessed him to be susceptible to atonement.

Firmly and quickly she went on, "I have always wanted to talk to you and always missed the chance. We disagree, I think, about many things--and disagreement always attracts me. I long at once to get the larger sight, to test my truths by other's truths. I so respect honesty, conviction, talent, even when used for purposes that oppose my own."

Mr. Merrick, feeling a deep surprise and, perhaps, a touch of suspicion, bowed gravely and turned to walk beside her.

"I have so wanted to ask you about your life, about the steps of thought that have led you to your present position; for you must recognize that it is a position--and that to have achieved it implies responsibilities."

Still with large gravity Mr. Merrick inclined his head, finding no ready words in answer to such comprehensive interest.

Angela was not wanting in humour, and a malicious thought of *Maitre Corbeau, sur un arbre perche*, flashed through her mind. He evidently accepted her implied homage as a making of amends fully due to his distinction.

"I have tried so often to really know you," Angela said, smiling plaintively, though lightly; "especially since reading your essay on 'Credulity' last spring. But I can never find you."

"Ah, yet I am often at home at this hour."

The touch of surprised suspicion was gone; Mr. Merrick spoke with benignity.

"Ah, but it's difficult, you see." Angela's smile gained at once in gaiety and plaintiveness. "I had so hoped to see more of you all; I hoped when your daughter came to London that as an old friend of her husband's--he is like a brother to me--was, I perhaps should say--she would let me be her friend too. London is a big, ugly place for a fresh young creature. I know it so well. I should have liked to hold her hand as it were, while she made her first steps in the muddy, slippery world."

Mr. Merrick looked now a trifle perplexed, and Angela felt that she had gone a little too fast as he said, "I have been with Felicia from almost the beginning of her London life; and since I fancy that I know the world better than any young woman can know it"--he inclined himself to Angela with a slight, paternal irony of manner--"she has had her hand held. I have watched over my young nestlings," Mr. Merrick added, smiling kindly upon her.

"Yes, yes," she hurried to say, "a man knows more, of course--can guard from anything obvious; but the things to be guarded against in our complex modern life are not the obvious things; they are breaths, whispers, vague touches in the dark. Dear Mr. Merrick,"--her gentle look had now its rallying touch of boldness--"men do not hear or feel the things I mean. And, again, you are a man of the world, but your daughter is not a woman of the world. I know what you have wished for her--to keep your rose-bud sheltered, the dew still upon it; so often the ideal of the father when he has seen life in all its dangerous reality. You have succeeded; she is a rose-bud with the dew on it. Dear Mr. Merrick, keep it dewy." Her smile straight into his eyes was grave, steady. *Maitre Corbeau* was flattered by her words, her look. The vague self-distrust that often fluttered in him, that fear of perhaps lacking what she so delightfully saw in him, was still. He had hardly grasped the significance of her allusions.

"You see," Angela went on quietly,—she was by now quite sincerely in the very frame of mind her words fitted, warning, protective, benignant, exalted in his eyes so that the mood of that final "God bless you" was with her again, a mist that shut out flames,— "You see, your daughter is younger than I am. In one sense—it may sound odd, but I am very clear-sighted in all matters of sympathy—in one sense I doubt whether she could understand you as I do."

Angela's voice was as mild and smooth as milk and honey as she glided to another turn of her labyrinth. "There is an inevitable narrowness, intolerance, in youth; something cruel in the clearness of young minds, unable to see beyond their own acuteness. It didn't surprise me that neither she nor Maurice appreciated your essay. I disagreed with it, but I saw the bigness of my opponent, saw all the thought and life and suffering that underlay every sentence; and when I realized that they saw only the little superficial things, that they laughed at the shrubs and thickets and didn't even look up at the mountain, I felt all the strange situation, all the pain it must be to you; felt, forgive me if I say too much, your loneliness."

Mr. Merrick was amazed, perhaps more amazed by this revelation of some unkind disloyalty in his children, than gratified by Angela's sympathy. But though he could feel little gratitude he felt no distrust; and his injuries suddenly lowered, even larger than he had fancied. Maurice too! There was treachery then as well as disloyalty. The sudden grievance could not be kept down.

"I am surprised at Maurice. He urged me to publish, seemed to see nothing but the mountain," he said.

Angela felt a hasty recoil from this false step; she had imagined the dissuasions both Felicia's and Maurice's.

"Oh, about Maurice I don't know," she said quickly; "it was in my talk with her about it that I saw her dislike—and only inferred his." She felt that she had dogged all sorts of funny, half-hidden little dangers—Maurice's aroused enmity was the plainest of them—and what was she racing towards? what her object? She could not see. Felicia took all from her, would share not a jot or tittle of her rich possessions; well then, she would keep what came. Besides, Felicia was in peril. Yes, there was the object. She heaved a sigh as it emerged once more before her.

Mr. Merrick, after a silence not without its dignity, forbearing further comment on the revelation, went on: "Yes, loneliness is the lot of age. Youth is narrow. I don't complain; one can't when one understands. Before her marriage Felicia was my complaisant little echo. I filled her mind with all it owns. Now other interests have pushed me out."

The object, the beneficent object, was now so clear, that the dubious meaning of that sudden dodge was comfortably obscured; with one's eye on a beacon one could no longer glance at these wayside mishaps. She had a look of quiet homage for his generosity, as she said, "As to interests that push you out I hardly care for one. Your daughter's feeling about your essay could hardly have been spontaneous in your complaisant echo; it's the rarest women, the strongest only, who do not echo some one; I imagined that in this case she echoed her husband, but I see the larger influence. My Cousin Geoffrey was with your daughter when I came this afternoon. I hoped to see her alone—to see you; but I felt that I was interrupting. He admires your daughter greatly. The dewy rose attracts after dusty, practical life; it's pleasant, after turmoil, to inhale the perfume. As I say, frankly, it is an influence that I regret."

"He is Maurice's most intimate friend," said Mr. Merrick quickly.

She felt his involuntary clutch at the answer to an intimation he hardly recognized.

"Yes, he is," she assented, "but not the friend I would have chosen for Maurice either. Maurice wants an ideal in life, an impetus away from dreams and diletante dawdling into noble action. Geoffrey is pinned to activity, indeed, but hardly in its noble forms; pinned rather to the practical, the expedient, the continual compromise of political life that tends, I think, to eat away all sense of moral responsibility. Not a good influence for either of your nestlings. I am very frank, Mr. Merrick, but I have known both these men so well, since boyhood. Geoffrey is strong, and Maurice, with all his charm, is weak; the contrast must tell. Geoffrey predominates over Maurice and will, I fear, over your daughter. Already we have found his influence working. Women echo the strongest. Here I am, at home. It was so good of you to come with me. I am so glad of our talk. Won't you lunch with me and my father on Friday? Lord Challoner is to be with us—a clever man; he will be delighted to meet you. You and he will talk while papa and I listen. I love to watch minds striking sparks. You will come?"

"With pleasure." Mr. Merrick's varying emotions culminated for the moment in gratification. Lord Challoner was a very clever man; Lady Angela well known as a very clever woman. The responsibilities of his recognized worth wrought in him as he walked homeward.

CHAPTER VII

THE talk had been as suave as the ascent of a rocket; and once its destined height attained its transformation into successive explosive shocks swiftly followed. Felicia, shortly after her father's return, burst into Maurice's dressing-room. She had known a tormenting doubt of her own distrust; now her indignation was sure of itself, her distrust was justified; there was almost a relief in the fulness of her anger.

"Maurice, what do you think has happened?" she demanded.

Maurice was just finishing his dressing. He looked round at her inquiringly, laying down his brushes. Felicia's indignations were rare, and therefore rather alarming; but seeing that this indignation was in no way connected with himself--Felicia's whole aspect irradiated a sense of union, a conviction that he was to second her in her indignation--he took up the brushes again and put a finishing touch to his hair. "What is it?" he asked, wondering if Mr. Merrick had suddenly become insufferable, and rather hoping that such was the case and that Felicia would initiate a movement to get rid of him. "Nothing to bother you about your father, dear?" he added.

"Exactly. You remember last summer--Lady Angela and papa's article? She came here this afternoon and asked me to forgive her. I couldn't; it seemed cruel, I know; but I felt through and through me that I must not trust her. She went away, forgiving me, and now papa tells me that she met him and has been talking with him, and that he finds her charming, and that he is going to lunch with her! Imagine the audacity!"

Maurice, looking at her in the mirror, had turned white, feeling serpent-coils tightening about him again.

"How astonishing!" he ejaculated. But more than astonishment, he felt a sickening fear. What had Angela intended? What did she now intend?

"We must prevent it," said Felicia. "I hate, dear, to bring you into it, but you must see as I do that it's impossible. Try to explain it to papa; try to make him feel that she cannot be trusted, that she will poison everything; that in trusting her he divides himself from me."

Maurice had begun to tie his white cravat, but his fingers fumbled with it, and he realized that they were trembling. Uppermost in his mind was a hope, clutched at, that Angela's proffered friendship had been sincere, a dread lest Felicia's rejection of it should call down upon her Angela's revenge; for after all had not Angela, under the circumstances, behaved with extraordinary generosity? And what a weapon she held--and withheld--the weapon he himself had put into her hands. It was the thought of this weapon, turned against his wife's breast, and murdering there her love for him, that made him white.

"I will tell him, dear, anything you like," he said, in a voice she recognized as strange. "And she was here, you say, this afternoon? Felicia, dearest"--he had managed now to draw through the loop of the white tie--"weren't you a trifle hard on her?--a trifle cruel, as you say? She is a visionary creature. She probably came to you with a real longing for reconciliation; and if she had offended you it had been unconsciously--through taking too much for granted. You know you misjudged her last summer. You remember, darling, you said you did."

Something like terror was freezing Felicia's anger. She steadied herself with the effort to look at and to understand Maurice's point of view. "I said so because I wanted to make it easy for you; because I longed to believe myself in the wrong. Even now, I long to believe it. Perhaps I am unjust; perhaps she is right in what she said of me--that I am hard, cynical; perhaps she has really always wanted to be my friend. I can't think it out; I only feel that I cannot trust her, that she is false, and that she is getting power over papa. Why, I don't know, except that she loves power, and that through him she may strike at me; for what I feel most of all, and I have always felt it, Maurice, is that she hates me."

"Dearest,"--Maurice searched a drawer for a handkerchief--"I know all you feel; but you do grant, don't you, that your dislike of her, instinctive from the first, may blind you to some real sincerity in her? I don't think she hates you; she is jealous. I am afraid, though it's caddish to say it, that she did care a good deal about me, and that that's the root of it. Her impulse is really kind, but your instinct makes you feel the pain and bitterness under it. Understanding it all, as we do, it seems really cruel to push her away, to break with her utterly."

"We must, we must," said Felicia, "for her sake as well as ours, we must."

"Why, dearest?" Maurice tipped some perfume on the handkerchief.

"It can only be more pain and more bitterness for her if we don't. What can I mean to her? What can you mean to her? And I have broken with her. Oh, Maurice, surely you see that it must be."

He turned to her now, and saw that tears were running down her cheeks.

Caution left him. "Dearest!" he exclaimed, his arms about her in a moment, "rather than hurt you I would walk over ten thousand Angelas. Dearest, don't cry; I will do my best. I'll try and dissuade your father--an ugly task for me. Poor Angela was my friend."

"Oh, Maurice, say that I do not come between you and anything real."

Hiding her face on his shoulder, it comforted her to think herself weak, and he, with his larger, kinder comprehension, strong.

"You are the only real thing," Maurice answered. He felt that he forced her to imply herself wilful in wrongness; and his fear lest she were more right than she guessed made his triumph seem dangerous.

Felicia said that she would not come in to dinner, and Maurice walked slowly to the drawing-room, pausing for a moment over his thoughts in the little hall. Felicia's parting kiss had quieted his worst fear--the fear lest her love

suspected past wrongs in him, a baseless fear he now saw, and with this steadying of the nerves he could see the other fear as baseless too. Angela would never turn despicably on him; besides, even if she did, Felicia would never believe her, her jealousy would piteously interpret her desperation. There was further relief in thinking Felicia unjust. The thing must be patched up, and Felicia brought to see that common fairness demanded a certain toleration of Angela.

Mr. Merrick was reading a paper with a pretence at absorption, and Maurice guessed that he was very angry. Neither commented on Felicia's absence, and they went in silence into the little dining-room.

"So you are going to make friends with Angela," Maurice observed lightly, when the servant had gone.

"Felicia has spoken to you, I infer," said Mr. Merrick, sipping his soup in slow and regular spoonfuls. His father-in-law's aggressively noisy manner of imbibing soup had long been a thorn in the flesh to Maurice. It was peculiarly irritating to-night. He could but hold Mr. Merrick responsible for all the vexatious situation. Silly, gullible old fool! He could almost have uttered the words as the sibilant mouthfuls succeeded one another. How obvious, in looking at him, that Angela could only have captured him as a tool. To think that, again cast the danger-signal on the situation, made it more than vexatious. Maurice forcibly quieted his mental comments, since to think his father-in-law a silly old fool roused again his worst suspicions of Angela.

"Naturally, she has spoken to me," he said.

"I trust that you do not share her morbid hatred."

"I don't know about a morbid hatred," Maurice answered, controlling his impatience with the more success now that the soup was done. "I see a very normal antagonism of temperament. Angela is all artificiality, and Felicia all reality; but I do think," he added, "that Felicia has the defects of her qualities. She scorns artificiality too quickly. Her scorns outshoot the mark. I don't think that poor Angela, with all her attitudinising, meant any harm this afternoon. Why should she? It was, I own, rather hard on her to come to beg for forgiveness, and to have Felicia refuse to forgive her."

Mr. Merrick had not dared openly to express his angers and grievances, for then he must reveal their source, and that he felt to be inadvisable; but the latent angers only awaited their opportunity.

"Upon my word! Forgiveness for what?" he demanded.

Maurice recoiled as Angela that afternoon had recoiled. He had intended a cheery, mending talk, and he had not intended that it should lead him to this. He could not tell Mr. Merrick the cause of Angela's visit--that he had jested with her over the very article he had urged him to publish.

"I don't quite know what happened," he said, searching his mind for a safe clue. "Felicia, as you know, didn't like that article of yours; Angela spoke to her about it--it was in the summer--there was some misunderstanding; Felicia resented her sympathy."

Matters were becoming clear, luridly clear, to Mr. Merrick's mind, and Angela gained all that Felicia lost. "Indeed," he said, ominously, "she criticizes her own father and resents the frank and more intelligent criticism of a friend."

"No, no!" Maurice was feeling a rush of stupefaction. What had he done? This was not the clue. "Felicia, as far as I understand, didn't initiate the criticism--resented Angela's."

"I see; I understand. It is the proffered friendship she rejects; the community, not the criticism." Mr. Merrick felt that in Angela's interpretation of the scene he held a touchstone of its real significance, invisible to Maurice. And how noble had been her further reticence. His anger rose with redoubled vigour over the slight obstacle Maurice had thrown before it. "I see it all," he repeated; "the quixotic generosity of Lady Angela's seeking for reconciliation, and Felicia's rejection of her. As I say, a morbid hatred, and that only, explains it, and it explains it all."

Maurice was silent, with a sort of despair he felt that so, in its false truth, the situation must rest.

"At all events," he said, "I don't suppose that under the circumstances you will really care to accept this invitation of Angela's."

"I have accepted it."

"Grant that it's a bit indelicate of her to steal such a march on Felicia. It looks like retaliation, you know."

Mr. Merrick flushed. "I do myself and her the honour to think that it looks like friendship for myself." Fresh lights were breaking on him every moment. Dewy roses in danger; perilous influences. "I do her the further honour," he went on, "to believe that Felicia's rejection of her does not alter her wish to do well by Felicia. For my part I will do my best to atone to her for the cruel affront that she has received at my daughter's hands."

Maurice, after the uncomfortable meal was over, almost feared to go to Felicia's room with his news of defeat. He feared, too, with this new weakness born of his new self-disgust, that her love already had taken on that shadow of suspicion and distrust that he dreaded. He was feeling a sort of giddiness from the hateful pettiness of complexity that enmeshed him. He even imagined he might find her crying in bed, and dinnerless, a horribly effective form of feminine pathos that he had never yet had to face in her. The sight of a tray outside her door reassured him as to the dinner, and it was with a sense of exquisite relief, a sense of dear, sane, commonplace effacing silly doubts that he found her engaged in the very feminine but very unpathetic occupation of tidying her drawers.

She sat—her lap filled with gloves, ribbons and handkerchiefs, and was folding and rearranging, apparently intent on her occupation. Her eyes, as she looked round at him, gave him once more that sense of quiet security. She had faced the situation, seen its triviality, recovered her humour and her calm. Maurice at once saw the situation as only trivial too.

"Well?" Felicia asked, laying a lawn collar in its place.

"Well, dear, I'm afraid he is unmalleable. He is going."

Felicia's face hardened a little, but not, he knew, towards himself.

"He sees the strain, the unnaturalness he makes?"

"Try not to mind, dear. You'll find that it will adjust itself."

Maurice had not guessed, nor had Felicia herself even, the almost panic sense of dismay and danger that underlay her determined activity, her determined cheerfulness. Angela seemed to threaten all her life. Worst of all, though Felicia clung blindly to her instinct, she seemed to threaten her very power of judging, feeling clearly. Darts of self-distrust went through her, and following them, strange disintegrating longings to justify Angela by that self-distrust, to own herself hard, cruel, and to find peace. Her mind played her these will-of-the-wisp tricks, tempting her—to what bogs and quicksands? Under the shifting torment only the instinct held firm, and with shut eyes it clung to courage as her only safeguard; courage to face the tangled life, and the greater courage needed to face the tangled thoughts and conscience. It kept the quiet in her voice, her eyes, as she answered now.

"I mind, of course; but I believe that with time he will come back to me. I shan't oppose him. As long, dear, as she doesn't come between you and me, it's really all right."

CHAPTER VIII

"YES, it had become impossible," said Geoffrey. He was standing before her in the little room overlooking the river where they so often talked. "I couldn't submit to being dragged helplessly at the wheels of a chariot that I would have driven in precisely the opposite direction." He smiled a little as he added, "So you see before you a ruined man. Are you pleased with me that I've embraced failure?" Lightness of voice went with the smile, and, superficially, the old manner of holding out a sugar-plum to a child.

Felicia, knowing what his resignation of office meant to him, was too much distressed by what she felt beneath the lightness to respond in the playful key.

"You are not a ruined man," she said; "I'm not pleased that you should call yourself that. You really can't afford to re-enter the House as an independent member?"

"No," said Geoffrey, shortly; "I can afford nothing but drudgery."

"Drudging with you will only be a stepping-stone back to power."

He was studying her as he stood before her, seeing suddenly after his momentary self-absorption, her pallor and thinness. She almost reminded him of the ghostly Felicia, the Felicia of tears and helpless grief; the Felicia of that distant day among the birch-woods. This Felicia was not helpless, not weeping, not quite so wan, but her looks made an ominous echo. He took a seat beside her. "Your father still goes constantly to Angela?" he asked.

Felicia nodded gravely, yet without plaintiveness. Geoffrey made no comment on the affirmation. In silence for some moments, he told himself that this daily growing alienation accounted for the air of pain and tension.

"I must actually seem to you to whine over myself," he said, presently. "Of course, I know that the drudgery is only a stepping-stone. I must fill my pockets with ammunition; find the pebble for my sling before I confront Goliath again. But tell me something.... I may ask it?" He hesitated. Under his light firmness he knew a shattered, groping mood. He could not think with clearness either for her or himself, and only felt that he must ask.

"Anything you like," Felicia answered gravely.

"Are you happy?"

He had never come so near as in asking the question; they both felt it. Some barrier was gone; the barrier of her happiness, perhaps. Felicia knew that the little moment suddenly trembled for her with that sense of nearness; in another she felt that her sadness would be a stronger barrier.

She looked up from her sewing.

"You know what I feel about papa and Lady Angela. I feel it foolishly perhaps."

"Apart from that, it's a pain, I know, but one can adjust oneself to pain."

"Apart from that, am I happy? What do you mean by happiness?"

"Are you satisfied? Is your life growing? Is it glad?" Each question was a stone thrown into a deep, deep well of sadness, but she answered with serenity over these shaken depths, even smiling at him with a flicker of the old malice.

"It would not grow if I were satisfied, nor, perhaps, if I were altogether glad."

She saw by the look of accepted gloom that came to his face that he knew himself banished from that moment of nearness, and over the barrier felt herself putting out a hand of tender compunction and comradeship, as she went on more gravely, "I think I am happy, but happiness is not a thing one can look at. It's like a bird singing in a tree--one parts the branches to see it and it is silent."

"You hear it singing, then, when I don't ask you questions?" He had grasped the metaphorical hand, understanding and grateful; understanding, at all events, as much as she herself did.

"Yes; and when I don't stop to listen for it."

They talked on again: of his situation, his projects, but these things were now far from their minds. The fact of his broken life no longer held Geoffrey's thoughts; they were in a chaos of doubts and surmises. He had ruined himself, then, that she might hear the bird sing, and it was silent; and was it only silent? Had it flown? For the first time since he had played the part of a happy fate in her life he knew a passionate regret for what he had done. No doubt, no surmise, touched her love for her husband. The regret was for the chance he had lost--that other chance of making her happy. Why hadn't he ruthlessly held on to the advantage circumstance gave him, the advantage not only over Maurice's poverty, but over Maurice's weakness? A lurid thought went over that weakness. Would he, Geoffrey, whatever his poverty, have given her up? The "no" that thrilled sternly through his blood told him that to his strength the triumph might have come. He only quelled the tumult by remembering her strength. Dubious peace--to think that her strength would never have let him hope; her strength was great, no doubt, but was it as great as he had imagined? And would it have held her faithful to a finally fickle Maurice? Above all, would it have outmatched his own through years? The tumult was rising again, and he saw that the sudden, wild regret had been like the opening of a flood-gate to such tumults. He must endure them with as much composure as he could muster from contemplation of the fact that the past was irrevocable, that he had given her to her husband, and that she loved her husband; the last fact in particular laid a chill, sane hand on retrospect.

He and Felicia were still talking when Mr. Merrick entered.

Far from assuming a culprit's humility, Mr. Merrick's demeanour of late showed, towards Maurice and Felicia, an aggressive indifference, and towards Geoffrey a portentous gravity. He had made a habit of coming in upon *tete-a-tetes*, taking up a book, and seating himself, with a frosty nod and air of remonstrant determination that was more than a hint for Geoffrey's departure.

Geoffrey had ignored the hint on several recent occasions, continuing to talk until Maurice's appearance seemed to relieve Mr. Merrick from some sense of grim obligation; he would then arise, with no word, and stalk away. Geoffrey felt amusement in watching these manoeuvres, giving very little thought to their significance, and finding a schoolboy fun in the conviction that he annoyed Mr. Merrick very much by outstaying him. But to-day he was in no mood for annoying Mr. Merrick; Mr. Merrick's appearance, indeed, annoyed him too vividly for him to feel the fun of retaliation. He got up at once, and before the other had taken his place near the window.

"Good-bye," he said, taking Felicia's hand; his eyes lingered on her pallor, her wanness. "I won't silence the bird any more. I'll see you soon again. Tell Maurice I'm sorry to miss him."

He departed, and Mr. Merrick, arrested in his usual routine, paused, book in hand, on his way to his chair.

His frustrated passive energy took form in speech. He sat down and opened the book, observing, "I am sorry, Felicia, to be obliged to send any of your guests away."

Felicia had noticed and wondered at the interruptions, hardly suspecting them of purpose, but now all manner of latent irritations leaped up in her. To-day, especially, she had resented her father's appearance. She had needed Geoffrey, the haven of his silence and his strength. After that one strange moment of inner trembling, the old sense of quiet skies and an encircling shore had returned, and she had rested in it.

Now, looking up, her face sharpened with quick suspicion and quick resentment, she asked, "Obliged? Send my guests away? Indeed, papa, you could not do that."

Her voice rather alarmed Mr. Merrick; it revealed a more resolute hostility than he had suspected; and real hostility, final or open hostility between him and his child, Mr. Merrick, in his heart of hearts, feared more than any calamity. Flattered vanity, injured trust, real anxiety for her welfare, had all helped to float his new independence, but he never contemplated really sailing away from her. He nerved himself now with the thought of his duty. Swinging his foot, speaking with measured definiteness, his eyes on his book, he said, "I shall at all events do my utmost to protect you from an undesirable intimacy."

Felicia's quick heart guessed at the alarm that nerved itself, and now, after the moment in which her anger rose, her sense of the ludicrous shook the anger to sudden laughter.

"Papa! how ridiculous!" she exclaimed. "Really, your prejudices shouldn't make you say and do such foolish and such futile things. Mr. Daunt is my dearest friend--Maurice's dearest friend."

"It is a friendship I regret for both of you. Maurice is weak, Mr. Daunt is strong; he dominates you both."

"What folly, my dear father!"

"Very well, Felicia, folly be it. I can only say that your conduct in this, as in other respects, deeply distresses me. You are altogether changed."

"I changed? In what respect?"

Mr. Merrick paused to review swiftly all the respects, before saying, "You have become cynical, ungenerous, disloyal."

Felicia's amusement hardened to stern gravity. She grew even paler, laying down her sewing as she said, "Ungenerous? Disloyal? I?"

"You, Felicia. It has given me the very greatest pain."

"How have I been ungenerous? disloyal?"

Her father did not meet her eyes.

"You have been ungenerous to a very noble woman, who only asked to be your friend. You have been disloyal to me."

"To you!" Her interjections were like swift knives, cutting at his careful deliberateness. "What do you mean?"

"You thought fit, moved by this influence that I deplore--quite apart from its open antagonism to my claims on you--to scoff and jeer at my essay. It would have been enough to have expressed your dislike to me alone." His eyes now turned to her.

She gazed at him with an almost stupid astonishment. Suddenly she rose. As if some hateful revelation had torn stupefaction from her,--"That horrible woman!" she cried.

"It was your husband who told me," said Mr. Merrick quickly.

"Maurice told you that I had scoffed at your essay with that woman?"

Her eyes now had a corpse-like vacancy, very unpleasant to meet; only his consciousness of integrity enabled Mr. Merrick to keep his own steady.

"Scoff is perhaps too strong a word. You allowed her to see to the full your dislike, your scorn, and then repulsed her sympathy. That is what Maurice gave me to understand, and that, I don't fancy you can deny, is the truth."

Felicia, looking now about her vaguely, sank again in her chair. Her silence, her dazed helplessness, tinged Mr. Merrick's displeasure with a slight compunction.

"There, child," he said, rising as he spoke, "don't feel like that about it. Any injury that I may have received is fully forgiven. The only real harm is your irrational hatred,--don't stare like that, Felicia--your irrational hatred, as I say, and the influence that I protest against and must always protest against."

Still she was silent, though her gaze had dropped from him. Her silence, her look of disproportionate dismay, perturbed and rather embarrassed him. He yielded to the magnanimity of a pat on the head as he passed her on his way out of the room, saying, "Think it all over; think better of it all." Pausing at the door, he added, "*She* bears no grudge, not the faintest; understands you better than you do yourself, my poor child." She still sat, lying back in her chair, her eyes cast down, her hands intertwined in her lap. It was uncomfortable to leave her so, but after all, the punishment was deserved, her very silence proved as much; and he had done his duty.

Felicia was hardly conscious of his presence, his voice or his going; the words went over her head like the silly cries of a flight of cranes; when the door was closed it was as if the cranes had passed. She was alone on a great empty moor, it seemed, an empty, lowering sky above her.

This, then, was the truth. Her husband was a false, a craven man. Fiercely, yet with a languid fierceness, as of slow flames, feeling an immense fatigue, as though she had been beaten with scourges, her thoughts stripped him of all her sweet seeings of him. Shallow, impressionable, weak, his love for her the only steady thing in him; his loyalty to her as unsteady as a flame in the wind; his love, perhaps, steady only because she was strong. She could feel no pity; rather she felt that she spurned him from her. In her weariness it seemed to her that for a long time she had been trying to love him, and that now the effort was snapped. And her scorn of him passed into self-scorn. Fatal weakness and blindness not to have seen him truly from the first, not to have felt that her craving for love, her love for his love, had been more than any love for him. In her deep repulsion from him and all he signified, his individuality and its fears, its sadness, its devotion, were unreal to her, blotted out in scorn--scorn, the distorter of all truth--as unreal as her love for it had been. And with her recognized weakness and despair came, with the memory of that trembling nearness, the thought of Geoffrey, and her heart suddenly cried out for him, for his strength, his unwavering truth. She closed her eyes, holding the thought close.

Some one entered, and she opened her eyes on Maurice. He had worked all the afternoon. The sitter was gone. He beamed with conscious merit, deserving her approbation, quite like a child let loose from school; smiling and radiant.

He came to her as she lay sunken in the chair, leaned to her for a kiss, and paused, meeting the hard fixed look of her eyes.

"What is the matter, dearest?" he asked, and his heart began to shake.

"Why did you tell papa that lie?"

He hardly understood the question, but her tone struck through him like a knife. "What lie?"

"You told him that I talked to Lady Angela of my dislike for his article."

"Didn't you?" Maurice asked feebly, for his brain was whirling. The added baseness did not urge her voice from its horrible, icy calm.

"I, Maurice? When you--you only talked to her of it?"

"Felicia, I swear you have mistaken it. Don't kill me in looking like that. Let me think. I told him--yes--I had to explain how it happened--your anger towards Angela, your sending her away. I muddled into the whole thing. I suppose I let him think that you had talked. How could I tell him that it was I? For Heaven's sake, be merely just, darling,--Felicia,--how could I tell him that, when I am half responsible for his publishing it? You remember the mess I got into to please you?"

"To please me? You are a coward, Maurice." She turned her eyes from him.

Maurice stood before her, miserably, abjectly silent. Moments went by, and still she sat with stern, averted eyes that seemed to look away from him for ever. It was not even as if she paused to give a final verdict; it was as though in her last words she had condemned him, and as if, now, he were a thing put by and forgotten.

But though, her brow on her clenched hand, her eyes fixed, half looking down, she seemed a figure of stony immutability, more than if she looked at him, she was aware of his misery, his abjectness, his piteous loss of all smiles and happy radiance. Her own words--"a lie," "a coward," echoed. Insufferable shocks of feeling, indistinguishable, immense, went through her; and suddenly the surging sense of her own cruelty, his piteousness, made a long cry within her. She could not bear to be so cruel; she could not bear to have him suffer. The inner cry came in a stifled moan to her lips. "Maurice!" She covered her face with her hands. He fell on his knees beside her, his heart almost broken by sudden hope. They clung together like two children. "Forgive me; forgive me," she repeated. "Forgive me. Nothing--nothing could deserve such cruelty. My poor, poor Maurice; I didn't love you. I was so cruel that I didn't love you any longer."

She looked into his blue eyes, his face, quivering with sincerity. With the confession, the awful moments of hatred drifted into nightmare unreality. His need of her, his love for her, were the only realities; they engulfed the vision of herself--dry, bitter, bereft of her love for him. It flitted away--a bat--in the sad, white dawn. It was she, who, holding him to her, explained, to herself as well as to him, how it all happened; an involved, sudden twist of circumstance before which he had been bewildered, weak. "And weakness is more forgiveable--so far more forgiveable than cruelty, dear--dear," she said. "Horrible! to have had such thoughts." She could forgive him. She could not forgive herself for having hated him. The very memory trembled in her like a living thing. No tenderness was great enough to atone.

Later on, when Mr. Merrick appeared, Maurice rose, and with unflinching distinctness put the whole piece of comic tragedy before him, sparing himself in nothing. After the searing torture he had undergone, he felt no pain in the avowal. Mr. Merrick's red displeasure rather amused him, so delicious was the sense of utterly redeeming himself in Felicia's eyes. It was Felicia who felt the pang for her father's wounded vanity and for the ugly picture that Maurice must present to him.

"You have behaved in a way I don't care to characterize," Mr. Merrick remarked, when Maurice had finished with "If I had only had Felicia's courage at the beginning--only frankly told you that I didn't like the article--if I hadn't been over-anxious to please you and her, I wouldn't have got myself into such a series of messes."

And now Maurice, his head held high, his thumbs in his pockets, looking as if, with gallant indifference, he were facing cannon that he scorned, replied that he deserved any reproach.

"Maurice has been weak, too complaisant," said Felicia, "but there has been a half-truth in all he said; he kept back the whole for fear of hurting you. Forgive us both."

"You have nothing to forgive in Felicia," said Maurice; "she has been the target, I think, for all our egotisms to stab."

"Indeed, Maurice, indeed. I am not in any way aware of having wounded my child except where your tergiversation opened her to my just reproach. If she has been a target you have hidden behind it."

"Exactly." Maurice received the raking fire with undisturbed equanimity. "In future you'll remember that whatever I say she can never deserve reproach."

Felicia was protesting against this too sweeping defence, when Mr. Merrick interrupted her with "I only beg that in the future you will not whet your consciences on my feelings. Pray consider me, if only slightly."

Felicia looked, when her father went out, too dejected as a result of this scene of dauntless penance.

"Smile, smile, darling," Maurice begged, raising her hand to his lips, and feeling like a knight returned to his lady, shrived of misdeed by peril bravely fronted.

"Tell me it really is all over. Tell me that I pleased you--that it was what you would have hoped of me."

"Yes; you were all that I wished. It is only that I am sorry for him. He is like a hurt child, Maurice."

"He will forget and forgive in a day or two. We will pet him; make much of him. Can I do anything more to feel that I am fully loved again?"

She leaned her forehead against his arm, tired with a spiritual and bodily fatigue that made her voice dim and slumberous as she answered, "Don't ever remind me that you were not."

CHAPTER IX

THE news of Geoffrey's resignation of office was a tonic to Maurice's new energy. It spurred him to fuller deserving of such sacrifice. He finished the portrait over which he had been loitering, with a sudden vigour that seemed in its auspicious result to promise more originality than he had ever shown, and in pursuance of the new resolution, he accepted another order--a dull and wealthy old ecclesiastic in a cathedral town--an order, in spite of remunerativeness, that he would certainly have refused a month before, as absolutely clogging to all inspiration.

"I shall have to leave Felicia to you for perhaps over a fortnight," he said to Mr. Merrick, as, in a hansom they drove to an evening party. Felicia preceded them with the friend at whose house they had dined.

Maurice had carried out his project of "petting" his father-in-law, but in spite of his butterfly manner of gaiety Mr. Merrick's mood showed little relaxation; his wounds were deep; they rankled; and now he received the news of guardianship, which Maurice imparted with an air of generous self-sacrifice, gravely.

"It's our first separation," Maurice added. "You will have her all to yourself. My loss will be your gain."

His smile left Mr. Merrick's gravity unchanged. The opportunity seemed to have come for the discharge of a painful duty.

"That I am to have Felicia all to myself, I question," he said, looking ahead at the swift lights of the moving town; for he did not care to meet his son-in-law's eyes while he seized the opportunity.

"Well,"--Maurice good-humouredly yielded to his funny exactitude--"not altogether; her friends will relieve guard now and then."

It was wiser to reach his purpose by slow approaches; Mr. Merrick evenly remarked, "My guard shall be unbroken," adding, "It will be doubly necessary."

He was rewarded by a light note of wonder in Maurice's voice. "You seem to take it very seriously, my dear father."

"I take it seriously, Maurice."

Even from Mr. Merrick's complacency such magnified significance was perplexing; Maurice turned an inquiring gaze upon him.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"I regret this departure of yours, Maurice. I beg you to reconsider it."

"My dear father, what *are* you talking about?"

"You should not leave Felicia. She is exposed to certain influences--to a certain influence--that I deeply disapprove. She is unruly, reckless. I pretend to no further authority. She defies me."

"Will you explain yourself?" The patience of Maurice's tone was ironic.

"I will speak plainly, since you force it. Mr. Daunt is too much with Felicia."

"Geoffrey! He can't be too much with her."

Maurice's nerves, since the last scene with Felicia, had been on edge. Only a contemptuous amusement steadied them now. Mr. Merrick's paternal anxiety, alloyed though it was with the latent desire to hit back, was sincere; Maurice saw in it only a pompous, an idiotic impertinence.

Mr. Merrick's voice hardened to as open an hostility as his son-in-law's.

"People notice it. There is talk about it. I will not stand by and see my child's name become the plaything of malicious gossip."

"Who notices it? Who talks about it? What utter and damnable folly!"

"I decline to enter into an unbecoming altercation with you, Maurice. Your friend is obviously in love with your wife, and Felicia allows him to be too much with her."

"Is this pure imagination on your part? I know, of course, that there's never been any love lost between you and Geoffrey."

"I have been warned," said Mr. Merrick, reluctant, yet with redoubled dignity.

Maurice's smouldering nerves struck to flame, and an ugly illumination glared at him. "This can be no one but

Angela," he said.

It was difficult to keep dignity under eyes that seemed to take him by the throat; in the struggle to look firmly back Mr. Merrick was silent.

"Come. Own to it. The venomous liar!" Maurice added in a low voice, studying the revelations of the other's wrathful helplessness.

"I have no wish to deny it, and I must forbid you to speak in that manner of a woman who honours you by calling you her friend."

"I know Angela better than you do," Maurice laughed. His fury almost passed away from its derivative object.

"The fact remains that people talk, and that truest kindness warned me of it."

"If people talk it's she who makes them. I've known--ever since I married her--that Geoffrey loved Felicia." Maurice flung him the truth scornfully.

"Yet you speak of lies!"

"I know my friend, and honour him, as you don't seem to know or honour your daughter."

"I know human nature as you don't seem to know it. It's a dangerous intimacy. I insist on my right to protect my daughter."

"You insult her by claiming such a right. Don't speak to me of this again." Maurice, as he said it, grew suddenly white with a new thought. "And never dare," he added, turning eyes that quelled even Mr. Merrick's fully-armed championship, "never dare tell Felicia that you have discussed her with that woman."

"You may be sure that I would not expose Lady Angela to Felicia's misconception."

Mr. Merrick, in his realized helplessness, cast about him for some retaliatory weapon. He seized the first that offered itself. "And since my meaning as Felicia's father seems gone, I had better go myself. I am not needed, since you say so, by either of you."

It was the idlest threat. In utter astonishment he heard Maurice answering, "I've thought more than once of suggesting it. By all means."

"I will remain with Felicia while you are away."

"As you please."

"I will leave directly after your return."

"When you will." Maurice's voice was quieter. The unexpected prospect of relief mollified him. "It's a pity, for Felicia will suffer, but she herself must see that it doesn't do. You have made life too uncomfortable for both of us. And after this! Well, you've made things impossible. For a time you had better realize what your daughter is away from her, realize how little she needs any one's protection. It's settled then; you go, on my return."

Mr. Merrick bowed. He was aghast, outraged, more than all, wounded. The hurt child whimpered and then fairly howled within him, while, in silence, he smiled ironically. They reached their destination, Maurice in a growing rage that for once obliterated his fears. It was like strong wine that uplifted, made him almost glad.

He left his father-in-law and made his way through the crowded rooms in search of Felicia. He needed to look into her limpid eyes after this hissing of serpents. But instead of Felicia he found Angela.

For the distasteful monotony of these assemblies Angela had always an air of patient disdain; and to-night, under a high wreath of white flowers, her face more than ever wore its mask of languid martyrdom. She was in white, perfumed like a lily.

Maurice felt a keener gladness on seeing her. His wrath, running new currents of vigour through him, carried him past any hesitation. At last he would have it out with Angela.

"I want to speak to you," he said. "Is there any place where one can get out of this crowd?"

Angela saw in a flash that a crisis had arrived; and in another that she had been working towards such a crisis, living for it, since Maurice had cast her off. For a moment, beneath the rigour of his eyes--to see Maurice unflinching was a new experience--her spirit quailed, then soared, exulting in the thought of final contest. Since he wished it--yes, they would speak openly. He should at last hear all--her hate, her love, her supplication. She was an intimate in the house where Maurice and Felicia were formal guests; her quick mind seized all possibilities. "Yes," she said, "there is a little room--a little boudoir. No one ever goes there on nights like these." Her self-mastery was all with her as she moved beside him through the crowd. She was able, over the tumult of hope and fear, to speak calmly, to smile at friends her weary, fragile smile.

"Aren't these scenes flimsy and sad?" she said. "How much happiness, how much reality do they express, do you think?"

Maurice forced himself to reply. "They express a lot of greediness and falseness; those are real enough."

"That is true, Maurice," she said gently; "so true that I sometimes think I would rather be a washerwoman bending in honest work over my tubs; one would be nearer the realities one cares for."

They left the reception-rooms, and she was silent when faces were no longer about them. She led him down a passage, across a book-filled room, a student's lamp its only light, and softly turning the handle of a further door, opened it on the quiet of a little room, discreetly frivolous with the light gaiety of Louis XV decorations, empty of all significance but that of smiling background for gay confidences or pouting coquetties. Not exactly the background for such a scene as she and Maurice must enact, yet Angela triumphed in the contrast. Tragic desolation, splendid sincerities would gain value from their trivial setting. Her passion, her misery, would menace more strangely, implore more piteously among nymphs and garlands.

She dropped into a chair, and put out her hand to a jar of white azaleas. She asked no question, but she looked at him steadily. Maurice had closed the door and stood near it, his back to it, at a distance from her. The sound of the world outside--the world that smiled and pouted--was like the faint hum of a top.

"How have you dared warn my father-in-law against Geoffrey?" asked Maurice. He was nerved to any truth.

Angela made no reply, her long, deep eyes on him while, automatically, her hand passed over the azaleas.

"How could you betray my confidence in you? What a fool I was to trust you!"

"Betray you?" she murmured.

"You pursue me and my happiness!" Maurice cried, and hot tears of self-pity started to his eyes. Her eyes dropped. That his hand should deal this blow!

"I pursue you?--and your happiness, Maurice?" she repeated.

"Can you deny it? Since we came back to England you have been a poison in our lives."

She was struggling with the moment's dreadful bitterness. Over the bleeding pain of it her sense of his cruel injustice sustained her to a retort: "I have betrayed nothing. You are the only betrayer, Maurice. You betrayed my love; you betrayed your wife to me."

"Great heavens!" Maurice dropped his forehead on clenched hands, "it was to spare you!"

"I guessed it," said Angela, while her hand still passed lightly over the azaleas.

They were silent for a moment, and presently in a voice, steady, even gentle, she went on, "I have wished, sincerely wished, to be your wife's friend. Even after she refused my friendship, I have wished to guard her, at least, from malicious gossip. You know what London is. You and I and your wife live in among people who regard old-fashioned scruples intellectually, not morally; but your wife's position is not great enough to allow her to be reckless. Even without such knowledge as mine to reveal it, Geoffrey's love for her makes her conspicuous. They are here together to-night. I saw them at a concert the other day; met them in the Park before that. When last I went to your house I found them together, alone, and--I understand your wife, Maurice--she would think no harm of it--I think she had just kissed him; no harm, Maurice,"--before his start her voice did not quicken, "she would imagine that she kissed him as a brother. He held her hand, I think. I felt it my duty to put petty conventions and reticences aside, and for her sake, for your sake, Maurice, to warn her father, with all delicacy, all caution. I believe it, with all my soul, to be a perilous intimacy. That is my betrayal."

Maurice's brain swam with the picture she flashed upon it. Only for a moment;--Felicia's smile went like a benison over it. Even if it were true, he could look at the picture, after that first pause of breathlessness, steadily. Even if it were true, he could smile back, understanding.

"Geoffrey has all my trust," he said; "I have all Felicia's love."

"You think so," said Angela quietly. Again her eyes fell before his, but her face remained fixed in its conviction of sincerity.

"How dare you, Angela."

Still looking down, she went on as steadily as before, her voice anchored with its weight of woe,--how he loved Felicia!--"I dare because I believe that she loves him most. Her love for you and your weakness is maternal by now. I know it, I feel it; I can see it when she looks at you and at him. She loves him as she has never loved you. And I! Oh, Maurice--Maurice--I!" She suddenly cast her arms upon the table, her head fell upon them; terror, regret, and passionate longing swept over her; her voice broke and she burst into sobs. "Couldn't I have let her go from you? Has it not been nobility in me to guard her--for you? She has never loved you, and I--Maurice, you know, you know--how I have loved you, how I love you! Forgive me! Have pity on me!"

Maurice, frowning darkly, sick with unwilling pity, hating to feel that she deserved pity and that he hated her, turned his eyes away. She had terrified him too much; had dared to lay desecrating hands on the thing dearest to him in the world. Something, and not the least best thing in him, froze before her cry for pity and made him incapable of forgiveness. For once in his life he hardened into resistant strength.

His silence was more horrible to Angela than any look, any word. She raised her head and saw his averted eyes. Only humiliation remained for her. She rose. Her wreath of flowers, loosened, had slipped to one side, she put up a vague hand to it, moaning "Maurice!"

Still he looked away, with odd, startled eyes that did not think of her. The wonder of the shot that had passed

through his heart was still felt more as a surprise than as a pain.

She knew that she would always see him so--erect, beautiful, startled from a shot. She tottered to him; she fell before him and grasped his arms. "Oh pity me! Don't be so cruel. What wrong have I done? Despise me--but pity me."

"I cannot," he said.

"Then kiss me--once--only once."

"I cannot," he repeated, still not looking at her.

"Have you never loved me? Never really loved me--as you love her?" she said, shuddering and hiding her face as she crouched at his feet.

"Never!"

Swaying, trembling violently, she arose. She threw wide her arms, seized him, and closing her eyes to his look of passionate repulsion, kissed him on his brow, cheek, lips, before, almost striking her from him, he broke from her, burst open the door and left her.

CHAPTER X

"GEOFFREY, dear old boy, walk home with me, will you?" On the steps, after seeing Felicia and her friend into their carriage, Maurice put his hand through Geoffrey's arm. "I've had a row with my father-in-law--would rather not see him just now." They crossed the square together. Maurice was feeling no reaction to weakness after his strength. The scene was like a distant memory, and that strange shot that had hurt, had pierced him with such a pang--not of suspicion, not of foreboding, but of wonder, deep, sad wonder.

He felt a sort of languor after pain, and, as they walked, went on dreamily: "Such a queer evening, Geoffrey, horrible!--yet no, splendid too. Facing things is splendid isn't it? I want to tell you something, Geoffrey--to confess something--I want you to know. That winter--when I thought I could not marry Felicia, I went pretty far with Angela. I thought everything was up with me; I didn't care much where I drifted. And I did drift. Nothing much more than there has always been, Geoffrey; with Angela it was never a case of playing with fire, the danger was of getting frozen into the ice. It was abominable of me--caddish;" Maurice's dreamy voice had a dignity that seemed to hold all other reproach than his own at arm's length, a dignity so strange and new that Geoffrey even at the moment's great upsurging of bitterness, regret and question could repress it as unworthy, not only of himself, but of Maurice. "Abominable--abominable," Maurice repeated, "for I let her think--more than ever--that I cared--something. She is odious to me, Geoffrey. I can't be just to her."

Geoffrey said nothing, but his quiet profile made confidences as easy as peaceful breathing; the confidences that could be told. The others--ah! that distant wailing of regret. But in this dreamy mood even that was very distant. "Perhaps, dear old fellow--if I'd told you--on that night, you wouldn't have cared to help me."

Maurice stated the fact calmly, looked at it calmly. "In that case--what would I be, Geoffrey?--if you and Felicia had not made me?"

In the still, sleeping town, chill with a coming dawn, they were as near as spirits, walking together through old memories.

"I would have cared to help you--and her," said Geoffrey.

"Ah! well; perhaps;" Maurice sighed a little. "While I'm away, Geoffrey, see a lot of Felicia, and, Geoffrey, see that Angela doesn't get near her. Her silly old father dislikes you, but you won't mind that. He suspected you of being in love with her, so I informed him that he was right. Dear old Geoff! You will see after her?"

"I don't mind the father; I would mind making it difficult for her to get on with him."

"Oh! you won't. He's had to accept it. I wouldn't like to go if you weren't here to see after her. So you don't regret making me?"

"Making you and her so happy?" Geoffrey smiled, humouring his child-like mood.

"I do make her happy? You see it. It's your reward, my dear friend. That's what I want to say to you. I've said it often enough to myself. You shall never regret it, so help me God."

Without looking at him Geoffrey put his hand on Maurice's, pressing it firmly. Dimly, he felt, among crowding shapes of accepted sorrow, only a peace, a thankfulness.

"You see," Maurice stammered, "I should die without her. She is life to me, Geoffrey. You don't know what you've given me--I hardly knew. She is life to me--that's all; and I should die without her."

The talk with Geoffrey seemed like a dream the next day. It was not real; Maurice's conscience could not call such faint confession real. Yet, in spirit, it had been more real than the reality which eyed it sadly. In spite of sadness it went with him like a thought of peace, of safety.

Felicia, when she heard of her father's proposed and accepted departure, acquiesced with even more cheerfulness

than he had hoped for, and when Maurice, flushing a little, told her of Mr. Merrick's resolution to protect her, she said that she had suspected that. "I am glad you let him know the truth, too. It's really better to let him see that he has only discovered what no one wishes to conceal." She looked musingly up at her husband. Though she looked clearly, no consciousness in her answering his flush, a faint trail of cloud drifted--faint and far--across the quiet sky of her thoughts, or was it a little wind that blew apart the veil of white serenity, showing darkness behind it? That turning of her weariness and wretchedness to Geoffrey--the memory of it was like the drifting cloud, or like the revealing wind. Dimly the darkness faded. The turning had been because of cruel passion, that horrible moment of mistaken hatred. The cloud melted, or was it self-reproach that once more drew the veil of tenderness across the dark?

Maurice, gazing, saw only the musing thought.

"I can't blame him--really--either, Maurice. You and I know how Geoffrey loves me, but we can hardly expect papa to see that as an accepted fact nor to recognize the calibre of such a love."

It was his recognition of the calibre of Geoffrey's love that kept Maurice's faith high above even a self-dishonouring twinge of jealousy. Yet the sadness, as for might-have-beens in which he had no share, still was with him. The vision of that unseen kiss was with him too. He did not believe it true, though his love for Felicia almost claimed it true; it beautified her--that kiss of reverent pity and tenderness. The toad Angela flung became a flower on Felicia's breast; that he could smile at such a vision was his flower, too; but the vision was part of the sadness. He saw himself shut out from a strange, great realm--colourless, serene, like a country of glorious mountain peaks before the dawn, a realm that he, in some baffling way, seemed to have defrauded for ever of its sunrise. He put aside the oppression, saying, "You don't mind, so much then, his going?"

"I am sorry, of course. But he made things too difficult. It will be easier to get back to the old fondness if we are not too near. And he will enjoy, when things blow over, coming to us for short visits."

The prospective peace, he saw, left her, with a sort of lassitude, a little indifferent to her father's pathos. Before this placidity his sadness became a sudden throb of gloom.

"You do mind *my* going?" he asked.

Felicia was sitting on the window seat and had looked down into the street far below for his coming cab. She glanced up quickly at him as he stood beside her, seeing the shadow in his eyes.

"Dear goose!" She drew him down on the seat, her hand in his, "Mind your going? I hate it. But it's only for a fortnight--less, if you are lucky with your work."

"Only a fortnight!" Maurice repeated, half playfully, but half fretfully too. "You can say that! It's our first parting, Felicia. It seems to me an eternity before I shall see you again."

She still looked into his eyes, seeing, under the playfulness, the fretfulness, all that he had suffered during these last weeks of entanglement. Leaning her head on his shoulder, she said dreamily: "Don't go."

"Really?" Sunlight streamed through clouds, "Really you say don't go? And my duty? my work? all the virtues you make me believe in?"

"I want to keep you near me, to comfort you for it all," Felicia said. He understood the reference to his pain. The very sweetness nerved his growing strength, the resolution to be worthy. With his arms around her he whispered that he adored her and that he would go and work so well that she should be proud of him. She listened, her eyes closed, yet, when he had spoken, still dreamily she repeated, "Don't go."

"Are you tempting me? because if you are, if you really want me to stay, I can't go."

She did not reply for a long time, lying quietly against his shoulder, her hand in his. They heard the cab drive up.

"I suppose you must go," she said, "Yes, of course, you must. Only, isn't it happy, sitting here together? You must go, though I want you to stay, for I really am sensible; I know there is a grown-up world; but sitting here makes it seem unreal, and I think of sweet, silly things, like children's games on a long summer afternoon."

She straightened herself, sighing, smiling, then as she looked at him, she saw that his eyes were filled with tears. In her eyes sudden tears answered them.

"It's that we have been rather unhappy, isn't it, dear Maurice?"

"Never, never again," he whispered; and, in a voice that took her back to such a distant day; "Do you remember once, long ago, when I first knew you, I told you that it was lack, not loss, I dreaded--it's only loss I dread now, for my life is full. And with you to prop me I am growing into such a real personality that I shall lose even my cowardly dread of loss. I'll never make you unhappy any more."

"Ah! but what about me? It's I who have made you unhappy, dear. Forgive me everything. You shall have no more dreads."

She leaned to kiss his forehead, rising, her hands in his. Compunction for the weakness that had showed him her unwillingness to let him go, smote her. Her strength more than ever, now that it was triumphing, must nerve his growing strength.

"Never, never again," she repeated. "So go, dear, have all the virtues. We will both work. The eternity will pass."

CHAPTER XI

MR. MERRICK, when Maurice had gone, made no reference to his own expulsion, and faced his daughter at meals in frigid silence. They saw little of each other now. Felicia was busy with her writing, with her friends. The days passed quickly. Geoffrey appeared punctually every day, but only for short visits. He told her that the readjustment of his life to its lower key kept him frightfully busy. He looked jaded, harassed.

Over these visits Mr. Merrick, oddly enough, no more mounted guard. Indeed, beneath the frigidity, the hurt child had howled itself into a frightened silence. Mr. Merrick's foundations seemed giving way beneath him, and, to add to the sense of general crumbling, he had not heard from Angela for many days. That his child should cast him off made a desolation so large that it was only dimly realized. Angela's defection was a concentrated, a sharp bitterness. He evaded its contemplation by accusing himself of over-imaginativeness--nerves on edge--no wonder--and went to her one afternoon at tea-time. Maurice's fortnight was nearly over, and the time of his own departure drew near. Already he had meditated a retreat on Paris, a week there to make the descent from London to the country less of a horrid jolt.

Angela was at home, alone, and looking, to Mr. Merrick's sharpened suspicions, colder, different. She was so white, so haggard that he hoped that ill-health and not change towards himself might be the cause of difference. At all events she was hardly beautiful, and something in her face, baffled, rapacious, dimly suggested a hovering, hungry bird of prey. Mr. Merrick felt uncomfortable, and, weakness in discomfort taking shelter in appeal and pathos, he found himself announcing to Angela his virtual dismissal from his children's roof. After all, as he reflected, it was in a sense Angela's doing. She might now at least from the frankness of the intimacy she had made between them, show him comprehension and compassion.

"To speak plainly, I've been turned out," he said, stirring the cup of tea she had handed him.

"Turned out?" repeated Angela, with an impersonal vagueness, quite as if it had been a stray dog of which they were speaking.

Mr. Merrick's suspicion grew past alarm to resentment, and resentment cowered under a more sturdy manner of pathos as of one who faced fate's unjust bolts with erect bearing and unconquerable gaze. "Our friendship, it seems, is unforgivable. It was a choice between it and them. I couldn't submit to such intolerable dictation."

Angela felt as if, after a long drowning swoon under water, she were being resuscitated to painful life by blows upon her head. She, so blameless, having done no wrong except love with a fatal fidelity; she, crushed, humiliated, was to feel another lash. Even her kindness to this pompous fool was to be made a scourge for her.

Mr. Merrick saw that she grew more white as, with folded arms, she drooped her head and looked up at him from sombre brows. "They can't forgive you that? They hate me so much?"

"Apparently," said Mr. Merrick, his growing sense of the indignity of his situation giving him a deeper gloom of manner. "The crisis was brought about by my venturing to warn Maurice on the subject you have spoken of."

"And you told him who had warned you? I see."

Mr. Merrick took hasty refuge before the cutting quality of her voice. "He sprang at the conclusion and defied me to deny that it was you. He was outrageous. I have had to defend you as well as myself, Lady Angela."

"He accused me of falseness?"

"Insolently." It was well that she should know how much he had had to champion her. "I don't care to recall the terms." But Mr. Merrick was feeling an odd satisfaction in recalling them. His heart, before this rebuffing friend, before her icy eyes and icy voice, was calling out for Felicia--Felicia whom he had lost because of this,--did she not suggest something snake-like? His wounded affection, his wounded vanity, longed for such comfort as Felicia alone could give. It would be well could he believe Lady Angela--if not a liar, at least a presumptuous busy-body. His first impressions of her were flooding his mind again.

"I could not forgive the insolence," he said, "although I can conceive it possible that you and I have been to a certain extent mistaken. Such a mistake must naturally wound Maurice and Felicia."

Angela leaned back in her chair, her long eyes on him, and he felt, like a palpable atmosphere, the enmity between them.

"As it happens, Maurice told me that he had always known of his friend's love for Felicia," he pursued. "It's in no sense an ordinary case of attraction, you see. A Dante and Beatrice affair. He has absolute trust in his friend, Maurice has, and I, of course, have absolute trust in Felicia. Not that I approve; I would have felt it my duty to protest in any case."

"You think that I imputed some wrong that was not there, and that owing to me this breach has come between you and your daughter?" said Angela.

"I hold you in no way to blame. Without a full knowledge of facts--Maurice's knowledge the most important of them--one may naturally draw false inferences. We were both a little hasty in judging." Mr. Merrick essayed a generous smile.

A deep flush passed over Angela's face. For a long moment she was silent, her eyes on him; then, in a voice harsh and monotonous she said--

"I hardly know what facts may mean to you--or inferences. Maurice, before he married your daughter, told me that Geoffrey had paid him to marry her. They live upon Geoffrey's money. He has ruined his career for your daughter's sake. These are further facts, Mr. Merrick. Have I indeed been a little hasty in my inferences?"

Mr. Merrick, his tea-cup in his hand, his face with as yet merely a look of wonder on it, sat dumb.

"You now see the knowledge that underlay my warnings. What Geoffrey's motives were I cannot say; purely disinterested, perhaps; apparently your daughter was dying for love of Maurice. Whether they have remained so disinterested is for you to judge. But I hope you will acquit my warnings of hastiness."

"Maurice told you?" Mr. Merrick repeated. He chiefly felt a deep, personal humiliation.

"As he told me everything at that time."

Mr. Merrick rose unsteadily, putting down his tea-cup upon the table. "The scoundrel!" he said.

"Which one do you mean?"

"The scoundrel! I mean Maurice. She shall know him."

Angela's eyes glittered.

"I think it well that all the truth should be known," she said.

CHAPTER XII

THAT evening, by special messenger, a note reached Angela. "Will you come to me,"--the words crossed the page with the swift steadiness of an arrow--"and repeat to me the calumnies that you have spoken to my father. I shall regard a refusal as a retractation."

Angela traced her own answer with a deliberateness that savoured to her mind of unwavering benevolence. "I will be with you at eleven to-morrow morning. Do not think that I come as an enemy. Be as strong to hear the truth as I to speak it."

She kept the boy waiting while she copied and re-copied the words into a larger, firmer script in which there should be no hint of threat or unsteadiness.

Between the sending of this acceptance of challenge and the hour of the interview next day Angela's mind, like a wreck, was tossed from shuddering heights to engulfing abysses. Since the moment when she had crawled at Maurice's feet her image of herself had been broken, unseizable. She no longer knew herself, she, the uplifter, a crouching suppliant. What she had further done--that final, passionate abandonment where vindictive fury, worship, and desperate appeal to the very rudiments of feeling were indistinguishably mingled,--she could not look at steadily. Yet, in swift glances as at something dazzling and appalling, she could just snatch a vision of a not ignoble Angela. There had been splendour in those hopeless kisses, a blinding splendour; she must veil her eyes from it.

Most terrible of all was the seeing of herself slip and slide from a serene eminence down into a slimy, warring world. The betrayal of Maurice had not been in her ideal of herself; it forcibly abased her to a level of soiling realities--hatreds, jealousies, revenges. With sick revulsion she could imagine herself feebly turning--though bones were broken--feebly crawling up again from the abyss, either by some retractation, or by withholding from Felicia the ultimate humiliations she could inflict upon her. She might evade the cruellest truth; spare her the deepest wounds and so hug once more the thought of her own loyalty to the man who had struck her from him, a loyalty crowned with a halo of martyrdom.

But so to turn would be to own herself abased; to see herself in the mud; and Angela could not for long see herself in the mud.

Then, in the swing of reaction, her head reeled with the old illusion of height; she was again on her illumined pinnacle, ruthless through very pity, wounding with the sharp, necessary truth; stern to the glamour of a loyalty grown craven, saving Felicia from a falsity that must corrode her life. A pitiful, relentless angel. She saw the sword, the wings--white, strong, rustling, the splendid impassivity of her face.

Yet on the pinnacle the darting terrors of the abyss went through her. Was not the truth what Maurice had said--what he had looked--so horribly looked--and not what he had written; that he had written to spare her; had never loved her? She turned shuddering from the thought as she had shuddered at his feet. If that indeed were truth he must convince Felicia of it. The fact of his written words was there, surely unforgiveable; the fact of Geoffrey's love was there; was not the fact of a dim, growing love for Geoffrey there too? She had said it; she believed it; and again, upon

the pinnacle, the hands of miry hopes clawed at her. Hardly could Maurice forgive the betrayal. Yet--had he not once loved her? The memory, sweet and terrible of that far-away spring day--his kiss and his embrace--faltered, "yes," though it wept in saying it. Should Felicia prove to him that Angela had only spoken truth might not the showing of the letter be one day forgiven by a man scorned, abandoned? She had been forced to the showing by all their guilty incredulity, and to save Felicia from the trap laid for her, to save her from Geoffrey's scheming passion--so could she dress her motive--had pointed out the trap, the danger. Where lay her guilt, if, after this, Felicia chose to verify all her prophecies by walking straight into the trap? It had not been to kill her love for her husband, but to warn her of Geoffrey's love that the letter was shown. So her thoughts groped in the dubious future; and when despair flung her back again on the black present, hatred, hatred for Maurice, and the recklessness of hatred, caught her, clasped her, sustained her from falling, and hurried her on all trembling with the final thought that if hope were dead, there was nothing to lose in betrayal, nothing to gain in loyalty.

As she drove next morning to Felicia, the day's clear sunlight, the almost wintry freshness of the air, lifted her mood once more to steadiness. She beat off debasing visions, pushed away miry hands, told herself that neither hope nor hatred was with her. And she felt herself standing high in sunlight as she waited for Felicia in the little drawing-room, its windows open on the blue, the brightness. She felt herself in tune with purity and radiance. Dressed from head to foot in spotless white, the long flowing of her fur-edged cloak monastic in simplicity, the white sweep of a bird's breast about her head, she was as pitying and as picturesque as a sculptured saint looking down through centuries of woe from the lofty niche of a cathedral; and a more human but as consolatory a simile showed her as a Dorothea waiting in all her tender strength and helpfulness for a fragile, tawdry Rosamund.

But when Felicia entered, and as she turned to her from the window, a mood as high, as inflexible as her own,--higher, more inflexible, she felt, in a crash that had a crumbling quality--met her in Felicia's eyes. For a moment Angela was afraid, felt herself rocking in her niche; in the next the recollection of her truth upheld her. Truth, pity and tenderness; with these she would meet this stony, hating creature.

"You see," she said, "I have not refused to come to you."

"You had to come, after what you had said," said Felicia.

It was a preliminary only; the pause before conflict. Angela's eyes went over her. Felicia wore her customary blue serge, her lawn collar and black bow. In her place, Angela thought, she would have felt the effectiveness of an unrelieved black dress; a comment followed by a further recognition of Felicia's indifference to effectiveness that left another little trail of fear. She had slept; well, perhaps. Her eye-lids showed no languor. Her face was white, cold, composed. Hardly fragile. Certainly not tawdry. From this re-adjustment to reality Angela glanced out at the sky. She must grasp at all her strength. She must pray for strength. With her eyes on the sky her mind sped hastily through the uplifting supplication--haunted as it sped by a thought of pursuit that gave a shadow-simile of a fleeing through caverns.

But she brought back gentle eyes to Felicia. "Mrs. Wynne, you have never understood me; never believed me; you have always misunderstood, and mistrusted me, as you do now. I have been forced to this," said Angela, keeping all her quiet while Felicia stood before her with her stony face. "I have watched you like a child wandering in the dark. I have seen you come to the brink of a pit in the darkness. I have put out my hand to save you. That is all my fault."

"By the pit, you mean, I suppose, Mr. Daunt's love for me. As my father told you, I have known, my husband has known, from before my marriage, that he loved me. You did not only warn. You lied. About my husband," Felicia's eyes did not change, as she said the word, looking straight at Angela. Since the night before when her father had told her vile falsehoods she had felt not one doubt of Angela's falsity. A white heat of utter scorn had never left her. She would have scorned her too much to see her had not her father's frenzied belief pushed her to this elemental conflict. She would tell Angela again and again that she was a liar.

"How you hate me," Angela now said.

"And how you hate me."

"I do not. I pity you. I want to help you."

"I will pity you if you confess that you have lied."

"If it were to help you I could almost do it--though that would indeed be to lie. I believe that truth is the only helper. Your husband was paid to marry you."

Felicia's eyes received it unflinchingly.

"It may be so. Geoffrey is generous enough; Maurice is enough his friend to accept his help. I will ask him to tell me all the truth. Your implication was that my husband married me through pity."

"You are very sure of people's love for you."

Angela saw herself lashed by the hatred of these two men, by the scorn of this woman whom they loved. Her voice shook.

"I am perfectly sure of their love."

"Yet your husband's love was not always yours."

She was horribly unmoved by half truths; this again she accepted. "Maurice may once have cared for you. Since he has known me he has loved me. I cannot spare you when you come between me and my husband."

"Since he knew you he loved me--loved me most!" Angela could scarcely draw her breath. "He married you from pity--it is not a lie--loving me. And I loved him--I love him now! It is the cross of my life! It crushes me!" Her breast panted with the labouring breath; she threw her cloak back from her shoulders and kept her hands at her throat, even then conscious of the gesture's dramatic beauty. "He is unworthy of it--that I know. He is incapable of the sacred passion I feel. He loves most the one he is with, and when he was with me--before you took him from me--he loved me most--before God I believe it--and with the best love of which he is capable. I would have lifted him--inspired him--he used to say I would. He told me that he loved me and that only my wealth had kept him from me--the day that Geoffrey came with his news of you. I would have redeemed him had not you made a claim on his weakness, his pity."

"I know that you are lying," said Felicia. But as she listened, as she spoke, old doubts, old fears flitted across the dimness of the past.

"Then,"--Angela's breath failed her; she drew Maurice's letter from her breast and put it in Felicia's hand--"read that," she half whispered.

And as she did this she knew that she had rolled to the very bottom of the abyss. It was only a glance of horrid wonder. She could not look at herself. She could not turn her eyes from the moment's supreme vengeance. She stood watching her rival--her victim--yes, yes, those voices from the abyss were true--watched her cheeks grow ashen, her eyes freeze, her beauty waver, change to something strange, rigid, mask-like.

But Felicia, as she read on to the end, and then, mechanically turning to the first page, read once more, did not think of Angela or even know that she was there. As she read and the blood seemed slowly crushed out of her heart, she forgot Angela, forgot herself, fixed in a frozen contemplation of Maurice's perfidy, a trance-like stare at him and at Geoffrey; Maurice who had abased, Geoffrey who had exalted her. Geoffrey held up from the dust, where Maurice struck her, some piteous, alien creature. But this new revelation of Geoffrey was dimmed again by the written words and the thought they hammered on her brain: "My husband's words." Then at last identity whispered "of me."

They ran, the words, like flame, scorching, blackening her past with him. Meanest, weakest, cruellest. Most dastardly of all, most loathly, was his love for her, his facile adaptation of his life to hers, his fawning dependence on the nature nearest him. Most horrible it was to know--for she knew it--that he indeed loved her. An acted lie--while he could betray her to another woman--would have made him less odious to her. That he could at once love and betray was the horror.

She hated him. She had shut her eyes again and again so that in seeing too clearly she might not love him less; they were widely open now and they saw more than the loss of love.

With all the force of her crucified trust and tenderness, all the passion of her shattered pride, she hated him.

Raising her eyes she saw Angela standing and looking at her. Angela was distant, unreal, a picture hung before dying eyes. She felt no hatred for Angela; instead, with the terrible clearness of her new vision, she felt a far-away and contemptuous pity. She saw both herself and Angela caught in the same net of falsity; both she and Angela in their struggles were piteous. Angela had been ugly in her struggle, but she could not feel that she hated her.

She turned her head away, looking vaguely around her at the room that had become unfamiliar, ominous. A chair was near her, one she and Maurice had bought together. She sank upon it thinking dimly--"This was home."

"You see--I did not lie to you," said Angela. That Felicia should show no anger, should not writhe and curse beneath the foot upon her neck, made her wonder--in another of those crumbling flashes--whether indeed her foot was upon Felicia's neck. She had struck her down, she had humbled her, but was she not now to be allowed to forgive, to staunch the wounds with magnanimity and sorrow? Was it possible that the horrid image of her was the true one? Was it possible that Felicia too, was seeing her in the mire?

She repeated: "You see I did not lie to you."

"No," said Felicia, folding her husband's letter as she spoke, "you didn't lie."

Her very voice had the charred, the wasted quality; life had been burned out of it.

"And can you not believe *now* that I never hated you?" said Angela.

Felicia leaned her head on her hand, closing her eyes. "I don't care. It makes no difference to me."

Angela felt herself shut out, infinitely remote from the other's consciousness. Tears rose in her eyes, almost a sob in her throat. "How cruel you are. What have I done to deserve such cruelty? I have only tried to help you."

Still with her hidden face, Felicia sat silent, thinking of Maurice, of Geoffrey, only vaguely hearing Angela's words.

"And then how human;--after all I am human. See how intolerable it was to me, your scorn of me, your rejection of me when I meant only good, when I knew that he had loved me most; when I knew how infinitely I loved him." It comforted her to feel the tears running down her cheeks and, in her poor, stricken humanity, to seem noble to herself in her avowed abasement. "Perhaps I have been jealous--oh, how can I tell? Perhaps I made too high and impossible an

ideal for myself and thought that I could conquer that yearning to be loved. Can't you pity me? Can't you see what I have suffered in seeing him with you?"

Felicia, looking on the ground, mechanically pushed back the hair from her forehead. The picture indeed was in a piteous attitude; she knew it, although she could feel nothing.

"Yes, I am sorry for you. It has been horrible for you," she said, but with the weariness that a soldier, lying shattered, helpless, upon a battlefield, might show towards the tormenting clamours and lamentations of a wounded enemy beside him. She wished to be allowed to bleed quietly to death. These alien hands plucked at her for a help, a sympathy she could not give. She was sorry; but when one was shattered one could only know that one was sorry and be tired.

Angela's weeping was stilled for a moment. After all, it was not pity that she wanted. She wanted to be lifted from the nightmare of abasement; to feel herself looking down once more; to be the consoler, the binder of wounds--not the suppliant; not the recipient of an indifferent dole. She approached Felicia, putting out her hand to her.

"And you know--dear--dear--child, how I pity you. Ah, let this pity, this mutual agony unite us, Felicia--you who have lost only an illusion, I who have lost a reality. Can we not see each other more clearly now? Can we not understand--and kiss each other--like sisters?"

Maeterlinckian visions--a tower, a sad blue sea, a great blue sky, white birds, wandering, beautiful souls in pain--crossed her mind, enhancing her consciousness of beauty. It was beautiful, what she said, and she must look beautiful, leaning in whiteness, with her outstretched hand, the tears of her deeper sorrow upon her face, towards this fallen comrade. This would atone for all, be the spiritual significance of all the tragic drama, this union of suffering sisters. She drooped softly upon the figure in the chair, encircling it.

But with a violence that made Angela reel back, almost losing her footing, Felicia started to her feet. Staring, white, shuddering, she looked at the other woman.

"Don't touch me. You must not touch me.--Go away--you are horrible," she said. "You fill me with horror." Her voice was hoarse, shaking.

Angela had retreated from her, and while they looked at each other across the room, a strange struggle and change showed itself in her face. Felicia's conviction entered her. She felt herself evil. She felt herself horrible.

With terror and malignancy she gazed for a long moment, and then, in silence, she went from the room.

Felicia heard the trail of her long skirts, like the dry swift rustle of a snake, cross the hall, and heard the door close softly upon her.

CHAPTER XIII

FELICIA stood at the window looking from the hill-top over the rain-dimmed country. It was early afternoon and in the steady grey, unbroken by a cloud, high over the grey land that melted to the sky, was a bleak, diffused whiteness that told where the sun was. Since her arrival the day before the rain had poured down ceaselessly, imprisoning her in the lonely house. Her father, after the scene of her hateful avowal, her escape from his fury of sympathy, had gone to Paris for a week. She had left him packing in the flat; he would join her later.

Felicia had taken one of the maids with her in her flight from the desecrated new to the old home, and had wearily aided her in making it liveable. The sitting-room where she now stood, after her half-tasted lunch of tea and fruit and bread-and-butter, was cheerless, for the more intimate books and pictures were in London; the furniture without its chintz covers was shabby, and the fire after long smoking, only now forced its way to a sullen brightness through heaped-up logs. She turned to glance at it once or twice, mechanically conscious of housekeeping duties. It had quite done smoking; it was going to burn. Presently, before the blaze, she would sit and rest--and sleep; there had been no sleep last night in her desolate room between the blankets of a hurriedly improvised bed; the maid protesting against damp sheets. Felicia had wondered indifferently, as they worked together, what the kind girl thought of this ominous pic-nic impromptu; she thanked her inwardly for the dumb discretion of her class. There was nothing more to do now. Chintz-covers--she glanced at the chairs that looked flayed without their proper coverings; but those had better wait until just before her father's arrival; for him she must manage cheeriness as well as the bare comforts of life. Until he came all she wanted was stillness, warmth, a bed to creep into at night.

Felicia's mind was fixed on two points, one past, one future--the writing of a letter yesterday to Maurice and his finding of it when he returned to-night--or to-morrow morning. She saw herself in the pause between a dagger's uplifting and its stabbing fall. She had known no pity in writing; she felt no pity for the reading. Her mind, indeed, went with a sullen quiet--much like the flames among their logs--through the well-remembered words.

"I am leaving you to-day and I will never see you again. Lady Angela has showed me the letter you wrote to her before we were married. You did not even marry me through generous pity; Geoffrey forced you to it. You betrayed him to her; you betrayed me to her. You gave me your sham in return for my reality. Do not tell me that you loved me then,

and now. That is the worst of it. Such love is a sham. I despise you. I see only falseness and cowardice in you. And through all this ruin I see Geoffrey as he is--and I see myself. I see now that I love him. You know that your honour--a strange word to write to you--is safe between our hands; but I love him as much as I hate you; the thought that he is there helps me to live. It is through your baseness that I see all his nobility. Do not write to me, for I shall not answer. These are the last words that you shall ever see from me."

This letter was lying on Maurice's dressing-table waiting for him.

There had been a fierce exultation in writing it, as at escape from a stifling cavern; and the sense of having flung the soiled and tattered past behind her, wrenched manacles of pity and tenderness from her bleeding flesh, of having run, naked, free, into the night--the cold, calm night, upheld her. But at moments those written words whirled oddly in her mind. "To him? From me?" She would think it dizzily; and dread clutched at her heart, dread of she knew not what, except the fate that had made the writing inevitable. A Felicia cruel enough to write it was as strange as a Maurice base enough to make her cruel.

But, she told herself, leaning her forehead against the cold window pane, to think herself cruel was still to idealize Maurice. He would suffer--for a day, a week, a year perhaps; would, fancying that he had truly loved her, feel remorse, despair; but when her love was no longer there to call forth his response the fancy would soon die. His love for her was no doubt as real as anything in him was real; but no love in Maurice could be more than fancy. His buoyancy would float him once more, and life once more be sweet to him. Life would always, in spite of certain moments of black whirlpool, be sweet for Maurice.

She could even imagine a sentimental bond growing between him and Angela. Angela was horrible enough for any cleverness. Her passion had a sincerity that would give life to any lie. She would twist facts into some becoming shape, build her bower and beckon Maurice into it. A shuddering seized her thoughts of Angela; she turned from them.

The rain now dashed on the window. The pallid memory of light was gone from the sky. Fold upon fold of deeper darkness covered it. The trees shook in the rising gusts of wind.

There was the turn of the road that she had often watched through so many years, longing for it to bring life to her. Well, she had had her wish. She had met her lions. She could not feel herself ennobled by her contests. It rather seemed that the lions had mangled her.

As she stood, pressing her forehead against the window and looking at the storm, she saw a figure, leaning to the steep ascent far down the road, a tall man's figure under an umbrella.

Figures were few on the road, and, on such a day, a casual stroller improbable. Her heart leaped to a terror of Maurice coming in person to plead and expostulate. Impossible that her letter had not forbidden all pleading and expostulation. It could not be Maurice.

It was not, as she saw, with a drooping of the breath in a relief so great that she knew how great the foolish terror must have been, as the figure, after a momentary disappearance, came nearer in that turn of the road. The long waterproof, the slanted umbrella, still made identity a conjecture; but already the steady stride, the grave, decisive carriage had a familiarity that hurried a new and deeper fear on the first. Not Maurice; not her father; obviously not Uncle Cuthbert. Could it be Geoffrey?

Since the day before, Geoffrey had been for her a figure aureoled and pedestalled--strange transfiguration of the statesman statue!--lifted high, far away, in his almost saintly strength; a figure to be gazed at with thanksgiving for its smile upon herself; but still so strange in its new setting that any nearness of regret or tremor had not touched her.

But to see Geoffrey now--now that she was his--and knew it.--The thought shook her with regret, fear, unutterable sadness.

It was Geoffrey. She drew back from the window as he approached the house. Regret was for the past, sadness for the future, but the fear was for the present and it seized her like the storm. He was perhaps not so high, so aureoled, so saintly. Wild surmises flashed lightnings through her mind, that seemed to rock like an empty bird's nest in a shaken tree. Had Maurice returned? Had he in a frenzy of anger or despair showed Geoffrey her letter? Had Geoffrey come to claim her on the strength of her own avowal?--come to claim her?--to take her away?

She had no time to analyze the terror of such surmises--what they implied of disillusion in him--or to look at the rapture that ran a dreadful radiance through terror and disillusion. That there should be rapture was perhaps the terror's root. She heard him in the hall ridding himself of the dripping umbrella and waterproof. Why, after all, call it disillusion? Perhaps strength not less saintly than that of renunciation lay in a solemn claiming. His nobility had chained them. Might not nobility now break the chains? But could he break them? Was not her strength to be counted with? She was asking herself the final question--in a gasp--as he came in.

His white, intent face admitted of many interpretations, even of one altogether new to her, for she felt in it something of a hesitation, a perplexity, that suggested weakness. For once he was not sure of himself; or, rather, not sure of what he was to do. Felicia, near the window, looked silently at him.

"It's true, then, you have left him?"

His eyes sounded hers as though he, too, were finding new meanings in her.

"Yes, I have left him. Who told you?"

"Your father. He was just leaving the flat. He was very incoherent. All I could grasp was that."

He did not know then, and any revelation of what his attitude would be when he did know was adjourned. Felicia, feeling suddenly how faint she was, how weak from want of food and sleep, went past him and sank into the deep old chair before the fire.

"Sit down. You must be tired. You had to walk from the station? There was no fly?"

"No. I didn't mind the walk." Geoffrey did not sit down; he took a turn or two up and down the room.

"Your father said that you would never go back to your husband."

"I never will."

"You have ceased to love him, then?"

"Absolutely ceased."

Geoffrey had paused now near the window, and was looking out. She could guess of what he was thinking; of that walk in the spring woods, and the girl who had said that to be unhappy with the man she loved would be happiness. He was thinking that he had tried to give her happiness and that he had failed. And presently, without turning, he said, "May I ask why?"

The thought of the spring day dwelt with her, infusing all the present tragedy with a tender, an exquisite pathos--like the spring's--like the day of distant bird-songs and melancholy brooks. She owed him everything. *Might* he ask?

"What may you not ask?" she said. "There is nothing that I have a right to keep from you now. This is why. Lady Angela showed me this--yesterday." Without turning her head she held out the letter. "It was written, you will see, the day after you and I walked together--when you told me that you loved me--when I told you that I loved him."

Geoffrey's hand was on the letter. For a moment, as her memory chimed with his, he grasped her wrist and she felt his kiss upon her hand.

He did not know. In the silence that followed, while, behind her chair, he read, Felicia was wondering, wondering--would he discover it? Should she hide it? Should she tell him? Was it not indeed his right to be told? Did she not owe it to him to let him know that a reward--though such a tragically belated one--had at last come to him? Even to hesitate seemed to smirch him with that fear of disillusion; or, her mind followed it further, hunted it down, while she breathed quickly--was it the possible rapture that made the real dread--the rapture of seeing him claim her and of admitting his claim? With an almost lassitude she thrust the balancing thoughts from her. How could she know what she felt or what she was, until the truth was there spoken and looked at between them? The circle had brought her back again to the first question. Should she tell him? She could not answer it. She closed her eyes. Suddenly she thought sharply, "I must not tell." She wondered if it was an inspiration; it seemed to have no sequence. So oddly does the most logical thing in life, the rewarding illumination of a conscience and character strengthened by strife, dazzle the obviously linked, the bewildered and bewildering intelligence. Like the revolving light of an unseen lighthouse it flashed out. A moment after it seemed unreal. Yet the memory of it would almost automatically guide a way among reefs and breakers and siren whirlpools. Felicia did not think all this. She kept her eyes closed and breathed more quietly. Geoffrey stood silent, and she knew, without looking round, that he had finished the letter.

"Now you see. Now you understand all," she said.

He made no answer. She opened her eyes, turned in her chair. He had mastered any horror, though his expression had the strained look of having been wrenched from horror to the resolute facing of a mystery to be tracked. He seemed to gaze through her at it.

"Now you see. Now you understand," she repeated. "I do, Geoffrey."

She had never called him by his name before.

His eyes now rested on hers.

"Let me tell you," she said, still leaning her head and shoulder against the side of the deep chair while she looked at him, unshaken now and calm. "Let me tell you that I see you and know you--and understand. Don't ever think that it has been wasted, or regret it, or feel that it has made sorrow where you meant it to make happiness. At first I could see nothing but my rage, my humiliation: but that has drifted away. I hardly feel anything now except my gratitude to you for your wonderful nobility--your love. To see it--to know it--is worth the suffering."

He could feel the tempests over which the calm had been won, and the calm moved him more than sobs or outcries. He looked from her head--the dear, proud head--to the letter that had laid it in the dust, and the conquered horror for a moment quivered across his face.

"How could he. To you." It was not question or exclamation, but a deep, sickened wonder.

"He had to. He did not love her enough to face your scorn--and my pain; he didn't love me enough to face hers. Fear is the very root of him." She paused, a question like a whip-lash cutting her. "You thought he loved me? You

would not have given me to mere pity?"

"I?" Geoffrey's stare was almost boyish.

"I?--who loved you enough to give you to the happiness you cried for?" it said.

"Forgive me for the mere thought. I have been such a chattel--a thing to be tossed appeasingly to a rival." Again she closed her eyes. "It makes me dizzy sometimes."

Geoffrey wandered off again to the window. He could not contemplate her pain, and for a long time there was silence in the room while he gazed, as Felicia had gazed, over the desolate country. The rain swept around the hill-top like a mantle; all but the nearest trees were blotted out.

Geoffrey was thinking of Felicia, of Maurice, holding his thoughts steadily from a dangerous thinking of himself; he needed to hold them steadily. He was seeing Maurice, his Maurice--how near his heart he only now clearly saw when at once that heart seemed to spurn him, with a wicked joy in his baseness, and then to catch him back, lamenting--seeing the boy, loving, impulsive, full of fears and intrepidities, needing always the strong arm to fall back on; the man, so boyish still, so weak, so generous; the sad friend of the other night, who, whatever his falsity, had spoken truth; and the poisonous letter was growing in his thoughts to the simile of some fatal trap that had caught his friend in a moment of dizziness and imprisoned him in baseness. Such baseness! Unforgiveable. And yet--was it essential? Still holding his thoughts away from the aspect where Maurice's baseness would serve himself, he balanced that question of the real significance of the baseness. Something in his mind, wrenched with his refusal to see the other aspect, bled, panted, protested. Then came dying throbs. He grasped at last his own decision.

He did not turn from the window as he said, "You must go back to him."

Her long silence showed, perhaps, a speechless horror. He turned to her. She still lay back in the chair. He came before her. She raised empty eyes to him.

"I know that he loved you; you know, as I do, how he loves you now, how incapable, now, he would be of it." She made no reply. There was no reproach in her eyes, no pain or rebellion, only a strange, still depth where he could see nothing. His decision reinforced itself as it felt a quiver of blind presage run through it.

"He was a base coward. I feel it for you as deeply--more deeply than you can for yourself. He was in despair of marrying you and he dallied with Angela--well, if he were half in love, what matter now? He had been in love half a dozen times before he met you. All those young emotions are games; Maurice was playing at life. He needed reality, and he has lived into it with you. I saw him cry with despair when he thought he had lost you; I saw his rapture when I told him he could marry you. I can guess what happened afterwards. He was afraid of Angela--and sorry for her, and he wrote her this lie. Yes, he was a liar and a coward--what of it? You have made him over. He is a different man. Say that he still is weak as water--what of it? He adores you; I know it--and you loved him--once. You gain nothing by leaving him, and he loses everything--everything. *You* are his only chance. He will go to pieces without you."

Her silence, those deep, empty eyes on his, almost exasperated him with the sense of fighting in the dark--he knew not what--but fighting some force in her, strong in its still resistance. And not in her only; in himself he felt a rising host of shadowy, veiled opponents.

He walked away from her up and down the room. "Only the other night--how I understand it now--he was trying to tell me all he could. He spoke of remorse and of his love for you, Felicia; he said that he would die without you."

"Do you really want me to go?" Felicia asked.

Geoffrey, glancing at her, saw that she had covered her face with her hands. He stopped in his impatient walking, his back to her. "I want what is best for him, and for you. You know I'm not a sentimentalist. I think a woman better off, more secure, more sure of a rightly developing life even with a husband she thinks she can't care for, than drifting about by herself; a dubious rebel against conventionality; forced into an exaggerated dignity, an exaggerated uprightness; conscious that she has to be explained and justified; cut off from her social and domestic roots--a flower if you will, and a very sweet and spotless flower;--but a flower kept alive in a vase of water, under cover, in an artificial temperature, liable to shatterings--to witherings; not a flower well rooted in the earth, growing, with the wind and sun about it."

"Witherings? Shatterings? What if the very ground one grew in is poisoned? You want me to go back to him--not loving him; do you want me to go back hating?--for I do hate him."

Geoffrey still paused.

"I want you to go back understanding him; pitying him. Bother love."

That memory of the lighthouse flash could no longer guide in this darkness where a blind and wilful giant's hand steered for a shore of reefs and precipitous cliffs intolerable for shuddering flesh to look upon. She herself must grasp the helm and turn the ship straight to the open, unknown sea.

"Do you want me to go back, loving you?" she said.

"Loving me?" Geoffrey repeated, and the giant indeed reeled back, as if from a staggering blow. His arm fallen, the ship in a moment had whirled round and fronted the tempestuous elements.

Her final question had been asked as evenly, as monotonously as the others. She went on: "I wrote and told him that I despised him--hated him, that I would never go back to him. And I told him that I loved you. He will get that letter to-morrow--perhaps to-day."

Geoffrey turned to her. All thought was struck to chaos. Maurice, Felicia, himself went like storm-blown birds through the mind that had been too steady--in the steadiness a rigidity tempting to an ironic, shattering blow. And in the chaos Maurice sank back--back, and down--where he had chosen to be, by his own act; and Felicia rose like dawn over the darkness. He approached her, leaned over her.

She opened her eyes to him.

The beat of the rain against the windows sounded as if from great distances. They were near in grey solitude, the world fading to emptiness; they were near in the enfolding storm, in the sound that was like a deeper silence. Neither spoke and neither smiled; into the mind of neither man nor woman came the image of a kiss or an embrace. Looking deeply into each other's eyes they seemed to see an eternity of awe and wonder. It was Geoffrey who first spoke.

"I felt it."

"You did not know it, Geoffrey."

"I touched something in the dark."

"I would not have told you if you had not wished to send me back to him."

"Why not, Felicia?"

Her eyelids for a moment fell, almost as if she mused.

"It seemed to make things less simple--more difficult."

"More difficult, perhaps," said Geoffrey, "but more simple, too, I think. Have you known for long?"

"Only, clearly, yesterday; but it seems now as if it had been there--oh--for long, long--since the beginning perhaps. I can't tell. I can't see. But so strangely, Geoffrey, not touching or harming my love for him, giving it strength indeed, I believe, as you gave me strength."

Still she seemed to muse, quietly; with down-cast eyes in speaking, but, in her pauses, raising that grave eternity of look to him.

"The threads go back and back--and they turn round one another. I can't see them separately till now--when his is broken. You remember when you kissed me, Geoffrey, at the edge of the wood? It was then--it must have been then--that the threads ran together. And ever since you have been woven into my life--into my love for my husband--I don't know what was you and what was I."

His hand on the back of the chair, he still leaned over her. Felicia rose, drawing a long breath. She walked to the end of the room; went to the window; turned to face him.

"Ah! Felicia," said Geoffrey. Looking at her with a sadness almost stern, he clasped his hands together in a gesture curiously uncharacteristic of him; significant of his helpless pain.

"Yes, yes," she said, "I know. Why did I make the mistake? Why did I not see who was the man I must love? Geoffrey, I would rather have you reproach me than listen to myself."

"Did you think I would reproach you? Did you think I would add that? I, too, was blindfolded," he said, looking away from her.

His voice was the voice of frozen tears.

They stood silent, his suffering beating at her heart. She knew that a word from her would unlock flood-gates.

And a great wave of longing rose in Felicia, engulfing her utterly, so that she knew for some moments that seemed eternal nothing but its thunder and its restlessness. She had already seen in herself, in her love for Maurice, this capacity for recklessness, and now a deeper tumult roared in her ears. For this was the man she loved. Through mistakes and misery they had found each other. Why not fall upon his neck and shut her eyes to all that distant world? Why not cry out to him, Take me away? His strength would never lift a finger to tempt her weakness; but was there not in him a new and beautiful weakness that would not resist the appeal of her strength, her courage? Would appeal not be courageous? To see that weakness in him was a craving that shook her through and through as she stood there with her fixed, contemplative face.

She closed her eyes, dazzled by the thought, and it was as if the wave echoed far above her head, and in the sudden stillness of its depths she knew them black and dangerous.

But in that moment of deep struggle it was not the thought of danger or of duty that gave her strength to strike upward to the air. It was the thought of Geoffrey and of the ruin that such an abandonment would make in his life. More than the lurid courage to repudiate safety and the world's wise barriers for herself, was her refusal to burden him with a defiant happiness.

She could not distinguish her weakness from her strength, nor know which had tempted and which saved her. She knew only her love for Geoffrey; a love that at the crucial moment seemed a long, strong stroke that sent her upward,

up to the air again. It was a leaden waste of water she rose to; a sad, colourless sky above; but there was a radiance in its whiteness. Her soul was half fainting, but she knew that her lassitude was that of victory. And all the time the surface woman of custom and control kept her look of contemplative solemnity.

Such victory made all lesser struggle easy. She merely looked her incomprehension when she heard Geoffrey saying--

"And now I wonder if you will believe me when I say that I still want you to go back to Maurice."

His voice told her that he, too, had been engulfed; that he, too, had struggled; that love of her had given him strength to win his victory, and then, in its light, to think; think clearly. But his thought made a fog about her. She could only gaze in wonder. "Nothing is really changed," said Geoffrey, who, his hand still on the back of her empty chair, had curiously the expression of an orator determined to convince, hardly stooping to persuasion. "You and I are parted. He needs you as much as ever, and you, Felicia, need him more than ever, his claim on you, I mean, his dependence, the burden that it must take all your time and all your energy to carry. I must hurt you with the truth--only I believe you have seen it, as I have. It's a choice between taking up your old life--and, I am sure of it, Felicia, making a tremendously good thing out of it--or living the new life I described to you--the life of the flower in the vase on the mantelpiece--a life of constant danger. For you--I know your strength; but could it keep me from you, year in and year out, do you suppose, if there were no barriers between us, no actual barriers of everyday life and everyday obligations? For myself--I would die for you, as you know; but to live without you--seeing you drifting--alone--in a sadness worse than any suffering--? I know that the time would come when I would ask you to chuck everything for my sake--for your own I'd put it, too--Felicia--for my sake--if I asked you as I could--you would do it; and you know as well as I do that that sort of chucking means failure all round. You wouldn't be the growing flower; you wouldn't be the cut flower in the vase"--his face, white in its intentness, grew hard as his mind flashed to the similes that would strip all illusion from her; "you would be like those snowdrops that I carry here--on my heart;--on my heart for ever, but crushed, shrivelled, dead." He had seen his weakness as she had not seen her own. She saw now, and as he had wished, without illusions.

"But go back to him!" she said, closing her eyes and shuddering from the cup he held out to her.

"He loves you. He needs you."

"Go back from fear?--fear of you?--of myself?"

"Turn from that thought then. Don't let it be a question of you or me. Go back from pity, and because you loved him; because you are his wife."

"But after that letter!"

"Is a person's moral deficiency to warrant the breaking of such a bond? If your mother had done something horrible would you be justified in disowning her?"

"Oh--a mother!" Felicia's tears ran down.

"Remember, I wouldn't urge--I wouldn't ask you to fear me or pity him unless I knew he loved you. Unless he had that claim I would say that you were right, altogether right, in cutting him away from your life. Felicia, it's his love, perhaps, his helpless, piteous love for you, that makes the barrier that holds me from you now--my memory of his face--his voice--when he said that you were his life--that he would die without you. He thanked me for his happiness--you and I had 'made him.' He said: 'You shall never regret it--so help me, God.' Felicia, you have given him his soul. You must not rob him of it."

"Geoffrey! Geoffrey!" she said, pressing her hands against her eyes--for his words flooded her mind with memories that came with the intolerable pain of life, after long swooning, stealing into crushed arteries, wrenched and broken limbs--"I have given him no soul. He has found his soul through me, perhaps, but I can't rob him of it."

"You can stifle it, make it speechless, useless. Ah, Felicia, you do pity him. And you must--you must pity him--and forgive him."

"How could we go on," she whispered, "after my letter to him? after he knows?"

"He doesn't return till to-morrow, you said? He has not read it yet. Besides, let him know the facts--but the facts from yourself. Tell him. Spare him the letter. It was a terrible letter, my dearest, dearest," said Geoffrey, with the deep, quiet assurance of safety.

"After his to her!"

"You wanted to hurt. You meant to drive the dagger in up to the hilt. Cruel, dear, cruel. Save him before he gets it. Say it to him, if you will; let him have it straight; but don't let him read it--alone. Poor old Maurice!" Geoffrey added.

The words, his comment on them, the "poor old Maurice!" that seemed a final summing, thrilled through her, and with the thrill flashed suddenly before her a vision of Maurice--a piteous Maurice. The hatred of her own written words smote upon her as she saw his face of terror reading them. He had betrayed her; he had lied and been a coward; but she knew, and she seemed to have forgotten it for so long, that his life was hers, that it was a new life, that he indeed loved her, and that bereft of her he could not recover. A distorting mist melted from her seeing of him, and as it melted she heard Geoffrey--so far away it seemed--saying, "Can you really bear to think of his reading that letter--alone?"

She went towards him--there was now no longer any fear in his nearness. He pushed the chair to the fire, and she sank into it sobbing.

Poor, poor Maurice. Yes, in that final, comprehending pity was the truth. Geoffrey was kneeling beside her. He put his arms around her and she leaned her head on his shoulder as she wept. How different this from the rapture of abandonment that had called to her--to him. What had he not conquered in himself--and her--to do this great thing for her?--to save not only her, but through her, Maurice?

But, though he had conquered, she felt broken.

"Life is so long, Geoffrey."

He did not reply. She knew that he, too, was looking down that vista of long years where they must walk apart.

"And life--founded on pity----"

"More will come. Something like a mother's love."

She knew that he spoke the truth. That vision of Maurice's terror-stricken face--reading her letter--had stabbed to more than pity. The protecting passion that had flung itself between him and the reading had in it a deeper quality. She could not analyze the fiercely defensive tenderness. Presently, when her tears were over, and his arms still around her, they were looking silently into the fire, she said, "I won't disappoint you, Geoffrey."

He hid his face against hers. She felt that his cheek was wet.

For a dizzy moment a greater pity, a fiercer tenderness, rose within her, a passion far other than the maternal passion that was to take her back to Maurice.

His cheek was wet; she clasped him in her arms.

And as they clung together, both felt the pendulum-swing of human emotion that from very excess of height plunges into abysses, the dark of unknown depths. They had not escaped the wrench with fundamental things, the swinging stupor of ecstasy and anguish. Tearless now, and in silence, they clung and kissed each other.

The pendulum swung in nature's steadied by conflict; the plunging moment came, went, and, without any conscious volition, left them shuddering from the final and now inevitable victory, but looking again down the long vista. It was mechanically that Geoffrey unlocked his arms, rose, and moved away.

Her little travelling clock ticked, eagerly it seemed, on the mantelpiece.

"Just half-past three," said Geoffrey.

Felicia went to the window.

"The rain has stopped," she said. "We can walk to the station in less than an hour."

Geoffrey, his hand on the mantelpiece, looked into the fire. "Don't you want something to eat? Some tea?"

"No; do you?"

"No, thanks."

"I will put on my hat and coat; I will be only a moment." She went to the door while Geoffrey said--

"We can catch the fast afternoon train. We shall be in London by six."

CHAPTER XIV

A COLD, evening sky was over London as Geoffrey and Felicia drove through wet squares and streets. Here, too, the storm had lifted, and between its darkness and the darkness of the coming night was the still moment of bleak and bitter twilight; strips of chill radiance behind the tattered trees; the pallid sky shining from the puddles of the roadway.

They had hardly spoken to each other during the walk; the wait at the desolate little station; the journey in the train. Geoffrey had merely expressed the hope that she was not cold; she had feared that he was hungry, had begged him to buy a sandwich. Once or twice from their corners of the railway carriage they had gravely smiled at each other. Now in the cab they neither spoke nor smiled.

Felicia's mood was that of the bleak, still pause between the storm and the darkness. It had its peace, its colourless peace. She could not look back at the storm and the coming darkness seemed impenetrable, but already her thoughts stole towards it, seeing, as if in a dream, Maurice, comforted; feeling his hand in hers.

She had a dreaming, a sorrowing presage that he had already returned, already knew the truth, that she would find him waiting, hopeless, yet waiting hopelessly for help.

From her letter he would look up at her--returned to him. And, though the thought wept for his pain, in her weariness it had lost its fear. There was peace in its very sadness. For then there need be no horrid crash of revelation for her to face. In silence she would hold out her arms to him. And "poor, poor Maurice," her heart whispered.

The river, when they reached the Embankment, had the sky's cold stillness; a drowned face looking up at its ghost.

Felicia, shivering a little, said that it was very chilly. A stir of fear came with the sudden hope that Maurice was not waiting for her. She would rather face crashes than have him waiting--alone--with her letter. Hope and its fear were like a rising of life, of eagerness in her. She leaned her head from the window of the rattling four-wheeler to direct the cabman; explaining: "They often take a longer way here."

"I will see you up to the door of the flat," said Geoffrey.

She nodded, then said, "But if he is there? If Maurice should come to the door?"

"But he doesn't return till to-morrow."

"He may be there--I think he is there."

"Well--the maid would come to the door. Besides--if he did--what more simple than to shake his hand and say good-bye to you both?"

She said quietly, "We shall not see you again--for how long?"

"Oh, it will be quite natural that I should now go under for some years," Geoffrey answered as quietly. "Some day, when you and Maurice feel like seeing me----"

"Yes; some day," Felicia answered, with her head again out of the window.

His dull ache of misery had been so steady that he was surprised to find it capable of a deeper pang. He had almost the impulse to ask her if her quiet were wrung from such agony as his. The next moment he was hating himself for the whimpering selfishness that could not feel gladness for her fortitude. Yet the plaint was there, and it dimly guessed at a woman's capacity, strange in its sanity, its acceptance of compromise, for two lives; her absorption in response to the claim that she may listen to. He himself had helped to lock her into that smaller room of her heart and now she must live in it, since the high and beautiful chambers were closed to her for ever. In the smaller room, too, was the love cruelly wounded, wounded by her hand. Her whole nature was now an eagerness to staunch, uplift, console.

The cab drew up before the block of flats, and while Geoffrey, saying that he would walk back to his rooms, paid the man, Felicia went inside and rang beside the lift for the porter. Geoffrey had joined her when the man appeared.

Yes, he said, Mr. Wynne had come back that afternoon. No, Mr. Wynne had not been out again, though he had sent the maid away soon after arriving. He knew that he had not gone out for he had been sitting in the hall all day.

There had evidently been talk, Geoffrey saw. Felicia saw nothing, thought of nothing but Maurice's presence above; her heart seemed choked in its beating. She made no objection to Geoffrey following her into the lift.

They stepped out together and, before the foolishly decorative little door that Maurice had so often jested over they paused, the porter still lingering.

"You can go," said Geoffrey cheerfully; "I prefer walking down."

The man reluctantly descended and then Geoffrey rang.

Felicia leaned against the wall, seeing Maurice's eyes as he had said good-bye to her, hearing his, "It seems to me an eternity before I shall see you again." He had read her letter, alone. Remorse gave her the sense of swooning to all about her.

With almost a start she saw that Geoffrey still rang; and now he knocked as well.

"Maurice must be asleep," she said.

Geoffrey, his finger pressed on the electric bell, nodded.

She had answered, "The eternity will pass." It seemed an eternity. And it had passed. Yes, here she was again, before the familiar door, and in a moment he would see her.

"I should think that by now he would be awake. Don't you think that he must be awake by now?" she repeated the question almost irritably as he did not answer her; adding, "Perhaps he guesses that it is we, and will not see us. Oh Geoffrey--Geoffrey. How could I have written such a letter!"

"It will be all right when you see each other. You must meet his despair, of course." Geoffrey, his shoulder turned to her, continued to knock loudly. The draughty landing with its twilight square of window open to a damp brick wall, was vault-like in its cold; Felicia, clasping her arms, shivered.

Geoffrey presently said, "I shall have to break the glass and open the door."

At this she started from her place, caught back his hand.

"No, no! He can't have waked yet. He is worn out--tired--imagine how tired! Go on ringing. Knock again."

Her face showed a horror that did not know itself.

"I think I had better break the door," said Geoffrey, gently; putting her back.

She dropped to helpless submission.

The glass panel crashed in under the sharp blow and putting his hand through the aperture Geoffrey drew the bolt.

Inside was complete darkness. A touch at the electric button near the door and the little hall, its closed doors, its

chairs, table, jar of laurel-leaves, flashed upon them.

Geoffrey still kept Felicia behind him.

"Let me go first," he said.

"You! First! No, no, I must see him first."

But firmly now he held her back.

"Felicia, you must wait here. Maurice may be ill."

She had seized his arms to push by him and they stood clutching each other in the brilliant light.

"Ill!" she repeated. "And I am not to go to him! My husband!"

Something in her stricken face, her fixed eyes, made him yield.

"Come then, let us go together."

"No." Her thrust against him did not relax. "I must go alone; I must see him alone; I must speak to him alone."

Geoffrey clasped his arm around her. "Felicia, understand me, you shall not go alone. We are too near to be separated--in this. We must go together."

He saw that his words tore from her mind the veil that covered horror. She submitted, grasping, yet pushing from her, the arm that held her.

"To our room--first. The light is turned in the same place--near the door."

Geoffrey flung open the door. It did not need the light to show them that the room was empty; the desolate evening sky again confronted them at the window. They drew back.

"The drawing-room--the studio--he could not easily hear in the studio."

Geoffrey knew that her hope was desperate--almost mechanical. They looked into the drawing-room; went through the dining-room to the studio. All were empty. They retraced their steps. Her hand no longer grasped and repelled his arm. She leaned upon it.

"His dressing-room--across the passage," she half whispered.

If only, Geoffrey thought, she would faint in his arms so that he might lay her down and go alone. But her swiftness equalled his. Neither could hesitate. He threw open the door of the little dressing-room.

Darkness again. The curtain drawn before the window with its courtyard aspect. Geoffrey's hand felt for the electric button, trembled before it found it. Light came like a shock in the darkness. Maurice lay at their feet.

The pistol had not fallen from his hand, though the open fingers no longer held it. He had not shot himself through the head. Thank God for that, Geoffrey found himself trivially thinking; his head was unmarred and beautiful. One hardly noticed the breast's tragic disarray.

As Felicia put away his arm and left him it was now Geoffrey who leaned, weak, nerveless against the wall.

He watched her kneel beside her husband, and, softly pushing the pistol from his hand, take the empty, open hand in hers.

With a look of tender wonder, like a mother with her sleeping child, she slightly touched his hair and brow. It was still with wonder that she looked up at Geoffrey.

"He is dead," she said in a hushed and gentle voice, as the mother says: "He is sleeping."

Geoffrey's white, silent face, the tears so strangely running down it, over his cheeks, into the corners of his lips, gave her a shudder. Her eyes turned again to the serenity, the slumbering serenity, of the dead face.

For long moments she sat still, while Geoffrey stifled his sobs.

"Is my letter there?" she said at last. He saw the open letter on the dressing table; near it was a sealed envelope.

He forced himself to cross the room to them. The dressing table was behind her; he lifted the letters above her head; the envelope was addressed to Mrs. Wynne. Hesitating, he glanced down, and saw that she had raised her head, that her eyes were on him. She put up her hand.

"Wait--not now."

"I want it now," she commanded with her emotionless gentleness. Now--while I am still stupefied; he understood. He gave it to her and turned aside while she read, down there, at his feet, beside Maurice.

The letter was not long. He heard her hand fall softly with it. She sat, the vacant hand before her face, bowed over her husband.

Geoffrey could not speak to her and he could not leave her. He stood looking down at the dressing table--empty but for its little ivory tray, its pin-cushion. Maurice had not unpacked his dressing-case. A photograph of Felicia was stuck into the glass; not the framed one; that was packed too; he had taken it with him. This was a profile; not good; making her too sad, as Maurice had said.

He heard now that she wept.

He could not speak to her, he could not leave her, yet in his wretchedness he felt himself an alien, a merciless onlooker, till the tearing thought of Maurice, lying there, dead, seemed to justify his presence by his grief.

And presently he felt a touch on his hand. He looked down at her. Her face still hidden she held up the letter to him.

"I am to read it, Felicia? You wish me to read it?"

"He is ours. It is because of you--because of you that I----" She could not finish, and again he understood that she would say that because of him she could look on her dead husband with a right to her despair. He had given him back to her and her to him.

"Dearest Felicia," he read, "I was a coward. But I always loved you most--even when I lied to her. And now there is nothing in the world for me but you. And I am unworthy of you--and of my friend. All I can do for you is to set you free. Do you remember Maeterlinck's poem, darling? I do smile; not only so that you shan't cry, but for pure joy that at last I can really do something not ignoble in your eyes. Darling--darling--it is only horrible because I can't see you again, and because you hate me and perhaps may still hate me and not believe me. Don't, ah! don't hate me. Love me again when I am no longer there to give you pain. Be happy, dearest one.--MAURICE."

A groan broke from Geoffrey's lips. Had it been any other woman at his feet, however his understanding might have condoned her innocent guilt, he must at the moment have shrunk from her. As it was, his groan was half for her, for the hideous helplessness of her remorse. His love yearned over her, and longed, in speechlessness, to shield her from herself.

"Oh, Maurice--my Maurice, I have killed you," Felicia said. "How can I live?"

He knelt beside her, his eyes on the piteous hand that blindly, patiently, wiped away the tears that fell and fell. He could not look at Maurice.

And with her sense of his nearness, his grief and his compassion, she shuddered with dreadful sobs.

"He went through that agony alone. He was so afraid of loneliness--so afraid of fear. He was like a little child. He came back to me--loving me--and he found that I had left him. He died thinking that I might always hate him. I can't live. I can't."

Geoffrey could not think clearly. No phrases of consolation came to him to lift her from her despair. He was with her in it. He could not lift her yet.

And it was no selfish claim that rose to his lips; rather it was the succouring instinct of life that spoke through him to show her life's supreme imperative as, putting his hand on hers and Maurice's, he stammered, "You must, you must. For me."

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