

FICTION

Anne Douglas Sedgwick

The Confounding of Camelia



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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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**The Confounding of
Camelia**

By

Anne Douglas Sedgwick

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TO

"CHARLIE" AND "JIMMIE"

The Confounding of Camelia

CHAPTER I

WHEN Camelia came down into the country after her second London season, descended lightly upon the home of her forefathers, her coming unannounced, and as much a matter of caprice as had been her long absence, a slowly growing opinion, an opinion that had begun to form itself during Camelia's most irresponsible girlhood, became clearly defined, a judgment fixed and apparently irrevocable. The Patons had always been good, quiet people; absolutely undistinguished, were it not that the superlative quality of their tranquil excellence gave a certain distinction. There were no black sheep in their annals, and a black sheep gives, by contrast, a brilliancy lacking to unaccented bucolic groupings, strikes a note of interest at any rate; but none of the Paton sheep were even gray. They fed in pleasant, plenteous pastures, for it was a wealthy, though not noticeably wealthy family, and perhaps a rather sheep-like dulness, an unimaginative contentment not conducive to adventurous strayings, accounted for the spotless fleeces.

Their cupboards had never held a skeleton--nor so much as the bone of one. The family portraits, none even pretending to be Sir Joshuas or Vandycks, only presented a respectable number of generations, so that the mellow perspective of old ancestry, remarkable at least for a lengthy retrogression into antiquity, made no background to their commonplace. Sir Charles, Camelia's father, was the first Paton weighted with an individuality that entailed nonconformity, and since Sir Charles's individuality had confused all anticipations, further developments of the wild streak could not be unexpected. Many of the quiet, conservative people, who had known Camelia, her father and mother, and Patons of an earlier epoch, pronounced with emphasis that Camelia was spoiled; there was a tenderness in the term, an implication of might-have-beens; and other people, more bitter and perhaps more sensitive, remarked that not her head-turning London successes, of which big echoes had rolled down to Clievesbury, but the inherent, the no doubt inherited defects of Miss Paton's character were responsible for her noticeable variation from family traditions. Did not that portion of Blankshire, which lay about the dim old village of Clievesbury, send up to the capital every year its native offerings of maidenhood? A London season had never induced in these well-balanced young ladies the merry arrogance so provokingly apparent in Miss Paton. Old Mrs. Jedsley it was, the last rector's widow, who most openly denounced Camelia, and that, despite her long friendship for the Patons; denounced her frivolity, her insincerity, her egotism, and her wonderful gowns--their simplicity did not deceive Mrs. Jedsley's keen eye; the price of one would keep the parish in flannel for a year she declared, and, no doubt, include the school feast. Mrs. Jedsley prided herself on her impartial faculty for seeing disagreeable truths clearly and for announcing them unflinchingly. Her fondness for Lady Paton--"poor Lady Paton"--could not blind or silence her. Poor Lady Paton was more than ever effaced, Mrs. Jedsley said; one might have thought that Sir Charles had required as much submission as a woman's life could well yield, but the daughter had called forth further capabilities.

"The very way in which she says 'Oh, Camelia!' is flattering to the girl. Her mother's half-shocked admiration encourages her in the belief that she is very naughty and very clever; and really while Camelia talks Lady Paton looks like a hare under a bramble."

The simile hit the mark so nicely that the alarmed retirement of Lady Paton's attitude was pictorially apparent forthwith. And, "Ah, well!" Mrs. Jedsley added, "What can one expect in the child of such a father! The most gracefully selfish man who ever lived. Charles Paton would have smiled you out of house and home, and left you to sit in the snow, while he warmed himself at your fireplace."

Indeed this application of the laws of heredity might have induced a certain charitable philosophy on Camelia's behalf. The love of adventure, of prowess, of power, had shown itself in Charles Paton; but much had been forgiven--even admired--with a sense of breathlessness, in a cloud-compelling younger son (his good looks had been altogether supreme), which, when seen flaunting indecorously in the daughter, was highly unpopular. Charles Paton at a very early age had found the family traditions "devilish dull" (and, indeed, it could not be denied that dull they were); he entered the army, kicked over the traces, and was "wild" with all his might and main. Clievesbury disapproved, but at the same time Clievesbury was dazzled.

Surrounded by this naughty atmosphere, reverberating with racing and betting, dare-devil big-game shooting, and the extreme fashion that is supposed to reverse the "devilish dull" morality of tradition, Charles Paton--like his daughter--returned to Clievesbury, and there fell most magnanimously and becomingly in love with little Miss Fairleigh, the eighth daughter of a country baronet--a softly pink and white maiden--wooed and married her and settled down, after a fashion, to carve out an army career for himself. He carved to good purpose, luck giving him the opportunity. He carried his life as lightly and gallantly as a flag; sought peril, and the tingling excitement of the strangest feats. His reckless bravery won him a knighthood; his fame, his happy good-nature, and extreme good looks, made him a hero wherever he went. Charles Paton's yellow curls, his smile, the Apollo-like line of his lips, were as well known as his martial exploits.

He was vastly popular, and his little wife in the shadow by his side, looked up, like the others, and adored where

they admired. Sir Charles liked a sunny atmosphere, and though the hearthstone flame in its steady commonplace did not count for so much as the wider outdoor effulgence, it was very cosy to come back to, when domesticity was a momentary necessity. He would not have liked a change of temperature, and tolerated the wifely worship very graciously. He was fond of her too; she was very pretty, not clever--(an undesirable quality in a wife)--far more of a help than a hindrance, though how much of a help he perhaps never realized. That broad triumphal road down which the hero marched was swept and garnished by the indefatigable wife. The dustiness and thorniness of daily life were kept from him. Lady Paton packed and paid, and dashed from post to pillar. She was a delicate woman who, petted and made much of, might have allowed herself an occasional headache and a tea-gown existence. The years in India were not easy years; through them all she unwaveringly adored her husband, and in many phases of a varied life showed the steely fibre so often and so unexpectedly displayed by the most delicately inefficient looking women.

Camelia was the fifth child; the others died, two in India and two in England, away from the poor mother. This last one was little more than a baby when ill-health and the death of his brother decided Sir Charles on a return to England. Lady Paton rejoiced in the home-coming. With her pretty baby--a girl, alas! but the estate was unentailed--and her great and glorious husband by her side--the future seemed to open on an unknown happiness. But Lady Paton was to know few compensations. Sir Charles found the role of country gentleman very flavorless, and his attempts to evade boredom left his wife more lonely--and too, more conscious of loneliness, than in busier days.

When Camelia was eight her father died. One saw then that Lady Paton was supremely adapted to eternal mourning. As a widow, she reached a black-encompassed repose, a broken-hearted finality of woe. Camelia was the one reason for her life. The child had never to enforce her will, her mother's devotion yielded to the slightest pressure. Camelia was hardly conscious of ruling, nor the mother of being ruled. As the stronger egoism, Camelia domineered inevitably. She was a gay, kind child, happy in the unfettered expansion of her individuality; she delighted in its exercise, and in all sorts of unconventional acquirements. She read voraciously and loved travel. Lady Paton had by no means reached the end of packing and paying days. Camelia hated beaten tracks; the travelling must be different from other people's; she managed in a tourist-ridden Europe to find the element of adventurous experience. Camelia was keen on experiences. Lady Paton did not appreciate them properly; but then Lady Paton saw life from no artistic standpoint. She thought undiscovered Greece and Poland more trying than the most trying places in India. The steppes depressed her; she dared not mention wolves, but her mind dwelt dejectedly upon them. She could hardly think of the cooking in certain out-of-the-way corners in Spain without shuddering. But she bore all with apparent placidity, and her helpful qualities won her daughter's approval just as they had won her husband's.

There was nothing rude or uncouth in Camelia's domineering spirit, it was too happy, too spontaneous, too sure of its own right. Even after these two years of London her severest detractors could not accuse her of the grosser forms of vanity, nor of affectation, nor of the ugly thing that goes by the name of "fastness." Her unerring sense of the best possible taste made "fast" girls seem very tawdry, and her coolly smiling eyes told them that she found them so. Even with the fact of her serene indifference to them growing into the consciousnesses of the people about Clievesbury, they still owned, generously, but perforce, that she was neither strident nor slangy, nor given to any form of posing. The change in Camelia, if change there were, was a mere evolution. She had tasted the joys of a wide effectiveness. She was only twenty-three, and more than once had been told that she was the only woman in London fitted to hold a "salon," a "salon" that would be a power social, artistic, and political. Authors talked to her about their books, painters about their pictures; her presence at the opera was recorded as having judicial importance; a new pianist was made if he played at one of her musicals. She was a somebody to whom the Clievesburyites were nobodies indeed.

Camelia smiled at her own power. She did not think more highly of herself, but less well of other people, for she measured at once the comparative worth of her own attributes in a world of mediocrity. She saw through the flattery, valued it at its proper rate, but enjoyed it, and indulged in a little air of self-mockery that to appreciative minds crowned her beauty irresistibly. But she was rather disappointed in finding most people so stupid. It was difficult to hold to one's standard in a world where the second-best passed so fluently. By those standards Camelia saw herself very second-best; but were there then no clever people to see it with her? She caught herself in a yawning weariness of it all. A lazy month or so in the country appealed to her; other motives, too, were perhaps not wanting. With a little retinue of friends she reappeared at Clievesbury, and, by degrees, old neighbors discovered that little Camelia had developed into a rather prickling personality. On calling they found Lady Paton very much in the background. Camelia seemed to make no claim, and yet she was the important personage, and to ignore her prominence was to efface oneself with her mother. It was thought--and hoped--that Lady Haversham, the magnate of the county, would vanquish that complacent sweetness, the aerial lightness of demeanor that glanced over one's head while one spoke, and "positively" said Mrs. Jedsley "makes one feel like a cow being looked at along with the landscape."

But although Lady Haversham held rule in the country, in London she, too, was a nobody, and Camelia very much the contrary. Lady Haversham knew right well that in going to see her old friend Lady Paton, Camelia was her objective point, and to try a fall with Camelia upon her native heath, her intention. Lady Haversham knew that in the eyes of the world--the world that counted--she was a mere country mouse creeping into the radiant effulgence of the young beauty, and this unpleasant consciousness gave her quite a drum-like sonority of manner--a fatal manner, as she felt

helplessly while she beat out her imposing phrases beneath the clear smiling of Camelia's eyes. Lady Haversham tried in the first place to exclude Camelia, and addressed herself with most solicitous fondness to Lady Paton; but Camelia's silent placidity stung her into self-betrayal. Camelia evidently cared nothing for Lady Haversham's graciousness--or lack of it; seemed, indeed, unconscious of the cold shoulder turned so emphatically upon her. Lady Haversham thumped and rumbled, and knew herself worsted.

"Manner! Unpleasant manner!" she said to Mrs. Jedsley later on in the day, "the child has no manners at all! That takes in London nowadays, you know. Anything in the shape of arrogant youth and prettiness is sure of having its head turned. And as to prettiness, I should call her curious-looking rather than pretty." And by this Mrs. Jedsley knew that Camelia had snubbed Lady Haversham, without trying to--there was the smart; Camelia was making no effort at all to be unpleasant, to impose herself, but, unmistakably, she only thought of the good people about her home as cows in the landscape.

"I suppose she finds us all very provincial," said Mrs. Jedsley, not averse to planting the shaft, for she had felt Lady Haversham's graciousness to be rather rasping at times.

CHAPTER II

ON the sunny autumn day with which this story opens, Miss Paton was in the morning room at Enthorpe Lodge, waiting for some one--a some one who to her was not a nobody; and though her attitude hardly denoted much anxiety, her mind was alert and very conscious of a pleasing and yet exasperating suspense. Her friend Mrs. Fox-Darriel was with her. Miss Paton leaned against the mantelpiece as she talked, her eyes often swerving to the clock, but calmly, with no perceptible impatience, or passing in a quiet glance over her hand, the falling folds of her white dress, her friend's face and figure--figure and face equally artificial, and perhaps affording to Miss Paton's mind a pleasing contrast to her own distinctive elegance.

There is in Florence a plaque by one of the della Robbia; a long throated girl's head leans from it, serenely looking down upon the world; a delicate head, with a clear brow, a pure cheek, a mouth of sad enchanting loveliness; Camelia's head was like it; saint-like in contour, but with an added air, an air of merry irresponsibility. The outward corners of her eyes smiled into a long upward curve of shadow, her brows above them made a wing-like line, wings hovering extended, and a little raised. The upward tilt pervaded the corners of her mouth, a sad mouth, yet even in repose it seemed just about to smile, and its smile sliding to a laugh. The very moulding of her cheek and chin showed a tender gaiety. As for coloring it might have been the coloring of a pensive Madonna, so white was her skin, so palely gold her smooth thick hair. She was slender too, with the long narrow hands and feet of an Artemis, and on seeing her one thought of a maiden-goddess, of a St. Cecilia, and, without surprise over the incongruity, of an intimately modern young taster of life, whose look of pagan joyousness took neither herself nor other people seriously, said "que voulez-vous," to all blame, and gently mocked puritanical earnestness.

Mrs. Fox-Darriel was plunged into the depths of an easy-chair, a type without hints and whispers to baffle and fascinate. She was thoroughly conventional and not in the least perplexing. Her elaborate head, a masterpiece of wave and coil and curl, rested against the high-chair back, its lustre a trifle suspicious where the light caught too gold a bronze on the sharp ripples.

She was considered a beauty, and her steely, regular face looked at one from every stationer's shop in London. Miss Paton's photographs were to be procured at no stationer's, one among the many differences that distinguished her from her friend.

On Camelia's "coming-out" in all the dryad-like freshness of her one and twenty years, Mrs. Fox-Darriel, smartest of the "smart," kindly determined to "form" and "launch" her. She was very winning, and Camelia seemed very willing. But Mrs. Fox-Darriel soon recognized that she was being led--not leading, soon recognized that Camelia would never follow. The first defeat was at the corsetiere's visible symbol of the "forming" process. Under Mrs. Fox-Darriel's eye, Miss Paton's nymph-like slimness was measured for stays of all sorts and descriptions; Camelia, when the stays were done, surveyed her figure therein confined, with reflective rather than submissive silence.

The week after she went to Paris, and when she returned it was with a stayless wardrobe. Mrs. Fox-Darriel was fairly quelled as Camelia swept before her in these masterpieces of the Rue de la Paix.

"They are not aesthetic," said Mrs. Fox-Darriel--"I own that--not a greenery-yallery whiff about them; nor too self-conscious; but my dear, why? Don't you like my figure?"

Camelia turned candid eyes upon the accurate waist, the rigid curves and right angles. "I can't say I do, Frances," she owned, wherewith Mrs. Fox-Darriel winced a little. "I don't think it looks alive, you know," said Miss Paton. "Of course one must know how to dress one's nonconformity. I think I have succeeded." And Camelia went to court looking like a glorified Romney, with hardly a whalebone about her. Their future relationship was forecast by this declaration of independence. The stayless protegee conferred, did not receive lustre.

Inevitably Mrs. Fox-Darriel found herself revolving about the young beauty--a satellite among the other satellites, and more than Camelia herself was Mrs. Fox-Darriel impressed by Camelia's effectiveness.

On this morning from the depth of her laziness she observed her young friend's glances at the clock with some wondering curiosity; it was difficult to imagine a cause for the stirring of Camelia's contemplative quiescence under country influences, but Mrs. Fox-Darriel was quick to see the faintest ripple of change, and to her well-sharpened acuteness the ripple this morning was perceptible.

"No new guests coming to-day?" she had asked, receiving a placid negative. "And what are you going to do?" she pursued, patting the regular outline of her fringe.

"I thought of a ride with Mr. Merriman and Sir Harry. Do you care to come?"

"No, no, I have too much of Sir Harry and Mr. Merriman as it is."

"It is dull down here, Frances. Perhaps you had best be off to Homburg. I am bent on recuperative vegetating, you know."

"Whom are you waiting for?" Mrs. Fox-Darriel asked, coming to the point with a circumspection rendered rather

ridiculous by the frank promptness of Miss Paton's answer.

"I'm waiting for Mr. Perior, Frances," and she laughed a little, glancing at her friend with a rapid touch of ridicule, "and he is half-an-hour late; and I want to see him very badly."

"Mr. Perior?" Mrs. Fox-Darriell's vagueness was not affected. "One of the vegetables, my dear? Has not the curiosity of the neighborhood exhausted itself?"

"Ah--this vegetable isn't curious, I fear, not a shoot shows at least. If he is curious he will pretend not to be, and pretend very successfully."

"That is subtle for a vegetable. Perior, the name is familiar. Who is this evasive person?"

Miss Paton's serene eyes looked over her friend's head at the strip of blue and green outside framed by the long window. She was asking herself with an inward smile for her own perversity, whether she had not come down into the country for the purpose of seeing the "evasive person." She would not mind owning to it in the least. Pickles after sweets; she anticipated the tart taste of disapproval pleasantly.

"Who is he?" Mrs. Fox-Darriell repeated.

"He is my oldest friend; he doesn't admire me in the least--so I am very fond of him. I christened him 'Alceste,' and he retaliated with 'Celimene.' He is forty odd; a bachelor; he lives in a square stone house, and taught me very nearly everything I know. My Greek is almost as good as my skirt dancing."

"The square-stone gentleman didn't teach you skirt-dancing, I suppose. I begin to place him. The editor; the family friend; the misanthrope."

"Yes, my 'Alceste.' He has reason for misanthropy. His life has been a succession of disappointments. I am one of them, I fear."

"Dear me, Camelia!" Mrs. Fox-Darriell sat upright, "have you ever dallied with this provincial Diogenes?"

Miss Paton smiled over the supposition. "His disappointments are moral, not amorous. Why do I tell you this, I wonder?"

"To show me that you don't care for him perhaps," said Mrs. Fox-Darriell, who to tell the truth, was rather alarmed. Since she had resigned herself to a planetary, a reflected brilliancy, her star at least must never wane; its orbit must widen. Camelia's whole manner seemed suddenly suspicious. She was evidently waiting for this person, pleased, evidently, to talk of him, and though Camelia might be trusted for a full appreciation of her future's possibilities, Mrs. Fox-Darriell was hardly satisfied by the frankness of her "Oh! but I do care for him; he preoccupies me."

Mrs. Fox-Darriell reflected for some moments on the dangers of country-house propinquity and retrospective intimacy before saying pleasantly--

"What does he look like?"

Camelia laughed again, soothing Mrs. Fox-Darriell somewhat by the good-humored glance which seemed to pierce with amusement the anxiety on her behalf.

"His eyes are thunderous; his lips pale with suppressed anger."

"Dear me! I am really anxious to see this vial of wrath."

"And since that is his footstep on the gravel, you shall see him immediately," said Camelia.

A moment after Mr. Perior was announced.

CHAPTER III

MR. PERIOR was a tall man, well built, yet carrying himself with a certain ungainliness. He had an air of eagerness reined back. His face was at once severe and sensitive.

He gave no notice to Mrs. Fox-Darriel, whose head twisted round to observe his entrance, and walking up to Miss Paton he took her hands--she had put out both her hands in welcome--and, looking at her kindly, he said--

"Well, Celimene."

"Well, Alceste."

The smile that made of Camelia's face a changing loveliness seemed to come and go, and come again while she looked at him, as a butterfly's wings fold and open while it rests upon a flower. She rarely laughed outright, but her face in gravity was unfamiliar; one could hardly imagine it without the shifting charm.

"You might have come before," she said--her hands in his, "and I expected you."

"I was away until yesterday."

"You will come often now."

"Yes, I will."

Mrs. Fox-Darriel's eye--a none too friendly eye--travelled meanwhile up and down the "vial of wrath." Clever, eccentric, he had evidently made an impression upon the not easily impressed Camelia, and his clean-shaved face, and the rough gray hair that gave his head a look of shaggy heaviness, seemed to express both qualities significantly.

"Did you ride over?" Camelia asked. "No? Hot for walking, isn't it? Frances, my friend Mr. Perior."

"You live near here, Mr. Perior?" said Mrs. Fox-Darriel, glancing at his boots, which were peculiarly solid and very dusty.

"Only five miles away," he said. Mr. Perior's very boots partook of their wearer's expression of uningratiating self-reliance.

"We have heard of you in London too, I believe. You are editor of--what review is it, Camelia?"

"I was the editor of the *Friday Review*, but I've given that up."

"He quarrelled with everybody!" Camelia put in, "but you can hear him once a week in the leading article--dealing hatchet-blows right and left. They don't care to keep him at closer quarters."

Mr. Perior looked at her, smiling but making no repartee.

"And Camelia has been telling me that you are responsible for her Greek."

"Is Camelia ashamed of her Greek? She needn't be. She was quite a good scholar."

"But Greek! For Camelia! Don't you think it jars? To bind such dusty laurels on that head!"

"Laurels? Camelia can't boast of the adornment--dusty or otherwise."

"Oh! leave me a leaf or two. You are disloyal. I am glad of my Greek. When one is so frivolous the contrast is becoming. And every twig of knowledge is useful nowadays in a woman's motley crown, provided she wears it like a French bonnet."

Perior observed her laughingly--Mrs. Fox-Darriel had as yet seen no hatchets.

"No danger of your being taken for a blue-stocking, Camelia."

"No, indeed! I see to that!"

"You little hypocrite," said Perior.

Mrs. Fox-Darriel's eyebrows arched into her fringe. She got out of her chair trailingy.

"I will go into the garden. Lady Paton is there, Camelia? I think so. I know that you have reminiscences. I am in the way."

"You are, rather," said Perior, when she had gone out. "A very disagreeable face that, Camelia; how do the women manage to look so hard nowadays?"

"Thanks. She is a dear friend."

"I am sorry for it. I hate to see eyes touched up; it gives me the creeps. I am sorry she is a dear friend."

"I am afraid I shall often give you cause for sorriness." Camelia stood by the mantelpiece, smiling most winningly. "Come, now, let us reminisce. I saw you last in London. Why didn't you stop there longer?"

"I had enough of London to last me for a lifetime when I lived there," said Perior. "I do go up for a bout of concerts now and then," he added, and looking away from her he took up a large photograph that stood on the table beside him. "Is this the latest?"

"How do you like it?" she asked, leaning forward to look with him.

"It makes a very saintly little personage of you; but it doesn't do you justice. Your Whistler portrait--the portrait of a smile--is the best likeness you'll ever get."

Camelia looked pleased, and yet a trifle taken aback.

"What a nice Alceste you are this morning!" she said. "Tell me, what are you doing with yourself down here? Growing more and more of the stoic? I expect some day to hear that you have left the Grange and moved into a tub. How do you get on without your pupil?" and Camelia as she stood before him made ever so faint a little dancing step backwards and forwards, expressive of her question's merriment.

"I have existed--more comfortably perhaps than when I had her."

"Now tell me, be sincere," she came close to him, her own gay steadiness of look exemplary in the quality she recommended, "Are you crunchingly disapproving? Ready to bite me? Have you heard dreadful tales of frivolity and worldliness?"

"Not more than are becoming to a pretty young woman with such capacities for enjoyment."

"You don't disapprove then?"

"Of what, my dear Camelia?"

"Of my determination to enjoy myself."

"Why should I? Why shouldn't you have your try like the rest of us? I am not going to throw cold water on your laudable aspirations."

Camelia still looked at him steadily, smilingly, and a little mockingly. Their eyes at these close quarters could but show a consciousness of familiarity that made evasions funny. Camelia's eyes were gray, the sunlit gray of a brook--reflecting broken browns and greens, *yeux pailletes*, as changing as her smile; and Perior's eyes, too, were gray, but the fixed, stony gray that is altogether another color, and they contemplated her fluctuations with an apparently unmoved, though smiling calm.

She laughed outright, and then Perior permitted himself a dry little responsive laugh that left his lips unparted.

"What are you up to, Camelia?" he asked.

"We *do* see through one another, don't we?" she cried joyfully. "I see you are going to pretend not to mind anything. That will sting her!--take down her conceit! I'll not flatter her by scoldings! Eh! Alceste?"

"You little scamp!" he murmured, while Camelia, sitting down on the sofa, swept her white draperies over her feet and motioned to the place beside her. "You will not--no, you will not take me seriously."

"If you see through me, Camelia," said Perior, taking the seat beside her with a certain air of resignation, "you see that I am very sincere in finding your behavior perfectly normal--not in the least surprising. You are merely gay, and happy, and self-centred; and behaving as all girls, who have the chance, behave," he added, putting his finger under her chin with a paternal pat and a look of gentle ridicule.

"Well done! That was very neat! Do you want me to show signs of discomfiture. I won't. You know that I am quite individual, and that for years you have thought me a selfish, hard-hearted little scoundrel."

"Oh no; not so bad as that."

"What have you thought, then?" she demanded.

"I have thought that, like other girls, you can't evade that label----"

"Oh, wretch!" Camelia interjected.

"That, like other girls," Perior repeated with an unkind emphasis, "you are going to try to make a 'good match.'" His face, for all its attempt at lightness, took on a shade of irrepressible repugnance as he spoke. "The accessories don't count for much. You may be quite individually naughty, but in your motives I see only a very conventional conformity."

"That's bad--bad and crude. The good match is, with me, the accessory; therein lies my difference, and you know it. You know I am not like other girls. You saw it in London. You saw," Camelia added, wrinkling up her nose in a self-mockery that robbed the coming remark of fatuity, "that I was a personage there."

"As a noticeably pretty girl is a personage. You really are beating your drum rather deafeningly, Camelia."

"Yes; I'll shock you by mere noise. But, Alceste, I am not as conceited as I seem; no, really, I am not," and with her change of tone her look became humorously grave. "I know very well that the people who make much of me--who think me a personage--are sillies. Still, in a world of sillies, I am a personage. It does come round to that, you see."

"Yes; I see."

Camelia leaned back in her end of the little sofa, her arms folded, her head bent in a light scrutiny of her companion's face. The warm quiet of the summer day pervaded the peaceful room, a room with so many associations for both of them. They had studied, read there together for years; laughed, quarrelled, been the best of friends and the fondest of enemies. Perior, as he looked about it, could call up a long vista of Camelias, all gay, all attaching, all evasive, all culminating and fulfilling themselves with an almost mathematical inevitableness, as was now so apparent to him, in

the long, slim "personage" beside him, her eyes, as he knew, studying him, her mind amused with conjectures as to what he really thought of her; she herself quite ready to display the utmost sincerity in the attempt to elicit that thought. Oh no, Camelia would keep up very few pretences with him. Perior, gazing placidly enough at the sunlit green outside the morning-room, knew very well what he thought of her.

"Are you estimating the full extent of my folly," she asked presently, "tempering your verdict by the consideration of extenuations?"

This was so apt an exposition of his mental process that Perior smiled rather helplessly.

"See," she said, rising and going to the writing-table, "I'll help you to leniency; show you some very evident extenuations." From a large bundle of letters she selected two. "Weigh the extent of my influence, and find it funny, if you like, as I do."

"I wonder if you quite realize the ludicrous aspect of our conversation," said Perior, taking a thick sheaf of paper from the first letter.

"Quite--quite. Only you push me to extremes. I must make you own my importance--my individuality."

"Ah, from Henge," said Perior, looking at the end of the letter. "He was my fag at Eton, you know; dear old Arthur!"

"Yes, and you quarrelled with him five years ago, about politics."

"We didn't quarrel," said Perior, with a touch of asperity; "he was quite big enough not to misunderstand my opposition. Must I read all this, Camelia? It looks rather dry."

"Well, I should like you to. He is one of the strongest men in the government, you know."

"Quite. He is the man for me, despite past differences of opinion. The man for you, too, perhaps," he added, glancing sharply up at her from the letter; "his devotion is public property, you know."

"But my reception of his devotion isn't," laughed Camelia.

"I am snubbed," said Perior, returning to the letter, and flushing a little. Camelia noted the flush. Dear old Alceste! Shielding so ineffectually, under his sharp blunt bearing, that quivering sensitiveness.

She put her hand through his arm, sinking down beside him, her eyes over his shoulder following his, while he read her--certificate. Perior quite understood the smooth making of amends.

"Well, what do you say to that?" she asked when he had obediently read to the very end.

"I should say that he was a man very much in love," said Perior, folding the letter.

"You are subtle if you can trace an amorous influence in that letter."

"It doesn't call for subtlety. Samson only abandons himself so completely under amorous circumstances. I hope you are not going to shear the poor fellow."

"For shame," said Camelia, while Perior, looking at her reflectively, softly slapped the palm of his hand with Arthur Henge's letter. "I am his comrade. I help him; I am on his side, if you please, and against the Philistines."

"Oh, are you? And this? Ah! this is from the leader of the Philistines, Rodrigg. Yes, I heard that Rodrigg was in the toils." Perior examined the small, compact handwriting without much apparent curiosity.

"That is simply nonsense. There was a time--but he soon saw the hopelessness. He is my friend now; not that I am particularly fond of him--the grain is rather coarse: but he is a good creature, far more honest than he imagines, simple, after a clumsy fashion. He aims at distinguished diplomatic complexity, I may tell you, and, I fancy, comes to me for the necessary polishing. Read his letter."

Perior had looked at her, still smiling, but more absently, while she spoke.

"Oh! Rodrigg is more cautious," he said glancing through the great man's neatly constructed phrases. "You are not with the Philistines; he feels that."

"Politically no; but I have a good deal of influence with him. You see those reviews he mentions; I went through a lot of heavy French and Italian reading for him--sociology, industrialism--and saw the result in his last speech."

"Really."

"Ah, really. Don't be sarcastic, Alceste, to me. One of those men will probably be Prime Minister some day. You can't deny that they are eminent men."

"And therefore you are an eminent woman. Well, the logic isn't too lame. I'll conclude, Camelia, that you may do quite a lot of harm in the world."

"You don't believe that a woman's influence in politics can be for good?"

"Not the influence of a woman like you--a *femme bibelot*."

"Good!" cried Camelia, gently clapping her hands.

"It is as that, you know, that these men court you. An *objet d'art* for their drawing-rooms."

"You are mistaken, Alceste."

"If I am mistaken--if they cherish ideals, they are unlucky devils."

"No, Alceste, I am well justified in keeping my self-respect intact. It is not for my *beaux yeux* that I am courted--yes, yes--that wry look isn't needed! I know in what hideously bad taste I am talking, but one can't use artistic methods with you. As I say, I have my finger in any number of pies besides the pie political. You should see the respect in which I am held by the writers and painters. And I *have* good taste; I know that. You can't deny it, since you helped it to grow. What other woman in London has a collection to equal mine? Degas--Outamaro--Oh, Alceste, don't look so funnily! Do you really imagine that I am not conscious of the baldness of my exposition? But what is the good of putting on a wig for you!"

"And all this to convince me----"

"Yes, to convince you."

"Of what, pray?"

"That I am not a little insignificance to be passed by with indulgence."

"Should you prefer severity?" and Perior, conscious that she had succeeded in "drawing" him, could not repress "You are an outrageous little egotist, Camelia."

Camelia, her hands clasped over her knee, contemplated him with more gravity than he had expected.

"No," she demurred, "selfish, but not egotistic. There is a difference, isn't there? Egotism is subjective, selfishness objective. I wonder," she added, "what you *do* think of me. Not that I care--much! Am I not frank? I must care, since I am shuffling about before you; getting a cuffing for my pains!" She rose suddenly, laughing, not in the least bitterly, and walked to the window.

"Mamma and Mary," she announced. "Did Frances evade them? They disconcert her. Frances, you know, goes in for knowingness--cleverness--the modern vice. Don't you hate clever people? Frances doesn't dare talk epigrams to me; I can't stand it. You saw a lot of Mamma and Mary last winter, didn't you? Took Mary out riding. Now, come here, Mr. Perior, and tell me *how* she looked on horseback."

Camelia was smiling irrepressibly as he joined her, and they watched the approach of the two ladies across the lawn. Certainly the angular, thick-set form of the younger gave no hint of pleasing possibilities under circumstances so trying as the equestrian.

"I never could wheedle Mary into the saddle. I should like to see her on horseback immensely." Camelia's eyes twinkled: "A sort of cowering desperation, wasn't it?"

"No, she rode rather nicely," said Perior concisely. There was something rather brutal in Camelia's comments as she stood there with such rhythmic loveliness of pose and contour.

"I wish Mary did not look so much like a milk pudding," she went on; "a raisinless milk pudding--so sane, so formless, so uneventful."

Perior did not smile.

CHAPTER IV

LADY PATON was a thin, graceful woman, her slenderness emphasized, like her daughter's, by a very small head. Since her husband's death she had worn black, and even now it seemed to invade her delicate whiteness rather overwhelmingly, rising closely about her throat, falling over her fragile hands, enfolding her with a soft solemnity. Her white hair was smoothed thickly under the transparent cambrics of an exquisite cap, and framed the sweetness of a faded face, in profile like Camelia's. Camelia's eyes were her father's, and her smile; Lady Paton's eyes were round like a child's, and her smile half-frightened, half-explanatory. With all the gentlewoman's mild dignity, her look was timid, as though it besought indulgence for a lifelong sense of insignificance, a look that aroused in Perior his grimmest scorn for a world in which such flower-like moral loveliness is inevitably victimized by garish egotisms. He had known Sir Charles, a charming companion, a good fellow--in the somewhat widely licensed sense the term implies, but not fit to untie his wife's shoe-strings when it came to a comparison. Camelia now had stepped upon her father's undeserved pedestal, and Perior, watching the new epoch of incense-burning, had smiled more and more grimly. He was devoted to Lady Paton, and had been so since the days when a raw, sensitive, high-strung youth, fresh from college, her Madonna head had roused in him poetical idealizations, and her husband's gay indifference a chafing resentment. With years he had grown rather fond of Sir Charles, could make allowances for him, and, too, had no longer idealized Lady Paton; but though he now saw her, sweet but dull, lovely in unselfishness, yet weak in all except a submission noble in its own way, the fragrant charm still stirred him with an almost paternal tenderness, a pity, even a reverence. She was too obtuse to see her own cramped and imprisoned life, but he saw it, and her unconsciousness was part of the pathos. He was very fond of her, and she of him, so that with all his protective partisanship there was, too, a willing filial deference.

This little corner of appreciation and affection was the softest spot in Perior's character. He took both her hands now and said, looking at her with a whimsical gentleness, "So you are back at last! And glad to be back, too, are you not?"

"Oh, very. And Camelia seems to like it so much," she smiled round at her daughter; "she was beginning to look quite fagged; already the country has done her good."

Camelia smiled back with a humoring lightness.

Mary Fairleigh stood quietly behind her aunt. Her expressionless face certainly did suggest a lacteal dulness. The Fairleighs were not responsible for her short nose and clumsily-cut mouth. Impecunious Maurice Fairleigh, third son, had "done for himself" when he married his younger sisters' nursery governess. Maurice had no money--and not many brains, and poor Miss Hockey had neither brains nor beauty, nor family nor money. Her flaxen hair and vacant blue eyes captured Maurice's vagrant fancy during a lazy summer. He was very young, that fact was the only excuse possible; but, as the Fairleighs said, there was no accounting for Maurice's folly. Maurice himself, after a very little time, could no longer account for it. He was a good-natured fellow, and his wonder at himself did not become too painfully apparent to his wife; but the short years of their married life were by no means a success. Maurice was very delicate, and the struggle to make both ends meet was but grudgingly aided by disapproving relatives. Lady Paton, only, was sympathetic, practically sympathetic too; but during the greater part of Maurice's matrimonial venture she was in India, and, as the other Fairleighs said, Angelica never had the wit to resent anything. Maurice died at Davos-Platz, and Mrs. Fairleigh, when her daughter was sixteen, departed her seemingly very pointless existence. Her last years had been sweetened by Lady Paton's devoted kindness, and she left Mary to this guardian angel. Since that time Mary had lived at Enthorpe Lodge; a grave, good little girl, solemnly submissive to her cousin, painstaking in dutiful gratitude toward her aunt. Camelia had always found this gratitude irritating, and Mary's manner--as of one on whom Providence had laid the patiently-borne burden of obscurity and dependence, very vexing. Camelia intended as little as her mother to recognize a difference, and did not realize that her own dominant characteristics necessitated Mary's non-resistance.

She laughed at Mary's gravity, tried to tease her out of her stolid acceptance of the role of poor relation, but, inevitably, she came to treat Mary with the tolerant carelessness she seemed only to expect. As for Lady Paton, she never surmised about Mary, nor analyzed her. Lady Paton accepted people and things as they appeared, and without conjecture. Mary was a dear, good girl. It was indeed impossible that her uninteresting virtues should arouse enthusiasm, and her aunt's appreciation from its very fulness was calmly unemotional.

Lady Paton having become in these latter days a sort of decorative adjunct to her daughter--for Camelia used her mother to the very best advantage,--lace caps, sweetness and all,--it was upon Mary that the duller duties fell. Mary managed bills and servants, and household matters; wrote little notes, ran little errands, chose embroidery silks, and sent for the books to Mudie's,--the tender books with happy matrimonial endings that Lady Paton liked. She read these books aloud, and talked to her aunt--as Camelia never did, never could. Lady Paton listened to her daughter, but she and Mary talked about her. Mary's conversation required no adjustment of amazed faculties, no quelling of old-fashioned alarms, nor acceptance of a wondering incompetence.

The little prattle of gardening and gowns, and Camelia's doings went on happily, unless hushed in an absorbed observance of that young heroine herself,--flinging pretty missiles of speech far above the heads of her mother and cousin.

Both dull dears; such was Camelia's realistic inner comment, but Mary was an earthenware dear, and Mamma translucent porcelain. Camelia, who appreciated and loved all dainty perfection, appreciated and loved her mother, with much the same love that she would have given a slender white vase of priceless ware, displayed on a stand of honor in her knowingly grouped drawing-room. She was a distinctly creditable and decorative Mamma. As for Mary, she was not decorative; a harmless, necessary hot water jug.

Camelia, now, as her mother spoke to Perior, went to her side and gave the muslin that fell over her shoulder a little touch and settling.

"You have had a nice walk round the garden?" she said, smiling, "your cheek is just the pink of a sweet-pea."

"And how are you, Mary?" Perior asked, turning to Miss Fairleigh. "You might have more color I think."

"Mary has a headache," said Lady Paton, the fluttering smile with which she had received her daughter's commendation fading, "I think she often has them and says nothing."

"You must play tennis with the Mappuck girls. You need more exercise," Perior continued. "They are at it vigorously from morning till night."

"Oh--really," Mary protested, "it is only Aunt Angelica's kindness--I am quite well."

"And no one must dare be otherwise in this house," Camelia added. "Go and play tennis at once, Mary. I don't approve of headaches." Mary smiled a modest, decorous little smile.

"Nor do I," said Perior, and then as Lady Paton had taken a chair near her work-table, he sat down beside her, while Mary sank from her temporary prominence, and, near the window, took up some sewing. Camelia remained near her, looking out at the smooth green stretches of the lawn, lending half an ear to the talk behind her, but keeping up at the same time a kindly little flow of question and reply with her cousin. How were the flowers getting on? and the hay making? Had she seen that morning her poor village people? The questions were rather perfunctory; and while she spoke Camelia aided the faltering march of a burnished little beetle up the window, and helped him out on to the fragrant branch of syringa that brushed the pane.

"I hear that you are embarked on a season of parties," said Perior to Lady Paton.

"Yes, Camelia has so many friends. She thought she would like it here if she could keep it gay with people."

"You will like it too. You were lonely last winter."

"Ah, Camelia was not here; but I was not lonely, Michael; you were too kind for that; and I had Mary. You don't think Camelia looks thin, Michael?" She had always called the family friend by his Christian name. Perior had Irish ancestry. "She has been doing so much all spring--all winter too; I can't understand how a delicate girl can press so many things into her life--and studying with it too; she must keep up with everything."

"Ahead of everything," Perior smiled.

"Yes, she is really so intellectual, Michael. You don't think she looks badly?"

"She is as pretty a little pagan as ever," said Perior, glancing at Miss Paton.

"A pagan!" Lady Paton looked rather alarmed. "You mean it, Michael? I have been troubled, but Camelia comes to church with me. It is you who are the pagan, Michael," she added, finding the gentle retort with evident relief.

"Oh, I wasn't speaking literally. I have no doubt that Camelia is a staunch church-woman," he smiled to himself. Camelia was a brazen little conformist, when conformity was of service.

"No, not that. I don't quite know. I have heard her talk of religion, with Mr. Ballenden, who writes those books, you know, scientific, atheistic books, and Camelia seemed quite to overpower him; the illusions of science, the claims of authority." Lady Paton spoke with some little vagueness. "I did not quite follow it all; but he became very much excited. Controversial religion does not interest me, it confuses me. It is the inner change of heart, Michael," she added with a mild glance of affection, "the reliance on the higher will that guides us, that has revealed itself to us."

Perior looked somewhat gloomily on the ground. The thought of Lady Paton's religion, and Camelia's deft juggling with negatives, jarred upon him.

"You don't agree with me, Michael?" Lady Paton asked timidly.

"Of course I do," he said, looking up at her, "that is the only definition needful. We may interpret differently, from different points of view."

"You would find, I think, greater peace in mine, Michael. May you come to it in time!"

They were both silent for a moment, and both looked presently at Camelia.

"She is so much admired, and so unspoiled by it. So frank, so unaffected. She is found so clever."

"So she tells me," Perior could not repress.

"And so humorous," Lady Paton added, taking his smile in its kindest sense, "she says the most amusing things."

"Mr. Perior," said Camelia, turning rather abruptly, "if Mamma is singing my praises I give you leave to repress her sternly." She joined them, standing behind Lady Paton's chair, and, over her head, looking at Perior. "I know how trying such praises are, heard outside the family circle."

"In which I hope I may include myself. I enjoy Lady Paton's interpretation."

"Mamma would not believe the biting intention of that speech. Cuff! cuff! cuff! *Il me fait des miseres*, Mamma!"

Lady Paton's smile went from one to the other.

"You have always teased Michael, Camelia, and he has always been so patient with you."

"Every one is patient with me, because I am a good girl. 'Be good, sweet maid--' I believe in a moral universe," and Camelia over her mother's head wrinkled up her nose roguishly as she made the edifying statement. "Mamma," she added, "where is my flock this morning? I fancied that you were shepherding some of them. I want to trot them out before Mr. Perior. I want to study his expression as Sir Harry and Mr. Merriman present themselves. Sir Harry the mere superlative of Mr. Merriman's fatuity. I imagine that by some biological adaptation of function they use their brains for digestive purposes, since I am sure they never think with them."

Lady Paton took refuge from a painful recognition of the inhospitable nature of these remarks in a vague smile. Lady Paton had a faculty for misunderstanding when either misunderstanding or disapproval was necessary. If Camelia hoped by her brisk personalities to shock her former preceptor she failed signally, for laughing appreciatively he asked, "And for what purpose were these latest sports of evolution imported?"

"Purpose! Could one pin a purpose to such aimless beings? They came because I like to have beautiful things about me, and, in their way, they are beautiful. Then, too, with a plant-like persistency they turn to the sun, and I do not flatter myself in owning that I am their sun. It would have been cruel to deny them the opportunity of basking."

"The hunting, dancing, yachting species, I suppose."

"Yes; their lives comprise a few more movements, but very few. It is a mere sort of rhythmic necessity."

Perior laughed again, and his eyes met hers, as she leaned above her mother's chair, in quite a twinkling mood.

Mary, near the window, paused in her stitching to look at them both with a seemingly bovine contemplation.

"And who are your other specimens?" asked Perior, less conscious perhaps than was Camelia of the purely dual nature of the conversation. She enjoyed this little display before him, and her enjoyment was emphasized by the presence of two alien listeners, it defined so well the fundamental intellectual sympathy.

Her smile rested on him as she replied, "You saw Mrs. Fox-Darriel."

"Yes."

"My only other guest just now is Gwendolen Holt, in appearance a youthful replica of Mrs. Fox-Darriel, but in character very embryotic."

"A very pretty girl," said Lady Paton, finding at last her little foothold.

"A spice of ugliness--just a something to jar the insignificant regularity of her face, would make her charming. As it is, her prettiness is a bore. You will stay to lunch, Alceste, and see these people?"

"I can't say that you have made me anxious to see them."

"Have you no taste for sociology?"

"You will stay and see *us*, however, will you not?" said Lady Paton, advancing now in happy security. "I want a long talk with you."

"Then I stay."

"His majesty stays!" Camelia murmured.

"How are the tenants getting on?" asked Lady Paton, taking from the table a soft mass of white wool, and beginning to knit. She was one of those women whose hands are always uselessly and prettily busy.

"Mary and I drove past the cottages yesterday--I wish you had come, dear--you would have liked to see them. So pretty they are, among their orchards, with such beautiful gardens full of flowers."

"Yes, don't they look well?" said Perior, much pleased. "I am trying to get the people to devote themselves to fruit and flower growing. It pays well."

"And do the cottages themselves pay?" Camelia inquired mischievously. "I hear that, asking the ridiculous rents you do, you need never expect to make the smallest profit--or even get back the capital expended."

"Thank Heaven the money-making epoch of my life is over," said Perior, folding his arms and looking at her rather defiantly.

"But what blasphemy against political economy! Cottages that don't pay! It's very immoral, Alceste. It is feminine. You are pauperizing your tenants."

"I don't at all disbelieve that a little infusion of femininity into political economy would be a very good thing."

Besides, the cottages will pay in the end."

"The rents are lower than the lowest in the village. Lord Haversham was telling me about it yesterday."

"Oh, Haversham!" laughed Perior.

"He was very plaintive. Said that times were hard enough for landlords as it was, without your charitable visionaries and your socialistic theories."

"The two accusations don't fit; but of the two I prefer the latter."

"It is a mere egotistic diversion then?"

"Yes, a purely scientific experiment."

"And your tenants have bath-tubs, I hear. Do they use them with Pears' soap every morning?"

"I flatter myself that they are fairly clean. That alone is an interesting experiment. Dirt, I firmly believe to be the root of all evil."

"Ah, we come down to the bed-rock of ethics at last, don't we? Well, how is the laboratory getting on? Have you found traces of original sin in protoplasm?"

"I think I have spotted perverse tendencies," Perior smiled.

"What a Calvinist you are!"

"Michael a Calvinist, my dear child!" Lady Paton looked up from her knitting in amazement.

"An illogical Calvinist. Instead of burning sinners he washes them! and I've no doubt that to some of them the latter form of purification is as disagreeable as the former. He puts them into model cottages, with Morris wall-papers."

"I beg your pardon. No Morris wall-papers."

"Camelia, my dear, how extravagantly you talk," said Lady Paton, her smile reflecting happily Perior's good-humor. Michael did not mind the teasing--liked it perhaps; and though she did not understand she smiled. Camelia sank down to a low chair beside her mother's, and taking her mother's hand she held it up solemnly, saying, "Mamma, Mr. Perior is a tissue of inconsistencies. He despises humanity; and he works for it like a nigger."

"You are an impressionist, Camelia. Don't lay on your primaries so glaringly."

"Confess that you are a philanthropist, though an unwilling one."

"I confess nothing," said Perior, looking across the room at Mary with a smile that seemed to invite her participation in his well-borne baiting.

"Is not your life one long effort to help humanity--not *la sainte canaille* with you--but, and hence your inconsistency, the gross *canaille*, the dull, treacherous, diabolical *canaille*?"

"Not to hurt it, rather; and as one is oneself gross, dull, treacherous, and diabolical, that may well engage one's energies. There would be less cant and more comfort in the world if we would merely avoid treading upon our neighbor's corns. Let us cultivate the negative virtues. What do you say, Mary? You have a right to a strong opinion, since I never saw you hurt anybody."

Mary, thus unexpectedly appealed to, started, grew red, and laughed an embarrassed and apprehensive laugh. Camelia cast a glance upon the long strip of rather foolish embroidery lengthening under her cousin's fingers.

"My philosophy!" she declared. "People who make a row about things are such bores."

Lady Paton, still smiling, quite at sea, but conscious of a pleasant atmosphere, bent her eyes upon an intricate turn in the futile garment upon which she was engaged.

"Do you avoid your neighbor's corns, my young lady?" Perior inquired.

"I never think of such unpleasantnesses," Camelia replied lightly. "As I haven't any corns myself, I proceed upon the supposition that other people enjoy my immunity. If they don't, why, that is their own fault--let them cut them and give up tight boots."

Perior, looking on the floor, his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped, laughed again.

"Little pagan!" he said.

"Frank, healthy paganism, an excellent thing. I don't own to it, mind; but is not the soul in our modern sense a disease of the body?"

"Oh, Camelia!" said Lady Paton, looking up with eyes rounded. Camelia's smile reassured her somewhat, and she glanced for its confirmation at Perior.

Mary Fairleigh, in her distant seat, carefully drew her silk about the contour of an alarming flower.

"Never mind, Lady Paton, she doesn't shock me at all," said Perior.

"I am glad of that, Michael; she will make herself misunderstood. Camelia dear, it is one o'clock. The others must be in the drawing-room. Shall we go there?"

"Willingly, Mamma. I'm very hungry. Did you order a *good* lunch, Mary?"

"I hope you will like it." Mary paused in the act of neatly rolling up her work. "Fowls, asparagus----"

"*Don't*," Camelia interposed in mock horror; "the nicest part of a meal is unexpectedness!" She laughed at her cousin; but Mary, securing her work with a pin, murmured solemnly, "I am so sorry."

"Mary, you are as silly as your own fowls!" cried Camelia; she gave her cousin's flaxen head a pat, and then, as Lady Paton had taken Perior's arm and led the way, she drew herself up in a mimicry of their stately progress, and followed them demurely.

CHAPTER V

MICHAEL PERIOR was an unfortunate man; unfortunate in his temperament, which was enthusiastic, sensitive, and idealistic; unfortunate in the circumstances with which that temperament found itself called upon to do battle. To a man who had expected less of life the circumstances might have been more amenable and far more endurable, but Perior had the ill-luck to be born with an unmanageable instinct for the best, with an untamable scorn for the second-best. It is not necessary to go into the details of a life which had not spared these qualities nor improved while disillusionizing him. Two blinding buffets met him at its threshold. His father was ruined in a lawsuit, which by every ethical standard he should have won, and Perior was in consequence jilted by the girl whom he had enshrined in his heart as the perfect star of his existence. At twenty-three he found himself under a starless sky, with a heart stupefied at its own emptiness, and in a world of thieves and murderers--for his father died under the shock of disaster, and Perior did not pick his phrases.

The abject common-sense of his *ex-fiancée* could be borne with perhaps more philosophy. He accepted the starlessness as in the nature of things, and his own brief belief in stars as typifying the ignorance of youth; but his father's death--the crushing out of life rather than its departure--was tragedy, and it was with the sense of inevitable and irretrievable tragedy that he began life. He had been thought clever at Oxford, and had considered himself destined for Parliament. With a huge load of debts upon his back, and an unresigned mother to support, all thoughts of the career for which he had fitted himself were out of the question. He turned to its only equivalent, and took up journalism. He was much in earnest; he believed in a right and in a wrong, and was intolerant of expediency. In a world of interested motives he bore himself with unflinching disapproval. He would limit his freedom by no party partiality, and in the laxity of public life his keen individuality made itself felt like a knife cutting through cheese. At the end of years of very bitter struggle he found himself in a position of some eminence, editor of a courteous, caustic review, whose chief characteristics were a stubborn isolation and a telling of truths that made both friends and foes blink. No half-measures, no half-truths. Conformity with the faintest taint upon it was intolerable to him. His idealism had not evaporated in the storm and stress, it had condensed, rather, into a steely resistance to ugly reality. Insincerity, injustice, meanness, hurt him as badly in middle-age as they had at twenty-five, but he now expected them, and by a stoical presage braced himself against disappointment. The stoicism was only a rather brittle crust, hastily improvised by Nature's kindly adaptation; he was soured, but his heart was still soft; he expected nothing, and yet he was hurt by everything. It was now some time since he had promised himself that Camelia should never hurt him. Camelia had occupied his thoughts for a good many years. The pretty child, with her face of subdued saint-like curves, and her smile of frank unsaintliness, had seemed to claim him from the very first home-coming. By a final irony of fate poor Mrs. Perior died only a few months before the Grange was freed from its last encumbrances. She had not made life easier for her son. She had always refused to believe in the necessity for letting the Grange, had always resented the lodgings in South Kensington, had always considered herself injured, and had not been chary in demonstrations of injury. Perior had looked forward with pride to the time when he should reinstate her in her own home, and her death made a mockery of his own home-coming.

It was in Camelia's early girlhood that ill-health, overwork, and a violent row with the powers of political darkness, made this home-coming definite. The battered idealist sought rather sulkily a retreat from the intolerable contemplation of a wider world's misdeeds. Young Camelia, so different from her dully worthy ancestors, so different even from her dashing but not intellectual papa, charmed him as the woods and flowers of spring charm eyes weary with city winter. She was too young to be taken seriously; that was a lifted weight, in the first place. The joyous receptivity of her mind afforded to his scholarly instincts just the foothold he required to excuse to himself an indulgent and thoughtless affection. As friend and adviser of Lady Paton, he drifted easily into a paternal attitude towards the fatherless Camelia; he was over twenty years her senior, and her eagerness for knowledge appealed to him. As she had said, he taught her nearly everything she knew; she rebelled against other methods, and Perior himself would have felt robbed had governess or tutor supplanted him. During those quiet and pleasant years he felt that on a melancholy walk he had picked a handful of primroses--their pale young gold irradiated his solitude. He did not say to himself that Camelia would never disappoint him, nor own that the handful of primroses meant much in his life, but hopefulness seemed to emanate from her, and insensibly he lived in the sunny impression. Her very defects were charming, the mere superfluity of exuberant vitality, and with this conviction he observed her happy, youthful selfishness as one observes a kitten's antics, and treated her claims for dominion with gentle ridicule. Camelia laughed with him at herself, and this gave them an irresistible sense of companionship; consoling too, since no defect so humorously recognized could be deep; his primroses still kept their dew. But as she grew older, Perior began to realize uncomfortably that Camelia could laugh at the deepest defect, recognize it, analyze it, and stick to it--a deft combination. This faculty for firm sticking despite obstacles gave the paternal Perior food for reflection, and, as he reflected, he felt with a sudden little turn of terror that he was in a fair way to take Camelia seriously after all. His terror struck him as very cowardly, a shrinking from responsibilities--his, of a truth, to a certain extent. That lightly assumed guardianship meant much in her life. Had

he failed in some essential? Was she not the product of her training? He owned with a sigh that the note of true authority it had not been his right to emphasize; yet in defending himself from the probable pain of a deep affection, had he not weakened his claim to a moral influence? And had he defended himself? Perior turned from the question. Camelia respected him, he knew that; and yet his very frankness with her--he, too, had laughed at himself for her benefit--had given her a power over him. He was not at all afraid of seeming priggish, but he was shy before certain contingencies; he knew that he should blunder if he preached, and that Camelia would force him to smile at the blunder and to blur the sermon.

At the age of eighteen he caught her more than once managing, manipulating the plastic elements about her with a skill approaching deceit. The very absence of a necessity for deceit alarmed him; she had so few temptations, there was no way of testing her, yet, that once or twice, when circumstances by a little twist or turn opposed her, he had caught her--too dexterous. Perior had not controlled himself, nor taken the advantage he might have seized. He had immediately lost his balance, exaggerated what Camelia regarded as a quite permissible and pretty compromise into a fault worthy of biting denunciation, and in so doing had given her a point of vantage from which she laughed--not even angrily. Perior for many years had thought most goodness negative, and preferred to see it tested before admiring, but he had forgotten to apply his philosophy in this case. He lost his temper, and Camelia kept hers, kept hers to the extent of soothing him by a smiling confession of her misdoing, an affectionate declaration that she was wrong and he quite right--"But don't be cross, dear Mr. Perior." What was he to do? She did not care if she were wrong. Perior thought he would be wiser in the future; he would give Camelia no further opportunity for facile confession; but though the first sting of unexpected disappointment was over, many unmerited aches were still reserved to him--all the more painful from the fact that he had never intended to ache for Camelia. Mary Fairleigh had come to the Patons when Camelia was sixteen, and Camelia's treatment of her cousin was another and more constant cause for growing discontent. Perior could not define the discomfort with which he watched Camelia's indifferent kindness, or, worse still, an unkindness as unintentional. He assumed by degrees an attitude of compensatory gentleness towards poor Mary; it held, however, no sting for Camelia; she seemed to watch his doing of the things she left undone very complacently. It was by degrees that his dismay took refuge in a manner of unshocked indifference which he hoped would prove salutary. It did seem to irk and perplex her somewhat, and he had the consolation of thinking that many of her perversities might be intentionally engineered for his benefit. Perior, too, had learned to smile, and Camelia was baffled. He would not scold her. After all, he counted for very little, so Camelia assured herself as she entered upon her London life, and he should see that she could be indifferent with far more effectiveness. Perior saw little of her during those years. The little he saw on his rare visits to London confirmed his grim conviction. She was a pretty, clever, foolish, worthless creature; her frankness threw no dust into his eyes. She might own herself a self-seeking worldling, and she did not overshoot the mark. Many were the corns she danced over in her quest of power and happiness. Her sincerity was insincere--it adapted itself too cleverly. Perior had seen her flatter, when only he and she knew that she was flattering; had seen her make her effect by pliancy or by resistance; had watched her smile light for those who could serve her, or stiffen to a sweet blankness for the incompetent. He recognized in her his own scorn for the world without his ideal, which would not permit him to stoop and use it; but, so Perior thought, Camelia knew no ideals; reality did not hurt her--she met it with its own weapons. One did not conquer an immoral world by moral methods; and if one lived in it, not to conquer it would be intolerable. The scorn no doubt excused her to herself, but it hedged her round with a sort of stupidity from which Perior's quick recognition of moral beauty preserved him. Ethical worth had come to be everything to him. Camelia simply did not see it. He himself had armed her with that scientific impartiality before which he felt himself rather helpless, before which good and bad resolved themselves into very evasive elements. She told him that her science was more logical than his, it had made her charitable to the whole world, herself included, whereas he was hard on the world and hard on himself. His very kindness lacked grace, while her unkindness wore a flower-like color. He was sorry for people, not fond of them--but Camelia was neither fond nor sorry. They were shadows woven into the web of her experience, her business was to make that experience pleasant, to see it beautifully. It was this love of beauty--beauty in the pagan sense--that baffled him in her. She had put appreciation and an exquisite good taste in the place of morality. Life to her was a game, to him a tragic, insistent conundrum. These, at least, were Perior's reluctant conclusions.

When he walked away from Enthorpe Lodge his mind was to a certain extent already reverting to the daily preoccupations of cottages, perverse protoplasm, and his weekly article for the *Friday Review*; but also dwelling with the dual peculiarity observable in our meditations, upon the people he had just left, Lady Paton, Mary, Camelia's guests, and Camelia herself. It seemed really unnecessary to remind himself of that promise he had made himself some time ago; Camelia could not disappoint him; he knew just what to expect from her; she could not hurt him. Yet the promise had been made at a time when she was hurting him very badly, and even now, while he recalled it with some vehemence, he was feeling a most illogical smart.

The country road wound among dusty hedges and through the little village. About half a mile beyond it lay a remnant of the Perior estate, once large, second only in importance to the Haversham's, now sadly shrunken and dislocated. By degrees, and during years of only meagre competence, he had built upon this pretty bit of land a cluster

of cottages, his playthings; to make them unnecessarily delightful was his perverse pleasure.

Perior was by no means a paternal landlord; the lucky occupants of the cottages were never reminded of the propriety of gratitude. Indeed Perior had enraged neighboring landowners by remarking that the cottages were none too good for the rent—a saying big with implications, and perhaps intentionally spiteful. Indeed intentional spite was attributed to many of his actions. It was a great fox-hunting country; and one of the finest coverts, rich in foxes lovingly preserved by Perior's forefathers, lay on his estate. Now it was currently reported that Perior had had all the foxes shot! A murder would have made him less unpopular. Malicious insanity seemed the only explanation.

He did not scruple to proclaim his blasphemous heresies on the sacred sport. He grew angry, said he abominated it, would do all in his power to stamp it out, and at least would see that no animal should be "tortured" on his property. The foxes had certainly disappeared from Mandelly Woods, and good, honest sportsmen could hardly trust themselves to mention the criminal fanatic's name. It must be owned that Perior's love of animals approached the grotesque. He entertained at the Manor a retinue of battered cats and outcast dogs, many garnered from London streets. He could hardly bear to have surplus kittens drowned, and only by the firmness of the housekeeper was the necessary severity accomplished. He was exaggerated, peculiar, unpractical; the kindest said it of him. He had sent two clever village boys to the University, one the son of the village poacher and ne'er-do-weel, a handsome lad with a Burns-like streak of genius, who had distinguished himself at Oxford, and disappointed many pessimistic prophecies by turning out more than creditably. At the present moment the son of one of Perior's field-laborers came every day to the Grange for a coaching in the humanities. Perior was a fine master, and Camelia was none too well pleased when she heard of her successor. These experiments in sociology aroused only less hostile comment than the black affair of the foxes.

Our misanthropic gentleman paused at an angle of the road to survey his cottages, each set in its own happy acres, stretching flower-beds and young orchards into the sunny country. His tenants all had a pleasant look of successful adaptation. One was a cobbler, and made most of Perior's boots; a fact rather apparent.

It was evening by the time he reached the tall gates through which the roadway led up to the Grange, a high-standing, unpretentious, gray stone house, rather bleakly situated on its height, but backed by a further rise of wood, and, despite its vineless severity of outline, gravely cheerful in aspect. An immaculately-kept lawn stretched in a gradual slope before it, shaded by two yew trees, and the light grace of beeches. Under the windows of the ground floor were beds of white and purple pansies, and at one side, near the shrubberies, were long rows of irises, also purple and white. From the other side of the house the ground descended very abruptly, giving one the realization of height, and a long view over woods, hills, and valleys to the distant sunset.

The house within carried out consistently the first impression of pleasant bareness. The wainscotted walls were reflected in the gleaming floors. No tenderness of draperies, no futile ornament. In the drawing-room three old portraits of three dead Mrs. Periors looked quietly from the walls; some good porcelain was on shelves where there was no danger of its breaking; the faded brocade of the furniture was covered with white chintz sprigged with green. The library, where the light came serenely through high windows, was lined with books; here and there on the peaceful spaces a good engraving or etching; philosophical bronzes above the shelves. The writing-table was spacious; opposite it was Perior's piano—he played well. This was the room he lived in. Now, when he entered, an old setter, glossily well-groomed, looked up with an emotional thudding of the tail, and of two cats curled exquisitely in the easy-chair, one only opened placid eyes, while the other, after arching itself in a yawn, advanced towards him with a soundless mew.

Perior was devoted to his cats, and adored his dogs. After stooping to pat these animals, he took up a letter from the table. Arthur Henge's writing was familiar, though of late years Perior had rarely seen it. The old friendship had borne pretty sharp twinges—had survived even Perior's ruthless handling of Henge's pet measure some years ago: Henge had believed ardently in the bill, and thought Perior responsible to a certain extent for its failure. That Henge had not been embittered by this political antagonism had deeply touched Perior. He always remembered the fact with a delightful, glowing comfort. His respect and fondness for Henge were a staff to him. The two men were intrinsically sympathetic, though they had hardly an opinion in common. Arthur Henge was an optimist, and deeply religious, his wide humanism going hand in hand with a fervent churchmanship. He was aided towards a happy view of things by happy circumstances. He was one of the richest men in England, and one of the most powerful; he held a high place in the present Government. No sword of Damocles in the shape of a peerage hung over his career in the Lower House, and at the same time the baronetcy, hoary with an honorable antiquity, had the consequence and standing of many greater but less significant titles. He was young, handsome, and serious. Above all small cynicisms and hardness, his experience of life seemed only to have taught him a wise, fine trust, and, perhaps in consequence of this attitude of mind, it was impossible not to trust him.

This was the man who had fallen in love with Camelia Paton. The fact was town talk, though it was surmised that despite his evident absorption he had not yet given her occasion to accept him. That he was courting her was not yet apparent, but his devotion remained gravely steady. Lady Henge was supposed to be the cause of this adjournment of decisive measures. Lady Henge was even more serious than her son, and her influence over him was paramount.

Now with all her ready qualities Camelia seldom pretended to seriousness. To Perior there was something highly distasteful in the whole matter. That Camelia should be the object of such comment, that her achievement of the "good match" should be canvassed, infuriated him. No blame could attach itself to Arthur's reticence; if reticence there were it was on the highest grounds. It was the world's base, materialistic chatter that jarred, its weighing of her charm and loveliness against his wealth and prominence merely. Perior weighed Camelia's merits against Arthur's. In his heart of hearts he did not consider Camelia fitted to make a high-minded man happy--and some dim foreboding of this fact no doubt chilled her lover's resolution. Perior, however, was not logical. He might not approve of Camelia, but that Lady Henge should disapprove nettled him. Arthur no doubt was a fool in loving Camelia, but Perior wished to be alone in that knowledge. As for the world's gross view of Henge as one of the greatest "catches" in England, of Camelia as lucky if she got him, Perior's blood boiled when he thought of it,--and that Camelia, with all her reliance on her own attractions, was quite aware of the world's opinion and was not angered by it.

She, too, thought Henge a great "catch," no doubt; a great catch even for Camelia Paton.

Perior read the letter now, standing near the window and frowning very gloomily. It was natural that Henge should write to him in this strain of only thinly-veiled confidence.

Henge knew of the long paternal intimacy with Camelia, and relied perhaps too much on a paternal sympathy. Henge and his mother were coming down to Clievesbury to spend some weeks at Enthorpe. He avowed no intention, but the whole note, its very restraint, was big with intention. He seemed, too, to emphasize his mother's pleasure in coming, and Perior felt in the emphasis a touch of triumph. He hoped to see a great deal of Perior, there was in the concluding passages of the note quite a prophecy of future relationship, nearer than any they had known. But through it all Perior fancied just the hint of an appeal--a quite unconscious appeal, none the less significant for that.

Camelia was to be put on trial before Lady Henge, and to Arthur the process would be painful. The Henges had stately requirements; and although Perior imagined that, were these requirements not satisfied, Arthur had almost determined to overlook them, he felt the keenness of the hope that all would be satisfactory, the support that the hope found in Perior's intimacy with Camelia.

Lady Henge shared her son's respect for Perior, and to her Perior's friendship could interpret many phases in Camelia's charming character perplexing to the anxious mother's unaided vision.

"I am glad my mother is to know her better; she has seen only the surface as yet," wrote Arthur. Arthur's love was a surety not quite trustworthy, but the lifelong friendship of a man like Perior must convince grave Lady Henge of many depths. Perior felt that his rigidity was to be made use of. His well-known earnestness was to vouch for Camelia's. His brow was very black as he finished the letter. He was nearly angry with Arthur.

CHAPTER VI

"Mrs. Jedsley is in the drawing-room," Camelia announced, "so I ran away. I am really afraid of her."

Mrs. Fox-Darriell laughed slightly; she put down the book with which she was solacing a lazy afternoon on the sofa, and, looking at Camelia's cloth dress and sailor hat, asked her if she had been out again.

"Yes, just back. I only stayed in the drawing-room long enough to show Mrs. Jedsley that she scared me. It's those eyebrows, you know, that lack of eyebrow rather, emphasized by an angry redness in the place where they should be. No, I cannot face her."

"She is rather *epatante*. I suppose you were walking with your brace of suitors."

"No, I don't know where they are. I was walking by myself. I think I must have walked eight miles," Camelia added, stretching out her feet to look at her dusty shoes.

"You certainly are an unsociable hostess, but those boys are becoming bores. Whom do you expect next week? You must have something to leaven the lump of pining youthful masculinity."

"That poet is coming--the one who writes the virile poems, you know, and whose article of faith is the *joie de vivre*; and Lady Tramley, dear creature, Lord Tramley, and--would you specify Sir Arthur as leaven?"

"Do you mean to imply that he *isn't* pining?"

"I imply nothing so evident."

"Wriggling, then--that you must own."

Camelia was sitting near the window, opened on its framing magnolia leaves, and said rather coolly as she took off her hat--

"No, I am wriggling. I must decide now."

This was a masterly assurance. Mrs. Fox-Darriell reflecting that nothing succeeds like unruffled self-confidence, and that Camelia's had never shown a ripple of doubt, owned to herself that her slightly stinging question was well answered.

"Don't wriggle, my dear; decide," she said, accepting the restatement very placidly, "you could not do better. To speak vulgarly--the man is rich beyond the dreams of avarice."

"Beautifully rich," Camelia assented.

"Ah--indeed he is."

"And he himself is wise and excellent," Camelia added; "I like him very much."

"He is coming alone?"

"No, Lady Henge comes too."

Mrs. Fox-Darriell gave her friend a sharp glance.

"That's very serious, you know, Camelia. I think you must have decided--to suit Lady Henge."

Camelia smiled good-humoredly. "I will suit her--and then see if he suits me."

Mrs. Fox-Darriell lay reflecting on the sofa. Camelia accepted frankness to a certain point, beyond that point she repulsed it. It was rather sly of her, Mrs. Fox-Darriell thought, to keep up these needless pretences. Camelia must be anxious for the match--anxious to a certain degree, and her careful preservation of the false dignity of her position was really rather mean. As for Mrs. Fox-Darriell, she desired the match with a really disinterested fervor. She felt a certain personal pride in Camelia's success; she had resigned supremacy, and only asked Camelia to uphold her own. Camelia as Lady Henge would, from a very charming person, have become a very important personage, a truly momentous friend. Her fondness for the child would ensure the child's loyalty. A near friend of the Prime Minister's wife--who knew? The thought flitted pleasantly through Mrs. Fox-Darriell's mind, and the thought, too, of all that Camelia, in an even less exalted position, could do for the impecunious Hon. Charlie, Mrs. Fox-Darriell's husband. There was really no possibility of a doubt in Camelia's mind. Mrs. Fox-Darriell simply did not believe her, and regretted her lack of candor; but at the same time she felt a little anxiety. There were certain phases in Camelia that had always baffled her investigations, an unexpectedness that Mrs. Fox-Darriell had encountered more than once.

"It is really the very best thing you could do," she observed now, "and I wouldn't play with him if I were you. I know that he is the image of fidelity, and yet the Duchess of Amshire is very anxious for him to marry her girl, that ugly Lady Elizabeth, and Lady Henge favors that match, and he really is under his mother's thumb."

"Decidedly I must waste no time," said Camelia, laughing, "and decidedly it would be the best thing I could do, since the Marquis was snapped up by the American girl--swarming with millions. I think I should have been a Marchioness, Frances, had not that strange look, between a squint and a goggle, in his eyes made me hesitate."

"Oh, the Marquis! You know that this is far better. This man means a lot."

"He swarms with millions too," said Camelia. "Come, Frances, preach me a nice little worldly sermon on the supreme utility of riches--without the gloves now."

"I usually remove them when I approach the subject," Mrs. Fox-Darriell sighed with much sincerity. "My poor Charlie! How we keep our heads above water I really don't know, and, as it is, the sharks are nibbling at our toes! Supreme! Money, my dear, is the only thing! Once you've that foundation you may begin to erect your sentiments, your moralities."

"And how few people are honest enough to say so. You and I are honest, Frances; it buys everything, of course."

"Well, almost everything. One must thank Nature for beauty and cleverness."

"Beauty and cleverness in rags have a sorry time of it in this world. But money, of course, especially if not too new, buys friends, power, good taste, morality. Poverty makes people base and cringing--makes criminals. One is jumped on in this world, scrunched into the earth, into the dirt, if one hasn't money, and yet the hypocrites talk of compensation! Of all the sloppy, canting optimism with which people try to make themselves comfortable that is the sorriest! And while they talk they go on scrambling and scrunching for all they are worth; nasty beasts! They kick a man on the head, and say 'the stupor compensates for the pain.' That is the current theory about the lower classes."

"Yet you enjoy the world, Camelia."

"I am not jumped on."

"You jump on other people, then?"

"Not in a sordid manner; I don't have to soil my feet. Why shouldn't I enjoy it?"

"And you think that Sir Arthur's millions would emphasize the enjoyment?"

"Widen it, certainly. But don't be gross, Frances. A great deal depends on him. I am not offering myself for sale, you know."

"No, I don't think you would. You have no need to."

"He would really be glaringly golden, wouldn't he, were he not draped with the mossy antiquity of his name?" said Camelia, drawing a white magnolia flower within the window frame, and bending her head to the scented cup.

"An ideal husband, from every point of view," Mrs. Fox-Darriell resumed; "clever, very clever, and very good--rather overpoweringly good, Camelia."

"I think goodness a most charming phenomenon, I shouldn't mind studying it in a husband."

"Mrs. Jedsley is good. Why don't you study her?"

"There is nothing phenomenal in her goodness, it is a product of circumstance only. There is Mary," Camelia added, tipping her chair a little towards the window for a clearer view of the lawn below. "Mary in a Liberty silk, of yellow-green, and smocked. Why, Mary, why wear a Liberty gown, especially smocked?"

"I have sometimes suspected that your colorless little cousin is here to play the part of a discord that resolves into and heightens your harmony," said Mrs. Fox-Darriell; "or is it the post of whipping-boy that she fills?"

Camelia continued to look from the window placidly, only raising her eyebrows a little.

"No, Mary never gets a whipping, not even when I deserve one. Mamma is very fond of Mary; so am I," she added. Mrs. Fox-Darriell took up her book with a little yawn that Camelia for all her placidity resented.

"How can you read that garbage?" she inquired smilingly, glancing at the title.

"The *bete humaine* rather interests me."

"Even interpreted by another? The man is far more insupportable than Zola, inasmuch as he is clever, and an artist."

"That's why I read him. You seem to know a good deal about garbage, my dear."

"I know a good deal about everything, I fancy!" said Camelia, with her gayest laugh. "I took a course of garbage once, just enough to make up my mind that I did not care for the flavor. We have a right to choose the phases of life we want to see represented."

"I like garbage," Mrs. Fox-Darriell said stubbornly.

"Yes, you are very catholic, I know. I am more limited." Camelia still eyed the lawn, sniffing at the magnolia. Now she rose suddenly and went to the mirror.

"Mary puts on a sailor hat--so," she said gravely, setting hers far back at a ludicrous angle. "Poor Mary!" She tilted the hat forward again, and briskly put the pin through it. "I am going down to harry Mrs. Jedsley. Good-bye, Frances."

"Good-bye. I shall be down to tea presently."

"The *bete humaine* will spoil your appetite!" laughed Camelia as she went out.

Mrs. Fox-Darriell heard her running down the corridor and the light rhythm of her feet on the stairs.

"Pretty little minx!" she said good-humoredly; and her thoughts turned to Sir Arthur. What a lucky girl was

Camelia! It was rather tiresome, perhaps, to sit by and watch her triumphs. Mrs. Fox-Darriel found the role of second-fiddle a little dull; still, it was well worth while to play it. She got up and went to the window, where the magnolia still swayed faintly from the suddenness of Camelia's departure. Tapping the sill lightly with her finger-tips, Mrs. Fox-Darriel looked out, yawning once more, at the translucent blue of the sky, the still shining of the little lake beyond the trees, the sun-dappled lawn, and at Mary Fairleigh on the lawn in the funny Liberty dress. Mr. Perior was walking beside her, in riding costume, a whip in his hand. Mrs. Fox-Darriel surveyed them as they walked slowly away from the house. He had evidently just joined Mary; and as Camelia herself appeared on the lawn her departure took on an amusing aspect.

Now it really was too bad of Camelia, she could have no use for him herself. The sun flashed from her hair as she bounded gaily across the turf and caught Perior's arm with a schoolgirl familiarity. Mrs. Fox-Darriel drew back sharply, but still observed from the screen of magnolia leaves Mary's slow return to the house, and Camelia's skipping step as she led Mr. Perior towards the garden. He held the whip clasped in his hand behind his back, and, as he walked, switched his calf in its leather gaiter. Mrs. Fox-Darriel fancied some temper in the action.

CHAPTER VII

WHEN Mrs. Fox-Darriell descended to the drawing-room a quarter of an hour later, she found Lady Paton and Mary alone with Mrs. Jedsley, who as yet showed no intention of departing. Mrs. Jedsley was very stout, but of a vigorous bearing. Her firm, wide face was dashed with rather choleric notes of red on cheeks, chin, and eyebrows. Her eyes were witty and humorous. Mrs. Fox-Darriell, very indifferently, felt these quickly travelling eyes taking in every gleam and glitter of her tea-gown. Mrs. Fox-Darriell always jingled a little as she walked; she was one of those women who dangle lorgnettes at the ends of swaying neck-chains, and circle their wrists with a multitude of bangles, and now, as she sank into a chair beside Lady Paton, and smiled a languid acceptance of tea, the infinity of pendent jewels and the linked gold that draped her person, chimed out quite a harmonious clatter. Mrs. Fox-Darriell always gave Lady Paton a fluttered look, the look of a child shrinking from a too persistently obtrusive rattle, and she handed her the tea and bread and butter with gently scared glances.

"What delicious tea," said Mrs. Fox-Darriell affably, "and the pouring of tea is an art in its decadence. Really, dear Lady Paton, you have spoiled me for all cups poured by other hands. Your aunt's hands add a distinct charm, do they not?" she added, looking at Mary,—"and her cap." Indeed Lady Paton's caps and hands resembled one another in blanched delicacy.

"Oh yes," Mary replied hastily; she was not accustomed to this suave mode of address from Mrs. Fox-Darriell.

"I saw you walking in the garden just now," pursued that glittering personage; "you made quite a picture in your pretty dress, I assure you."

"Oh! do you like it?" Mary's face was transfused by a blush of surprised pleasure.

"It is really charming," said Mrs. Fox-Darriell unblinkingly, while Mrs. Jedsley's eyes travelled up and down poor Mary's ungainliness.

"Against the deeper shades of green, you know, and with your golden hair, you looked quite--quite like an Albert Moore. Has your friend, Mr. Perior, gone? I saw him with you." There was a subtly delightful intimation in this question that filled Mary with a half painful, half delicious embarrassment.

"Mr. Perior is with Camelia," she said, the crude fact hardly jarring on the dulcet echo of Mrs. Fox-Darriell's question. He was her friend, Mary knew, felt it with a wave of gratitude that quieted many aches, but was it then so evident--so noticeable?

"Ah yes! Camelia is rather fond of teasing him, I am afraid," said Mrs. Fox-Darriell, observing Mary's flush, and noting as an unkindness of nature that her hair, the only grace she possessed, should grow so thickly at the back and with such unbecoming scantiness around the high brow. Mary's whole being had been quivering with the pain of her dispossession, but a grateful warmth now stole through the chill of bereavement.

Her flush had not died when Camelia came in, Perior following her. Camelia's face was imperturbably gay, but from a certain severity and tension in Perior's expression, Mrs. Fox-Darriell surmised that the pastoral promenade had not been altogether peaceful.

It was hardly possible, of course, that the indifference of this stiff provincial should pique Camelia into an attitude that might compromise real interests; no, hardly possible; yet Mrs. Fox-Darriell, with some acuteness, determined that all her efforts should tend to make such an absurdity impossible indeed.

Ugly Mary was evidently in love with the unattractive Diogenes; but Camelia need not know that. Mrs. Fox-Darriell almost laughed at herself while she meditated; Camelia could hardly intend more than the purposeless capturing of Diogenes; Camelia's head was perfectly sound when it came to decisive extremes. Only--well--women, all women, were such *fools* sometimes. That bounding, pursuing step across the lawn had given Mrs. Fox-Darriell a new impression of Camelia.

"Look, Mamma, is not this beautiful? Look, Frances." Camelia held out a branch of white roses, buds and leaves climbing on lovely curves to a heavy, swaying flower;--"it is such a perfect spray that I am going to attempt a Japanese arrangement with this bit of pine. Mary, will you fetch me that bronze vase out of the morning room--with its little stand, you know--and have it filled with water; and, Mary,--" Mary was departing obediently, "a pair of scissors--don't forget. If there is anything I dislike," Camelia went on, hers was always a temperate manner of speech, "it is a heavy mass of flowers bunched together with all the individuality, all the form and vitality, of line quite lost."

She smiled at Mrs. Jedsley as she spoke, skimming caressing finger-tips over her rose branch, and adding, "You may see me at your place to-morrow, Mrs. Jedsley. Mr. Perior has been giving me a dreadful scolding on my neighborly deficiencies. To-morrow I make a conscientious round of calls--and pour balm into all the wounded bosoms." Mrs. Fox-Darriell glanced quickly at Perior to see how he relished this offensive obedience; Perior, as he stood before the fireplace, was looking at his boots. Mrs. Jedsley's eyebrows grew very red.

"I won't be at home to-morrow," she said decidedly, "and if I were conscious of wounds I'd keep at a good

distance from you, Camelia." Lady Paton looked from her daughter to Perior, an alarmed appeal, but he did not raise his eyes nor seem to notice Camelia's graceful promises.

"Mrs. Jedsley, *why* are you always so unkind to me?" Camelia asked, laughing. "I assure you that you may trust my balms. Mrs. Jedsley, I will wager you--do you ever bet?--that by to-morrow night the whole county-side will be singing my praises. I like people to sing my praises--I like to feel affection and sympathy about me; now Mr. Perior has been telling me that there is a distinct absence of these elements in my atmosphere. I begin to feel the vacuum myself. Won't you help me to fill it--help my regeneration?--No, Mary, that is the wrong vase--how could I arrange flowers in that? On the stand, was it? The house-maid's stupidity, then; and I bought together the stand and the proper vase to go with it. No; don't take the *stand* back with you, you goosie! put it here. Now, Mrs. Jedsley," she added, when Mary had once more departed, Perior having relieved her of the stand and carried it, not at all graciously, to Camelia, "tell me how I can best please every one most? You know them all so well--their pet pursuits, their pet hobbies. Mrs. Harley has orchids, of course; I shall immediately ask her to take me to the conservatory. And Mrs. Grier--that pensive little woman with the long, long nose--has she not a son at Oxford, a boy she dotes on? Isn't she very fond of music?"

Mrs. Jedsley was stirring her third cup of tea with an entirely recovered composure. "Yes, Mrs. Grier plays the violin, and has a son she dotes on; if you flatter her nicely enough, she will certainly join in the 'Hallelujah.'"

"Well, that is nice to know." Mary had now brought the correct Japanese vase, and Camelia neatly trimmed from her branch while she spoke a few superfluous leaves and twigs.

"Is not Mrs. Grier a dear friend of Lady Henge's?" Mrs. Fox-Darriell asked in an aside to Lady Paton--to the latter a very welcome aside, as in murmured acquiescence she found a momentary refuge from the bewildered sensations her daughter's projects gave her.

Yes, Lady Henge and Mrs. Grier were great friends, both musical, both deeply interested in charitable work. Mrs. Grier, a sweet woman,--"and you know," said Lady Paton, bending gently towards her guest, "her nose is not so long. That is only Camelia's droll way of putting things, you know."

"Oh, yes,"--Mrs. Fox-Darriell's smile was very reassuring--"you and I understand Camelia, Lady Paton. It doesn't do to take her *au grand serieux*." Indeed, Mrs. Fox-Darriell smiled inwardly, feeling that all disquiet on Camelia's account was very unnecessary, and convinced that she knew her very thoroughly.

"You won't be at home to-morrow, then?" asked Camelia, looking around from her vase as Mrs. Jedsley rose to go.

"No, my dear; and I'm afraid you won't find me of use at any time. I haven't any particular foibles. You won't discover a handle about me by which to wind me up to the required musical pitch."

"You traduce yourself, Mrs. Jedsley; with your charitable heart, do you mean to tell me that, were I to wrap Clievesbury in red flannel, fill it with buns and broth, you wouldn't think me charming, and make sweet music in my ears?"

"I never denied that you were charming, balefully charming, you naughty girl," said Mrs. Jedsley with a good humor that implied no submission.

"Here is a rose for you. May it give you kind thoughts of me." Camelia fastened one of the rejected buds in the lady's portly bosom, and when she was gone, Lady Paton, leaving the room with her, she added, "Mary, is the piano tuned?"

Mary went to the Steinway. "Lady Henge is a composer, as you know." She turned a face sparkling with mischief to Perior, who maintained his silence beside the mantelpiece.

"You have heard her? Yes? Well, you shall hear her again. That's enough, Mary," she added, lightly; "we hear that the piano needs tuning."

Now Mary had a certain little pride in the neat execution of Beethoven's Sonatas, that many hours of faithful practice had seemed to justify, and while Camelia stood back to admire her flower arrangement, both Perior and Mrs. Fox-Darriell noticed the flush that swept over Mary's face.

CHAPTER VIII

BY the time Sir Arthur and Lady Henge arrived, Camelia had fulfilled her prophecy and become a popular person. Under the blighting indifference of her first appearance Clievesbury had naturally retaliated with severity, but that the first impression had been erroneous the most severe owned--after Camelia had called on them. Camelia found the process of winning the whole neighborhood great fun, and its success gave her a delicious sense of efficiency. She cared nothing, absolutely nothing, for her neighbors, but once she determined to be cared for by them she found the facility of the task highly flattering to self-esteem.

She drove from place to place, sweet, modest, adaptable. She dispensed pretty compliments with a grace that disarmed the grimmest suspicion. She showed a pretty interest in every one. Indeed why should they not like her? Camelia thought she really deserved liking; and though she laughed at herself a little for the complimentary conclusion, her kindness struck her as rather nice. It was motiveless, was it not? almost motiveless, a game that it pleased her to play. Certainly she did not care to appear before Lady Henge on a background of unpopularity; the background must harmonize, become her; she would see to that. At the bottom of her heart Camelia cared very little for Lady Henge's approval or disapproval; Lady Henge was part of the game; but Camelia had determined that the game required Lady Henge, like everybody else, to find her charming; the game required Arthur Henge to propose--then she might accept him; but she must make quite secure the possibility of refusing him. So Camelia aimed steadily at one result, and was not at all sure of her own decision once the result was reached, and this indecision gave her a happy sense of freedom.

She must capture Sir Arthur; this visit was definite, the last test; but once captured, Camelia wondered if she would care to keep. Theoretically she owned to a hard common-sense ambition that would make rejection doubtful; but when the moment for decision finally arrived, Camelia felt that this trait in her character might fail her; she did not really believe in it, though she paraded it, flaunted it. Every one might think her a hard-headed, hard-hearted little worldling--as far as practice went they were right, no doubt, in all honesty she must own that she gave them no occasion to think anything else; but she reserved a warm corner of unrevealed ideals--ideals she never herself looked at, where a purring self-content sat cosily.

Lady Henge and her son arrived on a Monday. Lady Henge was nervous, though her massive personality concealed the tremor, and unhappy--for she felt Arthur's fate to be a foregone conclusion. She was not a clever but an immensely conscientious woman. She lived up to all her principles, and she took only the highest view of everything. Her son's love for the pretty Miss Paton, who meddled frivolously with politics (Lady Henge meddled ponderously), and made collections of Japanese pictures, had thrown her into a dismal perturbation. She could not like Miss Paton; her cleverness was not disinterested; her sense of duty was less than dubious, she lived for pleasure, for admiration; she was no fit wife for a Henge.

The most imperative of the Henges' stately requirements was that solemn sense of duty which Lady Henge embodied so conclusively.

She felt the tremor quieted, the unhappiness soothed, however, on seeing Camelia in her home. Indeed, Camelia's background was masterly. By the end of the first day Lady Henge was owing to herself that the glare of London had perhaps been responsible for her former unfavorable impression. Camelia's manner was perfect; she was quiet and gentle; her wish to please was frank but very dignified. Lady Henge felt that in no way was her favor being courted, and she was quite clever enough to appreciate that. Lady Paton was left to take all the initiatives, and behind her mother Camelia smiled with an air of happy obscurity.

The following days emphasized the initial approval. The image of the excellent Lady Elizabeth faded by degrees from Lady Henge's mind, and the ache of disappointment with it. She wonderingly expanded into confidence under Camelia's gentle influence.

She was a shy woman; she had been afraid of Camelia; but with tender touches the shyness and the fear seemed to be pressed away. There was nothing to be afraid of. Was it possible? She doubted sometimes, when alone and deeply thoughtful; but with Camelia quiet satisfaction was irresistible.

Perior watched the little comedy, convinced of its artificiality. That doubt of her final choice which preserved for Camelia her sense of independent pride free from all tarnish of self-interested scheming, he could not have believed in. Her motives were, he thought, very clear to him--as they must be to everybody else. He could not credit her with love; a girl so dexterously managing her hand was held by no compulsory force of real feeling. She was going to marry Arthur Henge, because he was a good match, not because she loved him; any girl might have loved him certainly, but Camelia was capable of loving no one. He was very sore, very angry, very moody. Lady Henge's transparent bids to him for sympathy in irritating his scorn for Camelia irritated him, too, against her, against Arthur even. Why couldn't they let him alone? They should get neither yea or nay from him, for, after all, Perior was inconsistent; the scorn did not shake his rather negative loyalty to his pupil, and beneath that there lay another and a deeper feeling, the feeling that made it possible for Camelia to hurt him.

"I was talking to her--to Miss Paton--about Woman's Suffrage to-day," so Lady Henge would start a conversation, "she seems to have thought rather deeply on the subject of a widened life for women--the development of character by responsibility--the democratic ideal, is it not?" Lady Henge combined staunch conservatism with a devout belief in Humanity.

Perior answered "Yes, I suppose so," to the question.

"She has, I see, a great deal of influence down here in the country--more than I could have expected in such a gay young creature. Mrs. Grier spoke to me of her good-heartedness, her generous help in charitable matters. Mrs. Grier, as you know, is deeply interested in the improvement of the condition of the laboring classes. I shall count upon Miss Paton next year; her aid would be very effective; she could help me with some of my clubs--a pretty face, a witty tongue, popularize one; she has promised to address the Shirt Makers' Union. She takes so much interest in all these absorbing social problems,--interest so unassuming, so free from all self-reference."

They were in the drawing-room after dinner. Perior seemed, in watching Camelia fulfil herself, to find a searing fascination, for he was often at Enthorpe Lodge of late. The faint flavor of inquiry in Lady Henge's assertions only elicited, "I'm sure she'd be popular." No; he would not be held responsible for Camelia; and again he determined that Lady Henge should on the subject of Camelia's full fitness get from him neither a yea or a nay.

Lady Henge's clear brown eyes had turned contemplatively upon her son and Camelia, who were sitting on an isolated sofa in a frank *tete-a-tete*.

Perior's glance followed hers, and while she read in Arthur's absorbed attitude and expression the wisdom of submissive partisanship--the utter futility of further resistance, Perior studied the half grave, half playful smile with which Camelia received her lover's utterances. She seemed to feel Perior's scrutiny, for her eyes swerved suddenly and met his, and the smile hardened a little as she looked at him.

"She is very lovely," Lady Henge said with an irrepressible sigh. "It is a very unusual type of loveliness," at which Perior looked away from Camelia and back at his companion. "He is very fond of her," Lady Henge added--a little tearfully, Perior suspected.

"He has taken it seriously for quite a while, I believe."

"Oh yes, yes indeed," Lady Henge, conscious of having herself made the only barrier to an earlier declaration, spoke a little vaguely. "Arthur's wife will have many responsibilities," she went on; "I think that--if she accepts Arthur--Miss Paton will prove equal to them." The "if she accepts Arthur" Perior thought rather noble, "and her gaiety will be good for him, he needs such sunshine. I must not be so selfish as to think that *I* could give it him. And then--with all her gaiety," here a recrudescence of the vein of urgency crept once more into Lady Henge's voice, "she has depths, Mr. Perior--great depths, has she not? Neither Arthur nor I take life lightly, you know," and Lady Henge held him with a waiting pause of silence.

"Yes, I know you don't," he said, and then found himself forced to add, "there are many possibilities in Camelia."

At all events, he might have said much more. Again he looked across at Camelia as he spoke, and again her eyes met his. She rose abruptly, and crossed the room.

"Lady Henge," she said, standing before her guest in an attitude of delicate request, "won't you play for us? We all want to hear you--and not as mere interpreter, you know--one of your own compositions, please."

If there were a vulnerable spot in Lady Henge's indisputable array of virtues it was a touching egotism in regard to her musical capabilities. She fancied herself the pioneer of a new school, and hoped for a rather shallow smattering of form and polyphony to more than atone by an immense amount of feeling. She smiled now, drawing off her gloves immediately, even while saying, with the diffidence of a master--

"I am afraid my *poemes symphoniques* are not quite on the after-dinner level, my dear. You know I can't promise a comfortable accompaniment to conversation."

"Don't degrade us by the implication," smiled Camelia; "we are at least appreciative."

"My music is emotionally exhaustive," said Lady Henge, shaking her head and rising massively. "In my humbler way I have tried to do for the abstract what Wagner did for the concrete. I do not depict the sea, but the psychological sensations the sea arouses in us." Lady Henge was moving towards the piano, her very back, with its serene, brocaded breadth, imposing by its air of large self-confidence a hush upon the babble of drawing-room flippancy.

"Oh, good gracious!" Gwendolen Holt ejaculated in an alarmed whisper to her neighbor Mr. Merriman.

"Poor dear Lady Henge," murmured Lady Tramley, leaning back in her delicate thinness, and fixing sad eyes upon her musical friend.

"Awfully bad, is it?" Mr. Merriman inquired.

"Awfully," said Gwendolen.

"Well, it's all one to me," said Mr. Merriman jocosely.

"I paint the soul of man, as influenced by the forces of nature," still delivering explanatory comments, Lady Henge

had seated herself at the piano. "My symphonic poem--'Thalassa,' shall I give you that?" and from a careful adjustment of the piano-stool, she looked up at Camelia, who had followed her.

Sir Arthur, on his solitary sofa, showed some dismay at the imminence of his mother's performance. Perior, who had heard Lady Henge play, fixed enduring eyes on the cornice. Camelia dropped into the vacant seat beside him.

"Hold your breath, Alceste," she murmured, her smiling eyes still gently observant of Lady Henge, who, after a majestic turn up and down the key-board, had paused in a menacing attitude, one hand lifted in a heavily pouncing position.

"She'll have our heads under water in a minute. Ah! here comes the splash!" The very walls quivered as that fierce hand fell. A volcanic, incoherent volume of sound hurtled forth upon the stillness. From thenceforward they might have been sitting amidst the clamorous concussions of a thunder-storm, Lady Henge, high priestess of terrified humanity, making valiant warfare with the angry gods. The wind, or rather the effect of the wind upon the shrinking mind of man, shrieked in long sweeps down the key-board--Lady Henge's execution with the flat of her hand being boldly impressionistic; the waves beat out their stormy rhythm in crashing chords of very feeble construction, but in noisiness immensely effective, leaping, bounding, shouldering, swallowing one another with a splendid inconsequence as to time or key. A chaos of stammering phrases cried out fitfully above the steady bellowing of the bass.

Physically the composition was most certainly exhausting. Lady Henge's fine, flushed profile, bent with brooding intensity above the key-board, evinced a panting effort to cope with the mighty requirements of her creation.

"It sounds as if she were being tossed in her cabin, doesn't it?" Camelia's soft voice murmured under the safe cover of the tumult, her face keeping the expression of grave attention, "and horribly seasick. One hears the bottles breaking, and the basins clashing, and the boots being hurled from side to side. Anything but abstract. Intimately descriptive rather--don't you think?" A side glint of her eye evidently twinkled for sympathy; but Perior solemnly stared at the ceiling.

"The construction too," Camelia said more soberly, "she plunged us into the free fantasia--and perhaps at the end she may fish us out with the dominant phrase--but I haven't caught it yet; ah, this thudding finale announces the journey's end." And she jumped up as Lady Henge, with a fine, tense look of soul-experience, rose from the piano. The dazed and wilted listeners chimed out the polite chorus usual on such occasions. Camelia led Lady Henge to her chair. "Thank you--so much," she said. Lady Henge smiled dimly, her eyes fixed on vacancy.

"It was like a glorious wind blowing about one. It made me think of Wordsworth's sonnets--of the soul in nature," said Camelia. Perior still looked stolidly at the ceiling, and she felt his silence to be ominous.

"Such music," she added, "gives one courage for life." She was angry with Perior. Lady Henge pressed her hand.

"Thanks, my dear. Yes--you *felt*. One must hear, of course, a composition many times before entering into the sanctuary of the artist's meaning." Camelia's mouth retained its sympathetic gravity. Perior said nothing; and faint, relieved little groups of talk twittered like birds after a storm.

"And you, Mr. Perior," Lady Henge, fanning herself largely turned to this silent critic. "You, too, are a musician as I know, a musician at least in appreciation. What do you think of my 'Thalassa'? Frankly now--as one artist to another." Perior moved his eyes slowly from the ceiling, and dropped them to Camelia's face. He grew very red.

"Frankly now," Lady Henge reiterated with genial urgency.

"I think it is very bad," said Perior. The sentence fell with a thud, like a stone.

Lady Henge flushed, and her fan fluttered to stillness; Camelia, her eyebrows lightly lifted, met Perior's square look.

"Bad," Lady Henge repeated, with a pathetic mingling of deprecating pride and pain, "really bad, Mr. Perior?"

"Very bad," said Perior.

The unmitigated sentence reduced her to feeble plaintiveness.

"But why? This is really savage, you know."

"Excuse me, I know I seem rude," he looked at her now with something of an effort. "You see I tell you the uncompromising truth. Your piece is weak, and crude, and incoherent!"

Now that she met his eyes, Lady Henge saw that it gave him pain to speak so. Camelia standing over them smiled unruffled.

"It is a case of Berlioz and the Conservatoire, Schumann and the Philistines, Lady Henge. Mr. Perior is an old classicist--understands nothing outside strictest adherence to form. Your more modern march of the *Davidsbundler* could say nothing to him." Perior did not look at her.

"If you will allow me, Lady Henge, I will come some day and go over a lot of Schumann with you. I think you will recognize the difference. His power and genuineness are apparent. And Schumann has a great deal to say."

He smiled at her as he spoke, a very sweet smile--asking tolerance for the friend in spite of the critic's unwilling arrogance. Lady Henge was soothed, though decidedly shaken.

"You are severe, you know."

"But you prefer severity to silly fibs."

"I may be silly," Camelia here put in with a touch of coldness, "if so, I stand convicted with you, Lady Henge, for I found your 'Thalassa' neither crude, nor weak, nor incoherent; but I can't be accused of fibbing. You will play your symphonic poem to me again, won't you? and we will leave Mr. Perior to the pleasures of iconoclastic conservatism." After so speaking, Camelia went back to her seat beside Sir Arthur.

He had a book in his hand, and was turning the leaves vaguely, he put it down as he looked up at her. For a man well over thirty, Sir Arthur had certain boyish traits, as a frank nervousness of glance now revealed.

"Well?" Camelia smiled, feeling a something in the silence.

"It was bad, wasn't it?" said Sir Arthur.

"Bad?"

"Yes, poor mother."

"I don't think it bad."

Sir Arthur surveyed her with pained hesitation.

"Why do you say that?" he demanded, with an abruptness of wounded tenderness that put Camelia alertly on her guard.

"Why do you say *that*?" she asked, rounding innocent eyes at him.

"I saw you laughing at it, with Perior--not that he laughed. I heard what he said too, I prefer that, you know."

Camelia herself was feeling wounded, was smarting under a sense of angry humiliation. This added and unexpected blow brought the blood vividly to her face, and the sincerity of her discomfort seemed even to herself to warrant the sincerity of her quick question.

"You suspect me of lying?"

Camelia hardly thought that she had lied; neither the flush nor the tone of voice was acted.

Sir Arthur looked away. "I saw you laughing," he repeated.

"I *was* laughing," Camelia declared. "Not at Lady Henge," she added.

Sir Arthur kept a silence in which doubt and a longing to believe evidently struggled.

"I said to Mr. Perior that the rocking passage with the chord accompaniment made me feel seasick--from its realism; that touch of levity doesn't imply insincerity in my admiration--I always smile at the birds in the 'Pastoral.' Why should I be insincere? If I had not liked it, I would have said so."

Sir Arthur's long breath escaped with the relief of recovered joy.

"Don't be insincere;--dearest," he added, looking at her; and seeing the surprise with which she received the grave, impulsive word, he went on quickly, yet gently.

"You know you often want to please people--to make every one like you;--even I have fancied it--forgive me, won't you, at the price of a little falseness. When one feels as I do, the least flaw cuts into one like a knife." With Camelia's triumph there now mingled a bitter distaste; she could hardly bring herself to look into his honest, adoring eyes; the quickness of her breath and wavering of her glance were, again, quite spontaneous, and that she knew them to be effective, deepened her humiliation.

"To see you laugh at mother--and then praise her--I thought it; and I can't tell you how it pained me. You forgive me?"

Her self-disgust now seemed to lend her a certain sense of atoning self-respect. "How good you are!" she said, looking at him very gravely, and this recognition of his goodness restoring still more fully that sick self-respect, she was able to smile at him, to think that she must not exaggerate the little *contretemps*, and to ask herself whether she might not fall in love with Sir Arthur--simply and naturally. Dear man! The words were almost on her lips--her eyes at least caressed him with the implication.

He looked embarrassed, but very happy. "No--no! Please don't say that! How divinely kind you are. I have been insufferable. It is noble of you to understand--. Can't we get away from all these people--if only for a moment. Let us go into the garden--it is very warm." She would rather not have gone into the garden, but she could not refuse him, she felt that to some extent she would like to justify his faith in her, and to shake from her that snake-like imputation of baseness. She glanced at Perior as she went out; he was talking most affably with Lady Henge, and did not look at her. His lack of faith stung perhaps more than Sir Arthur's faith. It was unmerited too, more unmerited than Sir Arthur's trust, so she told herself, stepping down from the terrace on to the gravel-path, and the sense of unmerited scorn sharpened that wish to justify herself--as far as might be--to the kinder judge.

"No, Sir Arthur, you are good," she went on, pausing before him, her hands clasped behind her after a little-girl fashion habitual with her; "and I am horrid--it's quite true--but not as horrid as you thought me. I do like to please people. I am often pettily, impulsively false; it's quite, quite true. I do like your mother's piece, but probably not as much

as I implied to her by my praise--not as much as greater things: and Mr. Perior's silence made me angry too; but I probably was a little insincere, and that every one is the same is no excuse for me. I don't want to be like every one, and you don't want me to be, do you? But if I had *not* liked it, you would not have wished me to express myself with the bludgeon-like directness of our rugged friend, would you?" Camelia asked the question with real anxiety, conscious though she was that she had thought the composition quite as ridiculous as Perior had declared it. After all, his ugly sincerity justified her kindly fibbing; and as for the laughing, she was sorry she had laughed, since Sir Arthur had seen her. His erectness of moral vision would so distort that unintentional meanness that she could not be asked to confess it; but her partial confession, all the same, left her confused by the stinging of small, uncomfortable compunctions. These, however, did not show themselves in her eyes, nor in the pure lines of her face. Her silvered garments and exquisite whiteness gave her in the moonlight an angelic look that might well humble modest manhood before her. Sir Arthur had never felt himself so near to the girl he loved, nor his love so well justified.

"No, I don't think it's necessary to give a person the truth like a box on the ear," he said, and he would have taken her hands, but Camelia again put them behind her back, and stood smiling at him.

"Poor old Perior," he added, and they walked slowly for a little way down the path. "You can understand it, though, can't you? He thought you were fibbing, and that made him give mother the ruthless *coup de dent*."

This was very true, and so Camelia knew, knowing, too, that she *had* been fibbing. "But that didn't justify the *coup de dent*," she declared, "and why should he think I was fibbing?" The bit of audacity was so inevitable that she hardly felt a qualm over its enunciation. On Perior's loyalty she relied as she relied on the ground beneath her feet.

"Well, he knows that you are clever, and that your taste has not been distorted--as mother's has--by fancied talent." Sir Arthur was all candid confidence.

"He was *very* nasty," said Camelia, "and I shall tell him so. And now that I have made my little confession, and that you have absolved me--for I am absolved, am I not?--shall we go in?" Camelia drew back from the proposal she saw looming in the moonlight; there was time, ample time, for that, now that she was sure of him, quite sure. A warm little thrill of pleasure went over her at the thought that it was she who was not ready, was not sure, though she had never liked him more.

"Must we go in?" Sir Arthur looked up at her as she stood on the step above him. He was very handsome Camelia thought with some complacency.

"I think we must," she said prettily, adding, "I promised to do my skirt dancing for them, you know. You must tell me it is delightful when I have done, even if you laugh at me while I am dancing." Sir Arthur had held out his hand, and she put hers in it.

"You absolve me, don't you?" he said. "You forgive me? You are not angry?"

"Angry? Have I seemed angry?"

"You had the right to be."

"Not with you," said Camelia, and at that he kissed her hand, and they went back into the drawing-room.

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Camelia as she undressed that night decided that Perior was responsible for her still smarting irritation. It was too tiresome. Of course, apparently she had not behaved nicely; but, in neatly analyzing the whole affair, she could find herself guilty of nothing worse than a little humorous gaiety--that took an old friend's sympathy for granted--(could one not think things one did not say? she had only thought aloud--to him), and a little kindly hypocrisy practised every day by models of uprightness. Perior's rudeness set a standard by which social conventions were guilty of black falseness. It was too bad of him, and her anger put him aside with a sense of relief. The only really serious part was the stinging sequel. How closely Arthur Henge must have watched her to catch that irrepressible glint of the eye. He had caught it, though, and she had lied about it--well, yes--lied, deliberately lied to a man she respected.

Of course it made her feel uncomfortable--of course it did. "I am not the vain puppet *he* thinks me," she said, leaning on her dressing-table, and looking gravely at her illuminated reflection--the *he* being Perior--"the very fact of my worrying over such a trifling incident proves that I am not. It is *his* fault that I should feel so." She paused for a further turn of silent meditation before adding, "My only fault was in having trusted to his sense of fun, in having been amused. The rest followed inevitably. I could not have told Arthur Henge that I found his mother ridiculous, now *could* I, you foolish creature?" and irrepressibly Camelia smiled at her lenient accuser in the glass. At this point of the colloquy a gentle tap at the door ushered in Mary. Mary, in a dressing-gown of just the wrong shade, was not an interesting object, and Camelia glanced over her reflection in the mirror without turning. She continued her own train of thought, hardly listening to Mary, though vaguely conscious that the awkward inquiries after her comfort were rather pointless.

"I thought you might want something, Camelia. I thought you looked rather pale," said Mary, drawing near with some timidity.

"No, thanks. I should have asked Grant, you know," replied Camelia, her elbows still on the dressing-table. She

absently watched Mary lift her discarded gown from the floor, fold it, and lay it neatly over the back of a chair. "Don't mind about picking up those things, Mary," she added, yawning a little, and wishing rather that Mary would go. "Grant can do all that."

"I like to tidy up after you." Mary's smile was slightly forced. "See, Camelia, you need me to look after you--your pearl necklace under a chair."

"It must have caught in my bodice," said Camelia, glancing at the necklace as Mary laid it on the dressing-table. "That certainly was stupid of me. Thanks, dear." Mary still lingered.

"You don't want anything, you are sure? You feel quite well--and--happy, Camelia?" The question was so odd that Camelia turned her head and looked up, surprised, at Mary's rather embarrassed countenance.

"Happy?" she repeated.

"Yes; I fancied you might have something to tell me." This initiative was certainly amazing in the reserved Mary, and Camelia stared.

"Something to tell you?" Then her deliberate departure for the moonlit *tete-a-tete* with Sir Arthur coming luminously to her mind, she began to laugh. "Why, Mary, did you come in a congratulatory mood?"

Mary's badly mastered nervousness melted somewhat. "Oh, Camelia--*may* I?" her face lighted to an almost charming eagerness--a charm that our aesthetic heroine was quick to recognize. "*May* I?"

"May you? No, you little goose," Camelia said good-humoredly. "Upon my word, Mary, you should have had your portrait painted at that moment; you never looked so--significant. Are you so anxious to get rid of me then?" The charming look had crumbled into inextricable confusion.

"Oh, Camelia, how can you?--how could you think----?"

"Now, Mary, imaginative efforts are bad for you; don't indulge them."

"I hoped--I only wanted----"

"Yes, of course, you want me to be happy; and very nice it is of you too. Be patient, Mary; you shall congratulate me some day. I haven't decided *when* that shall be. I haven't really quite decided *how* I shall be happy--there are so many ways--the choice of a superlative is perplexing. When I choose you need not come to me, I promise you." Camelia rose, stretching her arms above her head, and smiling very kindly at her cousin.

Her own words made her feel comfortable. Still smiling, she put her arm around Mary's neck and kissed her. "I shall tell you *immediately*. Now run to bed, dear, for *you* look pale." When Mary was gone, Camelia finished undressing, and got into bed in a frame of mind much reassured as to her own intrinsic merit.

CHAPTER IX

THE little moonlit episode had very thoroughly mended the rift within the lute. Camelia's seeming frankness of confessional confidence more than atoned for every doubting qualm. Sir Arthur evidently put doubts and distresses behind him. He allowed himself to be wholly in love. He wondered resentfully at himself for the mixed impulses he had known, since all were now merged in one fixed determination.

The country influences of green trees and summer sky seemed to have breathed a heretofore unrealized gentleness into his fair one. Her playful sallies, her little audacities, delighted him now unreservedly, for under the tantalizing shifting and shimmering of surface moods, the translucent depths of a loyal and lovely nature, were at last fully revealed to him.

Camelia felt the resultant ardor hovering during all their constant companionship, but she evaded it. The conquest had been so easy, was so complete, that fitness seemed to require a compensatory dallying. The atmosphere of adoration, submissive in its certainty of ultimate success, felt as flatteringly around her as the warm sweetness of a summer breeze. Conquest was delightful, so was dallying, so was her own indecision; that was the most delightful part of all. She felt, too, in the loving warmth that encompassed her, a consolation, a refuge from cold and rugged depreciation.

Perior had not reappeared since the musical *melee*, and, while enjoying the sunny harbor where she rocked so peacefully, Camelia was conscious that thoughts about that rough, that unsympathetic sea outside preoccupied her amidst the kinder waters. Her gaiety was therefore a little forced, absent-minded, in a sense a mask; her gentler mood was the result of inner cogitations, so involved at times as to give to her manner a dreamy sweetness. Her moral snubbing, though she rejected it as undeserved, subdued her.

Lady Henge's vanity was of no petty or immovable order. Far from antagonizing, Perior's judgment had aroused in her an anxious self-doubt, an anxious respect for her candid critic. Despite Camelia's sympathy--for Camelia stuck to her colors, entrenched herself behind a staunch fidelity to a false position, listened with absorption to frequent renderings of the "Thalassa," thoughtfully discussed its iconoclastic merits, the high value of its full flavored modernity, and felt a certain ethical elevation from these painful sacrifices to the only constancy permitted her--despite this steady sympathy, Lady Henge perversely longed for a further expression of unsympathetic opinion from the ruthless Perior. And one morning she told Camelia that she had written to him, had asked him to fulfil his promise, to bring some music of his choosing that might, with his aid, be useful to her.

"I had hoped to see him every day," she owned, and Camelia realized the power of a negative attitude--how flat beside it, how feeble, was her exaggeratedly affirmative one. All her pretty conciliations were as nothing to Lady Henge beside the stinging interest of Perior's dislike.

"I think he may help me about so many things, I so often feel a helplessness in self-expression; the idea is there--but the form! the form! ah, my dear, art, after all, is form." (This piece of information was certainly bitter to our martyred heroine.)

"As you said, his severity may, to a certain extent, be conservatism, academic narrowness, but I have always heard of him as widely appreciative."

Camelia could answer for the width of appreciation that her resentment had falsified on the unlucky night of the first performance; she remembered now, with a little flush, that her saddling of him with tastes not his own must have seemed to him the culmination of spiteful pettiness. And then he had not rejoined--had not defended himself, even against that intimation of academics opposed to his dearly loved Schumann. Camelia could soothe herself with an "I don't care! He deserved it. He was horrid;" but all the same the memory brought a hotness to her cheeks. She felt very angry, too, with Lady Henge, and, while smiling pleasantly, found some satisfaction in various cynical mental comments on the weighty intricacy of her cap, and the vast stupidity of her self-absorption.

"Do you know, my dear, that phrase," and Lady Henge struck it out demonstratively from the piano near which she stood; "that phrase does sound a little weak." Weak! Camelia could have capped the criticism very pungently. With a good deal of disgust at a situation which had so neatly turned the tables upon her, she said, "Mr. Perior may tell you so; I really can't." Her fate evidently was to support Lady Henge by a fraternity in inferior taste; and to be branded with inferior taste, even in Lady Henge's eyes, was certainly rather galling. She had not bargained for it at all, nor dreamed that Lady Henge's complacency would go down like a ninepin before Perior's brutal missile. Her little perjury had not been in the least worth while.

Perior, having the grace to look somewhat embarrassed, arrived next morning with an impressive roll of music, and Camelia laughed, with some acidity it must be confessed, as she heard in the drawing-room the convincing energy of his demonstrations. Fragments of the poor *poeme symphonique*, panting from their cruel dissection, reached her ears while she strolled about the lawns with Sir Arthur.

She foresaw that Lady Henge would prove a humble convert, and that she herself, if not to be convicted of gross insincerity, must remain gibbeted in a stubborn unconversion.

"Your mother is very patient," she said, as, from the distant piano, the dogged repetition of a phrase emphasized its feeble absurdity. "Mr. Perior as mentor is in his element."

Sir Arthur laughed with a good-humored recollection of his own political rebuff at Perior's hands.

"He is uncompromisingly honest. If you ask for his advice he'll give it to you."

"Give it to you unasked sometimes," said Camelia.

Sir Arthur had told her all about that lost cause, and all about his plans for the future. There was a very delightful plan for the very near future; the next session would decide the fate of the Factory Bill that went by her lover's name, and Camelia, under her attentive quietness, felt a heaving sigh of ambition gather. Sir Arthur's grave eagerness showed that after his winning of herself, his political campaign filled the chief place in his hopes and thoughts. Her interest delighted him, and the intelligence of her comments.

He had himself an almost reverent belief in the bill, and Camelia's sympathetic affirmatives seemed to chime deliciously with his own deep, active pity for the dim, toiling masses the bill was to reach and succor. Such a common object was a sanctification; he could hardly, he felt, have loved a woman who did not feel his own deep pity. They talked now of the coming struggle, of the rather dubious success of the second reading that might yet be enhanced for the third.

"And do you know," he said, "Perior, positively Perior, approves; he is buckling on his armor for the final fray. An individuality like that counts, you know. A few leaders in the *Friday* would rally many waverers."

Camelia flushed suddenly when he said this; it delighted her sense of proprietorship in Perior to hear his praise--to hear that for others, too, he counted. And yet a touch of pain came with the delight, reminding her that under present conditions the delight was very generous, and proprietorship very unassured.

How he evaded it! Yes, he certainly was horrid; but her breath came quickly, and with a deft persistence she kept Sir Arthur still talking of him, finding in his answers to her questions on his youth glimpses of Perior's.

"Always generous, always intolerant, always tripping into ditches while star-gazing," said Sir Arthur; "he has an exaggerated strain in him; it must be that Irish ancestress. He feels everything more acutely than thicker-skinned mortals, sees everything, the good and the bad, magnified--a trifle grotesquely. But it is a noble nature;" and he went on, as they walked back and forth over the lawn, Perior's pianoforte exposition, firmly insistent, coming to their ears at broken intervals: "Perior is staunch on individualism, as you know; believes in the hygienic value to the race of the combat--a savage creed, I tell him; but he has amended it; he is not one jot afraid of seeming inconsistent; he owns to the scientific logic of our attitude. I was afraid he would accuse us of socialistic methods, tyrannical kindness, State intervention," and so from Perior Sir Arthur went back to the all-absorbing topic of the bill; he could allow the bill to absorb him. For all Camelia's evasions and smiling warnings to patience, he was deliciously sure of the ultimate end of all. He could afford to be patient with the luminous sympathy of her eyes upon him, afford to talk of the unfortunate women-workers whose long hours the kind tyranny of the bill would restrict, while this woman listened with such a sweet chiming of pity.

"If you could only count on a fair following among the Liberals," Camelia said, phrasing his keenest anxiety, "horrid egotists! They all have factories, I suppose. Mr. Rodrigg may wrest your dubious majority from you; he is the lion in your path, isn't he? and he has a whole town of factories. What chance has a moral conviction against a town of factories? And he is such a bull-dog; I did wrong to dignify him by the leonine simile."

"Such a clever chap, too," said Sir Arthur; "bull-dog cleverness, I mean."

"And bull-dogs are so dear," Camelia said, as a small brindled member of the race, his head haloed by a ferociously bristling collar, came bounding to them over the lawn. "Dear, precious beastie," she put her hand on the dog's head as he stood on his hind-legs to greet her, "we must indeed find another epithet for Mr. Rodrigg, not that I dislike him, you know. He shares some of your opinions," she added rather roguishly.

"Not one, I fear."

"Yes, one," she insisted. Sir Arthur's eyes dwelt on her charming look; it carried him into vagueness as he asked--

"What one?" not caring at all for Mr. Rodrigg's community of taste, and smiling at her loveliness.

"I think he is rather fond of me," Camelia owned. Sir Arthur could afford a generous laugh.

"Poor old Rodrigg! He has then a vulnerable point in his armor?"

"Yes, indeed, yes. I don't know that it amounts to a weakness. I fear I couldn't wheedle him. But, you might convince him, and I might help,--and, he is coming down next week." She laughed out at his look of surprise. "That is news, isn't it?"

In her very heart of hearts Camelia was rather complacently convinced that Mr. Rodrigg's fondness *did* amount to a weakness. Mr. Rodrigg's devotion was in our young lady's fastidious opinion his one redeeming quality. She had kindly, but thoroughly, she thought, nipped in the bud certain too aspiring attempts; but the man was all the more her

friend.

His devotion was built upon a fine hopelessness that really dignified him.

She was an Egeria who hovered above him, gently smiling at his earthiness. Yes, she was kind; for Mr. Rodrigg was a most important person--emphatically, personally important just now, it seemed; and though Camelia's thoughts of him were merely humorously tolerant, she felt quite sure of a wealth of unreturned friendship, ready to transmute itself into golden action at her bidding. She could but pride herself a little upon her intellectual influence over her unpretentious Numa, and thought that she could, through that dignified influence alone, by all means wheedle him, if wheedling became necessary. Sir Arthur would hardly approve of these personal methods, and therefore he need not know of the little game that might win his cause; a perfectly innocent game, she assured herself, since it hurt no one and helped Sir Arthur; and if Mr. Rodrigg were to be convinced, Sir Arthur must fancy himself sole winner.

He did not seem to recognize the possibility, for after his pause of surprise he laughed again, saying, "Is he coming on *my* account?"

"Not on *his*, I am sure!"

"You know, it won't do any good," he smiled fondly at her, as one smiles at the folly of a loved woman; "Rodrigg is too deeply pledged, has his whole party behind him. I could no more convince him, even in these enchanted premises, than in the dry precincts of the House. Political conversions are very rare."

"But you *may* convert him," Camelia urged. "I will give you every opportunity."

"And it is rather unfair, you know." Sir Arthur paused in their strolling to look at her face, half shadowed in the sunlight by the brim of her white hat. "He perhaps imagines that he is coming for purposes far removed from the political."

"Oh no, no, no. I tell you, dear Sir Arthur, that--well--since you must have it--I refused him. He hasn't a hope; I pinched the last pangs out of him a long time ago. In fact, I let him see that I found his audacity rather funny than piteous. I have laughed him into most submissive platonic. He will come, because he really is my friend, and really likes me; and I want him to come, because he must like you."

"Camelia!" Sir Arthur had used her name more than once of late, and she let it pass with a half-merry, half-menacing little glance.

"You dear little schemer," he added. Though spoken in tenderest teasing, Camelia was just enough conscious of a certain applicability to say with some quickness--

"Not *really*. You know I'm not. I only want to help you--legitimately, I would not lift my little finger to win your cause if you did not want me to."

"Really, I know you're not!" Sir Arthur's voice retained the teasing quality, but the tenderness had deepened; Camelia was listening all the while to those dogged passages from the piano. They ceased now, and a certain gravity and determination of look that had succeeded Sir Arthur's last words quite justified a sudden retreat.

"I must go and make Mr. Perior stop to lunch. One only gets him out of his lair by force and wheedling! I wheedle *him!*" She left Sir Arthur rather disconsolately cut short, and ran off to the house, her own words ringing reassuringly in her ears. Yes, she could wheedle him. Despite unreason, stupid unreason, despite rebellious crossness and pretended indifference, she had the mastery. He cared so much; that was the fundamental fact that upheld Camelia's assurance; he cared enough to be very angry. He would try to hide his anger of course. Her heart had beaten rather quickly when Sir Arthur's face took on that look of resolve--she was not ready, not quite sure, not yet, but flight from his purpose had been only a secondary impulse. She must see Perior. She ran through the morning-room and met him coming down the stairs, and panting a little, laughing a little, she leaned against the banisters and opposed his passage.

"Well, have you taught her how bad it is?"

"I think I have," said Perior, looking over Camelia's head at the open doorway. She stood aside to let him join her.

"What have you to teach me this morning--*caballero de la triste figura?*" she said as he came down the stairs and stood beside her.

"I don't propose to teach you anything. I am not responsible for you."

Camelia had not analyzed his probable mood incorrectly; he was angry, and he was trying to hide his anger, fearing for his self-control. But more than that--though this the acute Camelia had never quite divined--he was feeling very unhappy. That he was angry she saw, however, with a little thrill of triumph running through her veins. Smiling an even smile she said, slipping her hand through his arm--

"Ah! but you *are* responsible. Come into the morning-room."

"Is Lady Paton there?" Perior asked gloomily.

"Yes." Camelia had seen her mother and Mary walking safely away into the garden with Gwendolen Holt and Lady Tramley. She threw open the door and ushered him in.

CHAPTER X

PERIOR surveyed the emptiness; it hardly surprised him, and well understanding her determination to wheedle him, he felt an added strength of determination not to be wheedled.

"What have you got to say, now that you've got me here?" he asked, putting down his music and looking at her.

"You bandersnatch!" Camelia still held his arm. "I am sure you look like a bandersnatch; a biting, snarling creature. You have a truly *snatching* way of speaking."

"What have you got to say, Camelia?" Perior repeated, withdrawing his arm from the circling clasp upon it.

"I have got to say that you must stay to lunch."

"Well, I can't do that."

"Then you may sit down and talk to me a little--scold me if you like; do you feel like scolding me?"

"I have never scolded you, Camelia," said Perior, knowing that before her lightness his solemnity showed to disadvantage; but he would be nothing but solemn, ludicrously solemn if necessary.

"You were never sure I deserved it, then," said Camelia, stooping to gather up her dog for a swift kiss, and laughing over his round head at Perior's stiffness; "else you would have done your duty, I am sure--you never forget your duty."

"Thanks; your recognition is flattering."

"There, my pet, go--poor Sir Arthur is lonely, go to him," said Camelia, opening the window for Siegfried's exit, "you know your sarcasm doesn't impress me one bit--not one bit," she added.

"I don't fancy that anything I could say would impress you," Perior replied, eyeing her little manoeuvres, "and since I have seen Siegfried receive his kiss, I really must go," and at this Perior took up his music with decision; to see him assuming indifference so badly was delightful to Camelia.

"*Why* were you so rude to poor Lady Henge the other evening?" she demanded, couching her lance and preparing for the shock of encounter; "you were hideously rude, you know."

"Yes, I know." Perior still eyed her, his departure effectually checked.

"Then, why were you?"

"Because you lied."

"Oh, what an ugly word!" cried Camelia lightly, though with a little chill, for the unpleasant sincerity of Perior's look she felt to be more than she had bargained for. "What a big, ungainly word to fling at poor little me! You should eschew such gross elementary forms of speech, Alceste; really, they are not becoming."

"I hate lies," said Perior tersely, thinking, as he spoke, that by the logic of the words he should hate Camelia too--for what was she but unmitigated falseness personified? He had lost his nervousness, now that the moment for plain speaking had arrived.

"And you call *that* a lie?"

"I call it a lie." She considered him gravely.

"I tried to give pleasure, you tried to give pain."

"I tried to restore the balance."

"I cannot think it wrong to slight the truth a little--from mere kindness."

"And I think it wrong to lie. And," Perior added, his voice taking on an added depth of indignant scorn, "you lied to Arthur; I saw you."

"You saw!" Camelia could not repress a little gasp.

"I saw that he caught your humorous and hospitable comments on his mother's performance, and I saw your cajolery afterwards. I am sure I can't imagine how you hoodwinked him. It was neatly done, Camelia."

Camelia felt herself growing pale, losing the victor's smiling calm. Here he was brutally voicing the very scruples she had laid to rest after moments of most generous self-doubt--atoning moments, as she felt. The playful game in which she would tease him into comprehension--absolution, had been turned into an ugly punishment. The wrinkled rose leaves of self-accusation that had disturbed her serenity had actually--in his hands--grown into thorny branches, and he was whipping her with them. She had never felt so at a loss, for she could not laugh.

"You would have had me pain him too!" she cried, her anger vindictively seeking a retaliatory lash. "Well, you are a prig!--an insufferable prig! I did nothing wrong!--except mistake your sense of humor."

This was certainly on her side a less dignified colloquy than the one with the looking-glass; she fancied that

Perior looked with some curiosity at her anger.

"Was it wrong to smile at you, then?" she said.

"Yes, it was wrong," Perior had all the advantage of calm, and she was helplessly aware that her excitement fortified his self-control.

"I thought the piece funny. Was I to tell her so?"

"You should have kept still about it. You mocked your guest behind her back and flattered her to her face. That is mean, despicable," said Perior, planting his slashes very effectively.

"To laugh with you was like laughing to myself," said Camelia, steadying her lips, and wondering vaguely if victory might not yet be wrested from this humiliation; his inflexible cruelty forced from her that half appeal. "It was merely thinking aloud, and to tell a few kindly little fibs--as every woman does, a hundred times a day--is not flattery."

"To gain a person's liking on false pretences is base; and I don't care how many women do it--nor how often they do it. I shan't argue with you, Camelia. We don't see things alike. Follow your own path, by all means; it will lead you to success no doubt, and for a nature like yours there will be no bitterness in such success."

He looked away from her now, as if, despite her immunity from it, he felt that bitterness. He felt it, though she did not. He looked away in the depth of his disgust and pain, conscious, though, of the golden blur of her hair, the indistinct oval of her face, the cool vague gray of her linen dress, as she stood still, not far from him. Camelia felt herself trembling. She beat off his cruel injustice--but it was hurting her--it was making her helpless.

"For what success do you imply that I am scheming?" she asked, and even while she spoke angry tears rushed to her eyes. To be misjudged was a new sensation; a hot self-pity smarted within her.

Perior did not see the tears, for he still looked away, saying in a voice that showed how clearly cut, how definitely perceived was the conviction, "The success of marrying a man you love little enough to lie to. Henge could not forgive you if he knew that you had lied to him and to his mother, yet he adores you--you have that on false pretences too. There is the truth for you, Camelia; and, upon my soul, I am sorry for Arthur. I pity him from the bottom of my heart."

"How dare you! how dare you!" cried Camelia, bursting into tears. "It is false--false--false!"

Taken aback, Perior stared blankly at her. It was the first time that he had reduced her to weeping. "Oh, Camelia!" he stood still--he would not approach her; he felt that since she could cry her helplessness was fully armed, and he quite helpless; his supremacy robbed of all value.

"Every word you say is false!" she said, returning his stare defiantly, while the tears rolled down her cheeks. "I am *not* scheming to marry him! I have not let him propose to me yet! I am not sure that I shall; I am not sure that I shall accept him, and if I do, it will be because I love him!"

Perior hardly believed her, and yet he was much confused, especially as with a fresh access of sobs her face quivered in the pathetic grimace of loveliness distorted; before that the real issue of the situation seemed slipping away; her repudiation of the greater dishonesty effaced, for the moment, the smaller; he had nothing to say--she probably believed in herself; and those helpless sobs were so touching to him that, notwithstanding his unappeased anger against her, he could have gone to her and taken her in his arms to comfort her, at any cost--even at the cost of seeming to ask pardon. He did not do this, however, but said, "Don't cry, don't cry, Camelia; you mustn't cry. I'm glad you feel it in that way; I am glad you can cry over it." He did not go to her, but his very attitude of nervous hesitation told Camelia that he was worsted--at least worsted enough for the practical purposes of the moment.

She got out her handkerchief and dried her eyes, still feeling very sore-hearted, very much injured; but when the tears were gone she came up to him saying, while she looked at him with all the victorious pathos of wet lashes and trembling lips, "You are not kind to me, Alceste."

He moved away from her a little, but took her hands. "Because you are naughty, Celimene."

"I will be good. I won't tell fibs."

"A very commendable resolution."

"You mock me. You won't believe a liar."

"Don't, please don't speak of it again, Camelia."

"Say you are sorry for having said it."

"Oh, you little rogue!" Taking her face between his hands he studied it with a sad curiosity. "I am sorry for having *had* to say it."

"Oh, prig, prig, prig." She smiled at him now from the narrow frame, her own delicious smile.

"And bandersnatch if you will," said Perior, shaking her gently by the shoulders, and putting her away with a certain resignation.

"My good old bandersnatch! *Dear* old bandersnatch! After all, I need a bandersnatch, don't I, to keep me straight? Yes, I forgive you. I must put up with you, and you must put up with me, fibs and all--fibs, do you hear, not lies. Oh, ugly word!" She clasped her hands on his arm, poor Perior! "And you will stay to lunch?"

"No, I won't stay to lunch," said Perior, smiling despite himself.

"Why?"

"I am busy."

"You are a prig, you know," said Camelia, as if that summed up the situation conclusively.

CHAPTER XI

WHETHER Camelia were decided on accepting Sir Arthur or not, every one else, under a waiting silence, considered the engagement an accomplished fact. Poor Mr. Merriman departed disconsolately when the reality of his utter ruin forced itself upon his unwilling understanding. Sir Harry contemplated the hopeless situation more compliantly, oscillated for a few days between feeble despair and jocular resignation, and then finding it impossible to utterly tear himself away from his charmer's magnetic presence, he settled down to a melancholy flirtation with Mrs. Fox-Darriell that masked his inability to retreat. Lord and Lady Tramley went on to another visit, and the poet who wrote the virile poems and believed in the joy of life, finding Miss Paton less sympathetic than usual, penned a laconic, psychological verselet for her benefit, and departed.

Camelia seemed rather vague in the furtherance of hospitable projects, and the merest trickle of visitors went through the house, affecting very slightly the really placid routine.

Lady Paton's whole personality expanded in prettiest contentment; the calm so far surpassed her expectations, and Camelia seemed very happy. Lady Paton could but take for granted her happiness.

Camelia was living the most poetical moment of life; she made no confidences; but Lady Paton's trust walked in a sadly sweet dream where her daughter's courtship mingled with tearful memories of her own. Charles Paton's smile; the first fluttering consciousness that the smile came oftenest for her; she still blushed as she remembered the moment when he had murmured to her as they danced that she had the prettiest throat in England; it had seemed so daring to little Miss Fairleigh, who had read her first novel only six months before; the very memory still had the glamour of daring. And Camelia was feeling all those tremulous delights, with their deep undercurrent of sacred solemnity.

Camelia was not demonstrative, Lady Paton had sighed over the accepted fact, but she could trace all such natural emotions on Sir Arthur's face when he watched or spoke to her daughter. She already felt a maternal tenderness for him, and his exquisite courtesy, that already implied rights, was nothing less than filial.

Lady Henge's dignified intellectuality she found indeed rather awesome, but she hoped by careful listening to expand her powers of comprehension, and Lady Henge delivered her expositions of social ethics with a pleasant faith in their tonic effect upon the suppressed mind of her hostess--

"Suppressed, repressed, Arthur, not shallow," she said to her son, "and you could not ask a daintier, truer gentlewoman for your wife's mother, dear." Lady Henge sighed just a little--though quite resigned to the future--for the Duchess of Amshire's mind was neither suppressed nor shallow, but as expansive and capable an organ as her own, and infinitely sympathetic. Lady Elizabeth, too!--Lady Elizabeth, who had worked at shirt-making in the slums for two weeks, and had caught typhoid fever at it--even Camelia's sunny charm could not efface the thought of Lady Elizabeth's almost providential fitness. But in spite of inevitable regrets Lady Henge was resigned, and the two mothers got on together very pleasantly, since moulding capability can hardly carp at a gentle, clay-like receptivity.

Mr. Rodrigg seemed the only new guest intended for any permanence of stay. He duly arrived at the given date and hour, a punctual man, very much aware of his own importance, and of the importance to him, and to others, of every moment.

And Mr. Rodrigg was really a very important personage and his moments weighty with significance. And this iron-gray, middle-aged man had not at all foolishly fallen in love with the brilliant Miss Paton. A wife so beautiful, so capable, so charming, would be the finishing touch to his influence; matter-of-fact motives may well have underlain Mr. Rodrigg's amorous determination, which Camelia thought so effectually snuffed out. But indeed Mr. Rodrigg's determination was far too strong to credit hers. His self-confidence smiled kindly upon a pretty coquetry. The exquisite grace of Camelia's rebuff--she had almost thought it worthy of publicity, so felicitous had been its delicate sweep round a corner dangerous to friendship--had merely impressed Mr. Rodrigg's unappreciative bluntness with a reassuring conviction of trifling and postponement.

The lightness of touch, the deft cleverness upon which our poor Titania so prided herself, were surveyed in this instance by an ass's head; the effect she thought so prettily made was quite missed, and she herself its only spectator.

The portentousness of Arthur Henge's presence at Enthorpe did not in the least weigh with Mr. Rodrigg against the final choice he considered as expressed in Lady Paton's invitation. Miss Paton had put him off--but she had not let him go; so Mr. Rodrigg interpreted the Egeria attitude; she demanded patience--and she should have it. She was too clever a girl to tolerate whining commonplaces; she would appreciate his whimsical calm; he would not whine--he would wait and humor her.

She liked to have important people about her, and Mr. Rodrigg explained Sir Arthur very much as Camelia had explained Mr. Rodrigg. It was platonic friendliness--quite hopeless. He realized that Camelia might dally with his own hopes, that skill might be necessary to win her finally, and he intended to be very skilful, to show no jealousy or carping that might indispose her towards his future marital authority. And Mr. Rodrigg hardly felt the fitness of

jealousy. He was, he thought, a cleverer man than Henge, a man of more intrinsic weight. Henge had a light and pretty talent, spoke with conviction, but was not the man to sway the world with socialism rewarmed in Tory saucepans; whereas Europe trembled at Mr. Rodrigg's nod, at least so Mr. Rodrigg, not unreasonably, was convinced. The "good match" theory in explanation of Camelia's motives only fortified his own quiet consciousness of supremacy. He quite gave Camelia credit for an undazzled directness of vision that would surely apprise her of the side on which her bread was most thickly buttered. So Mr. Rodrigg arrived in an atmosphere of blue-books and business unavoidable, though with a minor effect of a great mind unbending to lighter mundanities. His face was typically British; ruddy, with broad features clearly hewn; keen eyes, a tight mouth, and an expression of sagacious toleration of things in general.

Camelia met him with her prettiest air of mutual understanding that would warrant the neatest epigrams. Her penetration of Mr. Rodrigg's character had never quite realized his tenacious conceit.

He had been anxious, he had been hurt; but he had never imagined that Camelia thought him hopeless. Her complacent conviction of intellectual conquest was far indeed from his suppositions; the results of her Italian reading had been adroitly thrown into his speech as a piece of pretty flattery, that a great man might harmlessly permit himself towards a wilful, easily flattered woman. So the two stupidities met quite unconscious one of the other.

Mr. Rodrigg was to stop for a fortnight at least, and as Sir Arthur had to absent himself at intervals during the period, Camelia was all the more content. She feared that Sir Arthur's attitude of independence and non-expectancy might antagonize Mr. Rodrigg. She relied upon her own arguments, her own flattering influence. She sat up late at night cramming the pamphlets, reports, and books with which Sir Arthur supplied her. The resultant pallor at breakfast deepened the effect of an intellectual atmosphere in which she wrapped herself serenely. Mr. Rodrigg smiled, paternally almost, and with his most tolerant calm, upon these efforts. He cut her a large slice of cold beef at the side-board and advised her to take a glass of port; "You mustn't tire yourself, you know, my dear young lady."

He rather resented Henge's evident influence when he saw how deeply Camelia was determined on the bill, but not really troubled by it. Camelia's fervor of sympathy seemed really personal; girlish emotionalism, a futile but pretty pity quite interpreted her tenacity. He was rather pleased that she should be on the side of the factory women, though anxious to explain to her that the logic of his own position need not exclude that partiality.

He thought it safer, however, to argue as little as possible, and listened attentively and pleasantly, quite willing to go this far in humoring. Meanwhile Camelia's delay in announcing an engagement imposed a general silence; no one spoke of Sir Arthur as an accepted lover, and Mr. Rodrigg might perhaps be pardoned if no such instinctive intimation penetrated his thick self-confidence. Sir Arthur coming down for a Saturday and Sunday in Mr. Rodrigg's visit, and going off again on a Monday, rather avoided an encounter.

Mr. Rodrigg himself good-humoredly introduced the subject of the bill one evening in the smoking-room, and they talked of it amicably and impersonally for a little while. But after this talk Sir Arthur said to Camelia--

"I see very plainly where he stands. He will be firmly against me; his reticence doesn't conceal that."

"Are you sure?" asked Camelia. She herself was not at all sure. In a walk with Mr. Rodrigg that morning she had certainly observed promising leaf-blades break the stiff soil of his non-committal attitude. Camelia did not imagine that her own beaming smile might well allure those vernal symptoms.

"Quite sure," said Sir Arthur, who was really getting rather tired of Mr. Rodrigg and his utility, "and--now that I won't see you again until next Thursday--won't you talk of something as far removed from the bill as possible."

"That would be a very uninteresting something," said Camelia. "No, I can think of nothing but politics just now. Whose fault is that, pray? Did you see the report Mr. Dobson sent me this morning? You don't want to see it! Fie, you lukewarm reformer. Now pray be patient--we will talk of something else on Thursday, perhaps." So she warded him off, conscious always of that trembling retreat when the momentous question approached her. She was almost glad when Sir Arthur was gone again. At all events, she would make a good fight for his cause whether or no she accepted him.

"And you are on our side too, are you not?" she said to Perior, for Perior, more silent than ever, and revolving inner cogitations on his own laxity, still made an almost daily visit.

He owned that he was on "their side."

"And you will support us in the *Friday*."

"I am going to do my best."

"But not because I ask you!" laughed Camelia, who still felt a little soreness since that uncomfortable interview where she had so much surprised herself. She was still rather resentful, and sorry that her tears might have implied confession. She was conscious now of a touch of defiance behind the light smiling of her eyes as he owned that her asking formed no compulsory element in his decision.

"Don't you think that Mr. Rodrigg may be malleable?" Camelia pursued, "Sir Arthur is to convert him, you know."

"You or Sir Arthur?" She laughed at this. "Would it be terribly wicked if I tried my hand at it?"

"It would be terribly useless," Perior remarked; but Camelia looked placidly unconvinced.

"I am justified in trying, am I not?"

"That depends;" Perior was decidedly cautious.

"Since I believe thoroughly in the bill; since only intellectual forces will be brought to bear on our stodgy friend,-- there is nothing of the lobbyist in it."

"I am sure that Henge wouldn't like it," said Perior, with the certain coolness he always evinced in speaking to her of Sir Arthur.

"Why not?"

"It would put him in a false position towards Rodrigg. Rodrigg will imagine that you are bribing him."

"*Bribing* him!" Camelia straightened herself.

"Yes; that the price paid for his apostasy will be your hand," and this indeed was exactly what Mr. Rodrigg, with some alarm, was beginning to think.

"Apostasy! If the creature won't be sincerely convinced we don't want him!" cried Camelia.

"Very well, you have my opinion of the matter." Perior's whole manner had of late been particularly irksome to Camelia.

Lady Henge meanwhile, seeing her son's foe within the gates, most seriously and conscientiously, and openly, made good her opportunity. She took her mental mastery far more gravely than Camelia took hers, and poor Mr. Rodrigg began to think that he was asked to pay a heavy price for his hymeneal visit when Lady Henge cornered him in the drawing-room and stupefyingly admonished him. Lady Henge's arguments were all based on superbly moral grounds, and levelled with severity at the iniquity of individualistic theories, which she demonstrated to be scientifically and ethically unsound. He at times found it very difficult to keep his temper. But under the exquisite warmth of Camelia's urgency his hopes were high. He could regard with humoring half compliances this pretty whim of his pretty Camelia. Camelia would have raged could she have known Mr. Rodrigg's real impressions--impressions accompanied by the fatherly tolerance of that "pretty Camelia."

CHAPTER XII

SIR ARTHUR was back again on Thursday, alertly conscious of a half promise, and he intended to put it to the test while he and Camelia rode together in the afternoon. The party was made up: Mrs. Fox-Darriel, Gwendolen Holt, Sir Harry, and another young man--but Camelia did not go. The horses were already before the door, and she, fully equipped in riding costume, engaged before her mirror on the final details of veil and gloves, when Perior rode up; Camelia saw him through the window, and heard him decline to join their party, as he had come for Mary. Mary was not a good rider, nor could she be urged beyond the dullest trot, and Perior's refusal was no doubt on her account. Poor Alceste! Condemned to Mary for a whole afternoon! In a rapid change of project Camelia dashed out of her habit and into her prettiest white dress, sent down a note to Sir Arthur pleading sudden headache, and commanding him to go without her, saw the five depart obediently, and placidly descended to capture Perior. Mary was getting ready; Camelia, as she passed her room, saw her sewing a button on a glove, her habit laid in readiness on the bed. Camelia would have liked her ride; it was only from the impulsive wish for ten or fifteen minutes with Perior that she had sacrificed it, and she saw with satisfaction that Mary would take quite that time.

"Well, how do you do?" she said, finding him as usual in the morning-room, "*I think* we have got him," she added, picking up the threads of their last conversation.

"That is Rodrigg, of course," said Perior, looking with a pleasure he could not conceal at her charming appearance. He felt for a moment like telling her that in that dress she was bewitchingly pretty, but checked the impulse with some surprise at it.

"Yes, I argued out the whole third clause with him yesterday," said Camelia, smiling her happiest smile, for she was quite conscious of those unspoken words.

"Dear me!"

"He seemed impressed--though you are not. Sit down."

"He seemed what he was not, no doubt--I haven't the faculty." Perior spoke quite good-temperedly. Indeed, Camelia's political manoeuvres did not displease him--consoled him in a sense. There was a pretty folly about them quite touching, and her earnestness seemed to vouch for some real feeling.

"Why should you imagine that he pretends?" she asked, taking the place beside him on the sofa and leaning forward, her arms on her knees.

"The man wants to please you," said Perior, looking at her white hands hanging idly together. He wondered again whether egotism or a real fondness for Arthur moved her.

The long delay of the engagement excited and made him nervous. It had usually been so easy to see through Camelia, and he did not like the perplexity. Still, the thought that she hesitated pleased him; she would accept Arthur, doubtlessly, but at least she would imagine that she cared for him. Camelia had gained some moral value in his eyes from that pause.

"Why should you imagine that he pretends?" she asked, feeling delightedly that the atmosphere was much less chilling than usual.

"The man wants to please you."

"Well, and what then?"

"He expects to marry you."

"Nonsense!" she said with a laugh of truest sincerity.

"Tell him that you are engaged to Arthur, and see." Perior's curiosity made that little probe, and the eyes of both showed a mutual self-consciousness; both thought of the last scene in the morning-room.

"I can't make the experiment yet, even to please you," said Camelia, satisfied that her cheeks showed no rising color. "Mr. Rodrigg is really attached to me. He would do a great deal for me."

"Your smile for all reward."

"Exactly."

"You are a goose, Camelia."

But she was pleasing him; her conceit amused him almost tenderly, and he laughed.

"You think me fatuous, no doubt," said Camelia, laughing too.

"Yes, rather fatuous. Not as clear-sighted as usual."

"Mr. Rodrigg knows that I could never marry him," said Camelia more gravely; "he can only hope for my smile, and, if he helps me through, I shall always smile."

"I don't credit Mr. Rodrigg with the faintest flavor of such humility."

Camelia's smile, confidently unconvinced, now shifted to a humorous little grimace. "He never really hoped. As though I *could* have married a man with a nose like that!"

"I maintain that he does so hope--despite his nose; an excellently honest nose it is too."

"So broad at the tip! as though he had flattened it against adverse forces all his life. It is a plebeian trait, an inheritance from money-getting ancestors who held theirs conscientiously to the grindstone."

"Mine should show the peculiarity," and Perior rubbed it, "it has been ground persistently."

"Ah--a merely acquired tendency; besides, you are not going to ask me to marry you--so you may carry your nose fearlessly." Camelia's eye, despite the light audacity of her tone, fixed him with a certain alert hardness.

Perior bowed, his hand on his heart. "Thanks for the intimation. I shall carry it quite fearlessly, I assure you."

Camelia laughed. "But I like your nose," said she, leaning towards him; and, very much as a kitten gives a roguish paw-tap, she drew a finger briskly down the feature in question.

Perior grew a little red, and drew back rather sharply.

"What a staid person you are," said Camelia, quite unabashed; "you don't take a compliment gracefully, Alceste; not that it was a compliment, exactly, since your nose is not at all handsome; a poor thing but to my taste. I like its dominant ruggedness, and that nice lift in the bridge."

"Well, Camelia, I came to take Mary out riding, you know," said Perior, who still showed signs of uneasiness under her scrutiny.

"Yes, I know; you are so good to Mary. She is getting ready."

Camelia contemplated Perior's paternal relation towards Mary most unsuspectingly, yet she really did not like it. She could not like anything that withdrew a very important tributary from the river-like receptivity of her existence. Mary's narrow channel was quite unmeet for such a complimentary contribution, and Camelia was sincerely convinced of the mere charitableness of Perior's attitude. Then, above all, Perior was her own especial property; Mary might profit by him when she did not feel the want of him, and this afternoon she wanted him--very much, as it now struck her. To have sacrificed her ride for this bare ten minutes had been hardly worth while. She had not looked beyond the impulse of the moment, and the lonely hours stretched in long inconsistency before her. She thought of them now with some surprised dismay, and her eyes, still contemplating Perior's nose, grew vague with conjecture. Perior certainly, despite his latter severity, would rather spend his afternoon with her than with Mary. He could not own to it, of course, nor would she force him to such an issue; but it might be managed--pleasantly for every one, for all three. Camelia's life, so wide in its all embracing objectivity, had little time for self-analysis, little time therefore for putting herself in other people's places. Her lack of sympathy was grounded on a lack of all self-knowledge. Therefore her mind turned the matter quickly in the direction that best suited the desire of the moment, good and bad being to Camelia external facts that either pleased or displeased herself, and she said without one inner compunction, "Shall I hurry her up? And I must see that she puts her hat on properly. Mary has an unerring instinct for the unbecoming."

"Has she?" said Perior, in the tone that Camelia well understood as being altogether unencouraging and perhaps disgusted. "Don't hurry her. I can wait."

"See how unkindly I dress my best impulses," said Camelia, smiling. "I really want to help her, and to make her smart and tidy. A few touches of my fingers about Mary's unfurnished forehead, and her face assumes a certain grace and prettiness. Alceste, you must not take my flippancy *au grand serieux*--you are in danger of becoming ridiculous, Alceste, I warn you of it." She had certainly succeeded in making "Alceste" smile, and with a reassured and reassuring wave of the hand she left him, delighted with her own ability for forcing him to swallow her naughtinesses--for swallow them he must; she would feign nothing for him; she would exaggerate even the defects he saw so solemnly. She was quite sure now that she must not be left alone, and that Perior must spend the afternoon with her. She ran upstairs quickly, conscious of how prettily she sprang from stair to stair, of how charmingly with its silk and muslin rustle her white dress swayed about her, conscious even of the distinguished elegance of her white hand gliding up the hand rail; for Camelia had always time for these aesthetic notes, and her grace, her dress, and her hand were so many reasons for keeping Perior to admire them. Mary was quite ready, and looking really nice; a pretty color, and the dull fairness of her hair smoothed neatly beneath her hat.

Camelia did not think of Mary as an obstacle to be callously pushed aside; but as an insignificance rather, quite as well satisfied with the barrel-organ equivalent she would offer, as with the orchestra that Camelia intended to keep for herself, since she had the supreme right of appreciation.

Indeed she hardly thought of Mary at all, as she acted surprise on the threshold.

"Were you going with them? They are gone, dear!"

Mary turned from the mirror, her habit skirt falling from her arm; on her face a dismal astonishment, that Camelia, absorbed in the mental completion of her arrangement, hardly noticed.

"Sir Arthur, Gwendolen, the others--you were going out with them." She scarcely knew why she hedged her position with this pretence of ignorance. But Mary's face brightened happily.

"Oh no, Mr. Perior is going with me. You haven't seen him, then. He came for me."

Camelia had the barrel-organ all in readiness, and prepared to roll it forward without delay.

"Oh! did he? Well, Mary, I have another plan for you this afternoon, you will like it just as well, I know. I promised Mrs. Grier to make that charitable round of visits to her poor people with her this afternoon. We were to go to the almshouses, and I have a basket of sweets for the children in Copley, and now I must give up going because of this dreadful headache, and knowing that nothing would please you more----."

It was quite true that Camelia had made the appointment with Mrs. Grier, but on agreeing to go out riding with Sir Arthur, she had intended to ride to Mrs. Grier's house and make charming apologies--of which Sir Arthur's tyrannous monopoly would bear the brunt. By her present plan both Mary and Mrs. Grier would be pleased. She congratulated herself on her thoughtful dexterity. Mary liked Mrs. Grier so much, liked almshouses and poor children, and especially liked the distributing of goodies among them; Mary gained everything by the little shuffle, and she was not at all prepared for a certain stiffening and hardening in her cousin's expression. "It is a lovely basket, and tea and curates galore," she added, turning on the final roulade of the barrel-organ, rather wondering, for the coldness of Mary's look was apparent, though Camelia did not divine the underlying confusion.

Mary was well trained in self-abnegation, but she turned her eyes away without replying for a moment: "Could you not send word to Mrs. Grier?" she asked.

Camelia felt quite a shock of surprise at the tone, and a sense of injury that hardened her in advance against possible opposition.

"Oh, it is too late, my dear--she would be terribly disappointed--and the children--and the tea prepared for me--the people invited. Why, Mary, don't you want to go?"

"I wanted the ride," said Mary in a low voice; and growing very red she added, "I am afraid Mr. Perior will think me rude."

"Oh, I will make your excuses!" Camelia, in all the impetus of her desire, was much vexed by this ungrateful doggedness.

"Mr. Perior and I could ride over and explain," Mary added.

Camelia had never met in her cousin such opposition, and a certain dryness mingled with the real grievance in her voice as she said--

"Is your heart so set on this ride, Mary? Mr. Perior will take you out again, and you know that the pleasure is always rather one-sided, since he particularly likes a good gallop across country. It isn't quite like you, I think, to disappoint a friend like Mrs. Grier--you are so fond of Mrs. Grier, I thought."

During this speech Mary's face grew crimson. Setting her lips, she began quickly to draw off her gloves; Camelia felt suddenly a sense of discomfort.

"You will enjoy it, I am sure, Mary."

Mary made no reply, and silently unbuttoned her coat.

"I beg of you, Mary, not to go if you are going to feel aggrieved about it. I do not see what I am to do. I thought it would be quite a treat for you."

"Thanks, Camelia."

"You will go, then?"

"Oh yes, Camelia."

Camelia felt more and more uncomfortable; her object was gained and she could hardly relinquish it, but she wanted to hurry away from the unpleasing contemplation of this badly-tempered instrument. She lingered, however.

"You are right to keep on that straw hat--it is very becoming to you. Here, let me draw your hair forward a little. Now you will make conquests, Mary! The basket is in my dressing-room on the little table. Shall I order the dog-cart for you?"

"Thanks very much, Camelia."

"Mary, you make me feel--horridly!"

Camelia could not check that impulse. "Do you *mind*? You see that I can't get out of it; you see that it wouldn't do--don't you? I hope you don't really *mind*."

"Oh no; I was a little disappointed, it was very thoughtless--very ungrateful." The conventional humility rasped Camelia's discontent. "And you will tell Mr. Perior?--you will explain?"

"Yes, yes, dear."

Mary was now so completely divested of riding attire that Camelia left her with the assurance of having effected her purpose most thoroughly. But alas! it had rather lost its savor. As she slowly descended the stairs she realized that the game, though worth the candle, perhaps, had been decidedly spoiled by the candle's unmanageable smoking and guttering. Mary's decided sullenness had been quite an unlooked-for feature in the little scheme; it had involved her in

a web of petty falsities for which Perior would have scorned her.

Remembering that to account comfortably for Mary's absence she must lie to him, she came to a sudden standstill outside the door of the morning-room. How badly she had managed everything! She did not want to lie to him. Why had not Mary been delighted to go--as she should have been? Only the thought of Mary's general disagreeableness fortified her a little.

Perior was still sitting on the sofa, abstractedly staring at the floor, as she entered.

"Oh, Camelia," he said disappointedly.

"Only Camelia." She felt herself, to her dismay and disgust, growing red.

"Where is Mary?"

"I have come to make Mary's excuses. She can't go--is so sorry." With an effort she regained her composure. After all, he would never dream that to be with him she had sent off Mary, and the sudden seeing of the matter in that absolving light relieved her; it was rather to her credit, so seen, and her fondness for Perior really touching.

"Can't go?" he repeated staring. "Why she sent me word that she would be ready in twenty minutes."

"She had forgotten an engagement with Mrs. Grier; I was to have gone--" (it was as well to be as near the truth as possible), "but couldn't because of my headache--I have a horrible headache. I would have put her off, but the engagement was one of a sort Mary especially likes, a round of village visits to the almshouses, and poor children, and afterwards tea and curates galore--" Camelia realized that with a confused uninventiveness she was repeating her own words to Mary. "Mary likes tea and likes curates," she went on, pushed even further by that sense of confusion--she had never told her old friend so many lies, "and the curates like Mary, and no doubt one day she will see her way to making a choice among them." Her voice was smooth, and certainly left no cranny for suspicion, yet Perior still stared.

"What a vacuous look!" laughed Camelia, wishing that she had not been forced to cross quite so many Rubicons.

"I feel sure that Mary has been sacrificing herself--as usual," he said slowly.

"Sacrificing herself? Conceited man! Do you weigh yourself against half-a-dozen curates--reinforced by tea and sandwiches?"

"Mary likes our rides immensely--and I never saw any signs of a fondness for curates."

"No, but a fondness for Mrs. Grier, almshouses, tea, curates, and the Lady Bountiful atmosphere combined."

Perior looked absently out of the window; presently he said, "I don't think she is looking over well--you know her father died of consumption."

"Don't; he was my uncle!" Camelia exclaimed. "Still, my chest is as sound as a drum." She gave it a reassuring thump.

"That must be very comforting to you, personally, but is Mary's?"

She looked at him candidly.

"You foolish, fussy old person! Mary is solidly, stolidly well; who could associate the lilies and languors of illness with Mary? You are trying to poetize Mary's prose to worry me, but you can't rhyme it, I assure you."

"I don't know about that!" Perior was again, for a moment, silent. "I don't think Mary has a very gay time of it," he said, speaking with a half nervous resolution, as though he had often wished to speak and kept back the words. "She doesn't go out much with you in London, does she?"

Camelia did not like his tone, but she replied with lightness, "Not much, Mary is a home-keeping body. She is not exactly fitted for worldly gaieties, and she understands it perfectly."

"How trying for Mary"--the nervousness was quite gone now--once he had broached a delicate subject Perior could handle it with little compunction.

"Mary is very happy, if you please. She adores me, and is devoted to Mamma. Mamma is certainly nicer to her than I am--that is an affair of temperament, for Mary does bore me tremendously--I think she knows that she does, but she adores me, since I don't deserve it--the way of the world--a horrid place--I don't deny it."

"Happy Mary! allowed to adore your effulgence--but at a distance--since she bores you, and knows she does!" And over his collar Camelia could observe that Perior's neck had grown red. She joined him at the window, and said, looking up at his face--

"Why do you force me to such speeches? I am not responsible for the inequalities of nature--though I recognize them so cold-bloodedly. The contrast does not hurt her, for she is a good, contented little soul, and then--for nature does give compensations--she has no keen susceptibilities;" she locked her hands on his shoulder, and smiling at him, "Come, you know that I am fond of Mary. You should have seen how prettily I arranged her hair to-day--it would have softened your heart towards me. Come, we are not going to quarrel again."

Perior's eye turned on her, certainly softened in expression, "By no means, I hope," and he smiled a little, "especially as I must be off--since I have missed my ride."

Camelia's face at this unlooked-for consummation took on an expression of sincerest dismay.

"Going! you will leave me all alone! They have all gone!"

Perior laughed, looking at her now with the same touch of irrepressible pleasure she could usually count on arousing.

"Poor little baby! and it has a headache, too?"

"Yes, it has; please stay with it."

She was quite sure that he wanted to stay; indeed, Camelia's certainty of Perior's fundamental fondness for her was an article of faith untouched by doubt.

"Very well, you want to show off your dress, I see." Perior's smile in its humoring coyness was charming; Camelia felt that she quite adored him when he so smiled at her. "A very pretty dress it is; I have been taking it in."

"And we will have tea in the garden," said Camelia, in tones of happy satisfaction, "and you will see how good I am--when you are good to me. And I'll tell you all about the people who are coming--for I must have more of them--doves of them; in batches, artistic batches, 'smart' batches, intellectual batches, political batches. You and I will look at them."

"Thanks; you don't limit me to a batch then?"

They were still standing near the window, and she kept a hand on his shoulder, and looked at him now with the gravity that made her face so strange.

"No, dear Alceste, you know I don't."

He returned her look, smiling with a little constraint.

"We must be more together," Camelia went on, "we must take up our studying. No, Mr. Rodrigg, I can't walk with you this morning, I am reading the Agamemnon with Mr. Perior." Camelia's eyes, mouth, the delicately long lines of her cheek, quivered with the half malicious, half tender smile that tilted every curve and every shadow from calm to roguery.

"How Mr. Rodrigg will hate me, to be sure," said Perior, who at that moment felt that he would like to kiss his bunch of primroses--an illusion of dewiness possessed him.

"And now for tea under the copper beech. And I will read to you. What shall I read? It will be quite like old days!"

"When we were young together," said Perior, smiling at her so fondly that she felt deliciously reassured as to everything.

The gods always helped a young lady who helped herself. Such had been Camelia's experience in life, even when she helped herself to other people's belongings.

At all events, with hardly a qualm of conscience, Camelia enjoyed the afternoon she had wrested from poor Mary.

The tea-table was duly installed under the wide shade of the copper-beech. Perior carried out an armful of books and reviews from which to choose. They drank their tea and ate their bread and butter, and Camelia read aloud from the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. And it cannot be denied that Perior, sitting in the cool green shadow, listening to the perfect French accent, looking at the white figure sprinkled with the pale shifting gold that filtered through the leaves above them, enjoyed himself a great deal more than he would have done with Mary. Truly at times the way of transgressors is very easy.

CHAPTER XIII

BUT retribution followed Camelia's manoeuvre. On the advent of Mr. Rodrigg, very red and hot after a long country walk with Lord Haversham (who also had axes to grind), Perior said good-bye, remounted his horse, and rode off.

It was six o'clock, a warmly rosy evening. The hot gold was gone, but in the sunset influences there was a certain oppression. Perior yawned and rode slowly along the strip of turf that bordered the dusty road. But though he felt physically very indolent, his mind was delightfully alert, weaving busily, with a sense of freedom and joyousness, a web of hopeful imaginings, swinging the illusive, intangible filaments from point to point of the afternoon's experience. Nothing, in his estimation, could raise Camelia much above the level to which that cluster of frivolous lies had sunk her; his very heart ached when he thought of them--especially of the lie to Arthur; but the tears of last week, though his reason denied their influence, had in reality touched, surprised, and softened him, and made him hopeful. And now came the smiles, the sincerity, the sweetness of this afternoon; he could not distrust them. The idealist impulse--the master mood of his nature, though reined in so often by bitter experience, began to evolve an ell from the supposititious inch of excellence. The possibility of moral worth; the implication of some real rectitude of soul, that her truth to him seemed to justify; the formative power of a real affection for Arthur: so Perior wove his spider web, working as the spider does, from the merest foothold, and bridging chasms with a shining thread of trust.

Yet alas! for Camelia--that afternoon had certainly been a bungling piece of mismanagement, a covetous snatching at the present, a foolhardy forgetting of the future.

Perior met Mary returning in the dog-cart. He had not forgotten Mary, nor his suspicions of self-sacrifice. He turned his horse's head again and proposed to ride back with her. Yes, he had plenty of time; and in assuring her of it he smiled his kindest smile, and the pony and the horse fell into a walk. The hours under the copper-beech, with Camelia's white dress, and Camelia's shining head to look at, had seemed delightfully cool and pleasant, yet the autumn afternoon had been a hot one, and Mary's face was flushed, tired, and to her own knowledge, even a little tremulous.

"Did you have a nice afternoon?" he asked her.

"Oh, very, thanks," the habit of submissive gratitude was too strong to be mastered at the first moment, though she added, "Camelia told you how *sorry* I was?"

"Yes, but I am still wounded. I did not think you would have deserted me for the babies of Copley."

It was rather useless to attempt humor with Mary, for even he could interpret as alarmed and distressed the look of her face as it turned to him.

"Oh! but I did not want to go!" she exclaimed; "you know that! Camelia wished it--she had a headache, and said Mrs. Grier expected her, so, though I was quite ready for our ride, looking forward to it so much, I had to go; but I didn't want to--indeed I was dreadfully disappointed--" And then suddenly the sense of injury, of resentment, of dismay at herself that she should wish to display that resentment--should wish to retaliate for humiliations too deep for display, getting altogether the better of her, two large tears--and Mary had been swallowing tears all the afternoon--rolled suddenly down her cheeks and splashed upon her dusty gloves.

"Why, Mary! *Mary!*" said Perior, aghast.

She searched for her handkerchief in hasty confusion. "How silly I am! I can't help it; it has been so hot, I am so tired."

"My poor child!" But Perior was more stricken than the sympathy of his tone made manifest. His pity sprang comprehendingly to Mary, but a deeper emotion underlay it. It was as if Mary had thrust that dusty dog-skin glove right through his beautiful, fragile spider web, and as he was dashed from his illusion his thoughts gathered themselves in quick bitter avengefulness.

"You were ready? dressed, you say?" he was already sure of Camelia's falseness, but he wished to define it, to see just how much she had lied, to see just how far went her heartlessness.

"Yes," Mary could not restrain the plaintive note, though she was drying her eyes in a sort of terror over her weakness.

"And Camelia forced you to go?"

"Oh, don't think that!" Mary had thought it, but the words spoken by him shocked her. "She did not know how much I had set my heart on the ride, and it would have been a pity had Mrs. Grier been disappointed. That is what Camelia thought of--" and Mary quite believed Camelia as far as that went; but the cruel manner of discharging her duty! the deep injury of the forces brought to bear! The memory of them rose irrepressibly, poignantly.

"How considerate of Camelia!" Perior's anger made any careful analysis of Camelia's motives impossible. She had shirked an irksome duty, and kept him to entertain her laziness. The latter fact did not in the least mollify him; it was of a piece with her grasping selfishness, Mary's pleasure not weighing a feather's weight against the momentary wish. She

had gone to "hurry" Mary, and on her return from the cousinly little errand, had given him the impression of Mary's uninfluenced change of plan--even implying curates as its cause! Liar! The word almost choked him as he kept it down, for he did not want Mary to know her a liar.

"She went to your room to ask you to go?" he pursued, choosing a safe question.

But his persistence aroused in Mary a certain dim suspicion.

"Yes," she said; "she was surprised to see me dressed. She did not know I was going with you." The very force of her inner resentment--a hating resentment, as she felt with terror--made her grasp at an at least outward loyalty. But hardly had she spoken the words when the suspicion, definite, tingling with probability, leaped upon her. She looked quickly at Perior. He was white to the lips. This revelation fairly silenced him. He put his horse to the trot, and the dog-cart, hastening its pace, kept beside him.

Mary could hardly have spoken. Her mind was in a whirl of broken, distracted thoughts, that only grew to coherence when the wave-like conviction of Camelia's mean robbery broke over her.

Perior's scorching rage meanwhile hurried forward to wreak itself on Camelia; he was conscious only of its scorching.

They reached the park gates in silence; then Mary was able to say, "Are you coming in?"

"Yes, I will come in for a moment."

"You--you won't say anything about--my silliness?"

"My dear Mary, I must speak to Camelia; but you have accused her of nothing, nor shall she think you have. I will come for you to-morrow," he added as he helped her down from the dog-cart at the door; "we will have our ride. Don't be persuaded out of it either. Let other people do their own charities. It won't harm them."

Lady Paton was in the hall, a cool, gentle embodiment of the evening. "Mary brought you back?--You are going to dine, Michael?" she asked.

"No; I only want to see Camelia for a moment."

"I have just come from her. She is with Mr. Rodrigg, talking politics," and Lady Paton's smile implied the softest pride in Camelia's prowess in that pursuit. "She says you have had an old-time afternoon, reading together. You must take up your reading again, Michael--for the time that she is left to us."

Mary, going slowly up the stairs, bent her head as she heard, "Yes: he had stayed with Camelia all the afternoon." He did not care to ride with her--no, for all his kindness, the pleasure of the rides was poisoned forever. That was the thought that, at the sight of him, had cut her to the quick, bringing the tears to her eyes. More than Camelia's lie, Camelia's cruelty in dealing her that humiliation, burned. When she thought of it the blackness of her own heart terrified her. She felt that she hated Camelia, and when she reached her room, she bolted the door and fell on her bed in an agony of weeping.

Camelia perhaps counted a little too confidently upon Mary's "adoration" for her. To Mary, Camelia had always seemed the bright personification of beauty, cleverness, joy. She had wondered at her, rather than admired her. Her attitude of mind had been as that of a child staring at the unattainable moon, shining silvery-gold, and sailing far above in a wide clear sky.

She had seldom been conscious in the past of any slight or injury. Her most constant feeling was one of quiet duty. Camelia's little kindnesses surprised her; her unkindnesses she took as a matter of course. But now, in this dreadful clash of ill-matched interests, her life against Camelia's game, all the sense of duty, of gratitude, of admiration, went down in black shipwreck. She found that they had been flimsy things, after all, that under their peaceful surface there had been for many weeks a lava-like heaving of resentment. And the worst terror was to see her life bereft of all supports--to see it unblest, all hatred and despair. For even at the moment she could judge herself, measure how much she had lost in losing her blind humility--that at least gave calm and a certain self-respect--could accuse herself of injustice. Camelia had lied; but then Camelia could never have divined the rash folly of Mary's secret--must never divine it; and the cruel humiliation of that one blighting intimation of Perior's charity hurt more than the lie; and Camelia's ignorance of the hurt she had inflicted only made it ache the more.

CHAPTER XIV

MEANWHILE Perior marched off to the garden. He passed through the morning-room where Mrs. Fox-Darriel was writing.

"So you didn't get your ride either?" said Mrs. Fox-Darriel, who had her own reasons--and not at all complex ones--for disliking Mr. Perior. "It *was* rather hot."

Perior in his indifference did not even divine the suspicion that saw in his arrival, and Camelia's defection and amusing headache, a portentousness threatening to the object she had set her heart upon.

Perior replied shortly, and it was with very little love that she watched him walk over the lawn. Camelia really was a fool, and who knew how far her folly might not go.

Camelia was still under the copper-beech, and still talking to Mr. Rodrigg. Perior perforce acknowledged her innocence of flirtatious methods. Her earnest pose--elbows on the arm of her chair, hands clasped, head gravely intent--denoted the seriousness with which she took her role.

Mr. Rodrigg's smile might have warned her. He balanced a teaspoon neatly on his cup, and looked from it to her, vastly unimpressed as to the real purport of the conversation.

Perior's mood was too miserable, too savage, to allow him more than a mere dart of cynical amusement at her folly. Camelia turned her head, surprised at seeing him. Smiling a complacent little smile she patted the chair beside her.

"So you came back after all."

"Yes." The nipped monosyllable, like a sudden *douche* of icy water, told her that since he had left her their relations had changed, and changed very much for the worse. Her conjectures sprang immediately to Mary. Bother Mary! what had she said? But at the thought of what she might have said Camelia knew that her heart was shaking. Her look, on a first impulse, would have been entreating, but in the presence of a third person it grew cold in answer to his, and she turned again to Mr. Rodrigg.

"Go, on, please; I want your answer. I have still that one fallacy to demolish, you know."

Mr. Rodrigg observed Perior affably; he was a really important opponent. "Miss Paton wishes, I believe, to institute a sort of eighteenth century role for women in politics," he said, "the role that obtained in France during that ominous century. She expects to rule England through her *causeries*."

"Indeed, I fancy that England would be very prettily ruled!" said Camelia, laughing.

Perior switched the dust on his boots and made no reply.

"You have been reading, I hear," Mr. Rodrigg continued, seizing gratefully the chance of escaping from the bill, "a very interesting number of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. I looked at it a day or two since: the serial romance is quite a new departure in style. There is certainly new leaven working in French literature. The revolt from naturalism is very significant, very interesting, though some of the extremes of opposition, such as symbolism, tend to become as unhealthy."

"Symbolism, mysticism, in the modern naturalistic French writer, is merely the final form of decadence," Camelia observed with some sententiousness, feeling Perior's silent presence as an impulsion towards artificiality in tone and manner, "the iridescent stage of decay--pardon me for being nasty--but they are so nasty! I have had quite enough of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*--so to business, Mr. Rodrigg." But though Camelia was quite willing to ignore the newcomer, Mr. Rodrigg insisted on dragging him into the running, until at last, perceiving a most unencouraging unwillingness, he rose and left him to the *tete-a-tete* for which he had evidently returned, going off to the house very good-humoredly. Perior's position was altogether unique, and not one of Camelia's lovers gave his intimacy a thought.

As Mr. Rodrigg's wide back disappeared through the morning-room windows Camelia turned her head to Perior.

"Well," she said, leaning back in her chair and putting her finger-tips together with a pleasantly judicial air, "what have you to say? You look very glum."

"I met Mary, Camelia."

"Ah! Did she have a good afternoon?"

"No; I fancy it was as dull to her as it would have been to you."

"Impossible. Mary loves such things; besides, I do not find them dull."

Perior looked at her.

"What a liar you are," he said. If hate and scorn could wither, Camelia felt they would then have withered her; she quite recognized them in his tone.

But she was able to say with apparent calm--not crediting the endurance of those unkind sentiments towards her, "indeed; you have called me that before."

"Will you deny," said Perior, looking at her with his most icy steadiness--Camelia keeping her eyes on his, and feeling that for the moment the best thing she could do was to hold firmly to their calm and luminous directness of expression--"will you deny that you went up to ask Mary to take your place? that you found her ready to go with me? that you pretended not to know that I had come for her?--she let that out in excusing you from my disgust!--didn't suspect you!--that to me you pretended she had gone to Mrs. Grier's of her own accord?"

The withering had begun to operate. Camelia felt his outward and her inner press of feeling vanquishing the mild inquiry of her look. She dropped her eyes. "Will you tell me why you take the trouble to debase yourself--for such a trifle?"

Camelia gazed at the grass. She had cried when he accused her unjustly; but now that her own hurrying, searching thoughts could find no loop-hole for denial she felt no wish to cry. She was not touched, but silenced, quelled. The enormity of her misdeeds made her thoughtful, now that they were put so plainly before her. She felt herself contemplating the sum of lies with an almost impersonal curiosity.

"Camelia!" The odd pitch of his voice, sharp with a sudden, uncontrollable emotion, made her look up.

He rose, paused, looking back at her. "You are breaking my heart," he said. He had not intended to say it, nor known the truth that now came imperatively to his lips. How she had hurt him, after all! He felt that he was almost appealing to her, that indignation, scorn, hatred of her baseness, were as nothing compared with that appeal--not to hurt him; and he grew very white. An answering pang shot through Camelia's heart--whether pain, pity, or triumph she could not have told; but she said quickly, her eyes rounded in unfamiliar solemnity, still on his--

"Breaking your heart?"

"I care for you," said Perior; "I only ask for a mere cranny, where a friendly tenderness might find foothold--one ray of sincerity, of honor--to make me feel that my fondness for you is not a--a contemptible, a weakening folly. It's as if you dashed me down on the rocks--just as I fancy I've found something to hold on by!" he spoke brokenly, clutching and unclutching his hands on his riding cane. "And I have to watch you dragging yourself through the dustiest meannesses; would I care if it was another woman!--no--let her be contemptible, ugly, puny, I could give it a laugh--one can only laugh; but you! to be fond of you! to watch you growing more and more greedy, soulless; a liar, a flatterer! Oh, it makes me sick!"

Camelia had again lowered her eyelids, but her eyes stared, startled at the grass. A creeping coldness went through the roots of her hair; she knew that her face was pale. For quite a long time there was perfect silence.

"To rob that poor child of her little pleasure," Perior said at last, "to lie to her--to me; and for what? What use had you for me? Were you so anxious to read me the *Revue des Deux Mondes*? *Why* did you lie?"

"I don't know," said Camelia feebly.

"*You don't know?*" he repeated.

"No--I thought Mary would not mind. I thought she would like to go."

"And you left me intending to ask her?"

"Yes."

"Telling me you were going to hurry her?"

"Yes."

"Pretending to her that you did not know I had come for her?"

"Yes." There was an impulse struggling in Camelia's heart--frightening her--but worse than fright, the thought of not freeing it. "One ray of sincerity." Mary had been noble enough not to tell him--she must be noble enough to tell.

"More than that--" she added, feeling her very breath leave her.

"More!"

"Yes; I let Mary think you would rather stay with me;--that you didn't care to ride with her----"

"*Camelia!*" They were in full view of the house, but his hand fell heavily upon her shoulder; and so he stood for a long moment, too much stupefied by the confession to find another word.

But Camelia took a long breath of recovery; sighed with it, and felt the blood come back gratefully to her heart.

"But why?--why?--why?" Perior said at last, in a voice from which anger seemed to have ebbed despairingly away, leaving only an immense and wondering sadness, "*Why*, Camelia?"

A faint, appealing little sparkle lit her face as she glanced up at him; that weight gone, all the buoyancy of her nature rose, ready to win smiles and rewarding looks of caressing encouragement.

"I wanted to read you the *Revue des Deux Mondes*."

He stared at her, baffled and miserable.

"And though I was a viper--it was true, wasn't it? You *would* rather stay with me."

"Yes, no doubt I would," said Perior with a gloom half dazed.

"And you see I did want you so much! Mary could not have wanted you nearly so much! Why, I gave up my ride to stay with you! I had no headache!" she announced the fact quite joyously; "I simply thought suddenly how nice it would be to spend the afternoon with you--like old days--when we were young together! I really thought Mary would prefer Mrs. Grier--really I did! And once embarked on a fib--for I did not want her to think that I cared so much to have you--I had to go on--they all came one after the other," said Camelia, dismally now, "and even when I saw how disappointed she was I hardened my heart in its selfishness--a perfect devil, of course; yes, I see quite well that I was a devil. So there is the truth for you. Really the truth. More than *one ray of sincerity*, is it not? And I need not have told you, since good old Mary was such a trump. There! I have lain down under your feet--and you may scrub your boots on me if you want to!"

"Alas, Camelia!" said Perior. He sat down again. Her confession had indeed forced upon him a certain resignation. For some moments he did not speak. "I believe I am the only person in the world to whom you would humble yourself like this," he said at last. "I am a convenient father-confessor for you. You find yourself more comfortable after dumping your load of sins on me. It's a corner in your psychology I've never quite understood--another little twist of egotism my mind is too blunt to penetrate. I am not worth while deceiving--is that it?" and as her eyes rested on his in mute, but unmistakable pain, he added, the note of resignation deepened, "You do not repent, that is evident. You confess; but it is very much as if I particularly hated dirty finger-nails, and to please my fastidiousness you washed yours."

"I might have hidden them," Camelia murmured, glancing down at the translucent pink and white of those *objets d'art*.

"Yes, you might; that is your advantage. The speck of dirt worried you, knowing my taste. The matter to you is just about on that level of seriousness. You are not sorry for Mary; you are merely preening yourself for me. It is that; your heartlessness, your selfishness, your hard indifference to other people's feelings that makes me despair of you. For I do despair of you."

"Am I so heartless, so selfish, so hard?"

"I am afraid you are."

"And it breaks your heart?"

Perior laughed shortly.

"Ah; you find compensation in that! I shall survive, Camelia. I have managed to survive a great many disagreeable experiences."

"And I am one. Don't you feel a little more kindly towards me? Are you not a little flattered by the realization that my misdeeds arose entirely from my affection for you?" Camelia smiled sadly, adding, "It's quite true."

"You want to monopolize me, as you monopolize everything, Camelia. If there was a cat that did not devote itself exclusively to you, you would woo the cat. In this case I am the cat."

"Dear cat!" she stretched out her hand and put it on his arm. "May I stroke you, cat?"

"No, thanks. You shall not enthrall me." He rose as he spoke. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye? Will you not stay to dine?"

"No; I am in no dining humor."

"Haven't you forgiven me--absolved me--one little bit?"

"Not one little bit, Camelia."

His farewell look she felt to be steeled against her in its resoluteness, though weak in its long dwelling. She knew that when he was gone the resoluteness would remain with him; the weakness would leave him with his departure from her presence. She enthralled him by the mere fact of being before him, baffling and exquisite; therefore he was leaving her. There was an air of finality in his very way of turning from her in silence. She watched him walk away over the lawn, and sat on in the dusk. She was a little dazed, and an evening dreaminess veiled from her the poignancy of her own fear. She evaded it, too, by the thought: he cares so much, so much. Then, too, what difference did it make? She could always wrap herself, in case of a shivering emergency, in that cloak of carelessness; but the fact of his caring so very much kept her now from shivering. When she went into the house at last she found Mrs. Fox-Darriell still alone in the morning-room.

"My dear Camelia," she said, looking round at her young friend, "when next you submit to being shaken by Mr. Perior, I really would choose a more secluded spot. The whole house might have been staring at you; and I can assure you that the spectacle you offered was highly ludicrous. A rabbit in an eagle's claws."

"And, really, if I choose to be whipped up and down the drive by Mr. Perior, I shall do it, Frances, notwithstanding your disapproval." Camelia was in no temper for smarting advice.

"The man is insufferable," said Mrs. Fox-Darriell, "*il porte sa tete comme un saint sacrement*; provincial apostolics. Your flattering wish to please him is not at all in character."

"Your knowledge of my character, Frances, is very restricted," Camelia replied, walking away to her room.

CHAPTER XV

CAMELIA during the next few days was conscious of an expectant pause. There was a page to be turned. She kept her own hand from it; for a day or two, at least, she would not stir a finger; and if Perior chose to turn it, the turning bound her to nothing--would probably reveal mere blankness, whereon he might inscribe an affectionate dedication for her new life. In that case the new chapter would be hymeneal; indeed, it seemed inevitable that she should marry Arthur Henge; the waiting volume seemed inevitably that of her married life.

But her thoughts were not with Arthur. They fixed themselves persistently on Perior. Let him come--write the friendly dedication, certify, by his blessing, to the sincerity and wisdom of her choice; or else, was it not possible that he might dash the volume out of her hands? No doubt she would pick it up again. Still, to see him dash it down would be eventful. Therefore, she waited, more breathlessly than she quite realized.

The last act of the drama had left her with no spite at all against Mary--its chief but insignificant factor. She was not resentful on the score of Mary's revelations; on the other hand, Mary's charitable reticence did not move her to gratitude. After all, it was a very explicable reticence; her own confession to Perior had lent it the kindest glamour. For Mary to have told Perior all would have been a humiliating plea for his negative; and the negative he could not have given with sincerity. Mary had felt that. No; Camelia's analysis disowned any obligation; but neither was she conscious of the least anger. A mean revengefulness was not in her nature, she was as easy towards Mary as towards herself; she quite saw that to Mary she must have seemed horrid, and that perfectly atoned for the whines in which poor Mary had probably indulged. She was sure the whines had not been spiteful. She could imagine Mary injured, but not at all spiteful; and on their first meeting after the portentous dressing-room scene, her eyes rested in blankest serenity upon her cousin's flushed and miserable face.

She felt serenity and blankness to be tactful kindnesses, and they were very easy. The thought of Mary hardly stirred her deep, still absorption in the purely dual problem, for, after Mary's ride--and Camelia missed him then--Perior did not come again.

The trial of strength in silence, they the two opponents facing one another for the test, filled her days with an excited sense of contest. It was not made more complex by outer jars. Mr. Rodrigg was unavoidably called away for a fortnight, and Sir Arthur might still be evaded, though Lady Henge's brow had grown gloomy. Camelia rather enjoyed the grave inquiry in the looks bent upon her by her future mamma (oh yes, almost without doubt, future mamma); but she did not intend to brighten them by the announcement of that fact until her own good time. Lady Henge's gloom and Arthur's patience touched only the outer rings of her consciousness. For Perior did not come. At the end of the first week her patience was out-worn; the detachment of mere contemplation became impossible. She essayed a flag of truce. Let it be peace, or, at all events, more close, more keenly realized warfare.

"Are you never coming to see me again?" she wrote. "Please do; I will be good."

Perior laughed over the document. It was merely the case of the cat again dignified by its persistent absence. His reply was even more laconic. "Can't come. Try to be good without me." The priggishness of this pleased him, and would probably amuse her. He did not want to hurt her. Neither did he intend that she should hurt him. She probably guessed that.

The note gave her a mingled thrill, anger and pleasure. That he should not come showed more than the priggish intent to punish; that pedagogic mask did not hide his fear; and that he should fear meant much. He wanted to punish her, yes; and that he could succeed was very intolerable; but that was his only strength, held to amidst a weakness he would give her no chance to exploit. His cowardice was complimentary, but since she was helpless against it Camelia was angry with her cat. Strength, after all, is largely a matter of situation, and to stand in the street vainly cajoling one's pet on the house-top gives one all the emotions of acknowledged inferiority. To turn her back and walk away was the natural impulse of Camelia's exasperated helplessness; she hoped that the cat would watch her, and feel badly as she turned the corner, for she determined to delay no longer decisions of far more importance, as she assured herself, than the ridiculous dwelling on such a trifling matter as a recalcitrant cat. The acceptance of Arthur Henge could be no longer evaded after this fortnight of evasions, each turn and twist leading her more inevitably to the centre of the labyrinth. Sir Arthur could hardly have a doubt of the final answer, though its postponement and her son's attitude of smiling patience might bring the gloom to Lady Henge's forehead.

"I do not like to see you played with, Arthur," she confessed; and her look said as much to Camelia, who, in her absolute security, only frolicked the more in her leafy circles.

"I enjoy it, mother," Sir Arthur assured her, "it's a pretty game; she enjoys it and so do I. She is cutting up a surprise cake, and I am sure of her giving me the slice with the ring in it."

"A rather undignified game, Arthur," said Lady Henge in a deep tone of aggrievement, and Sir Arthur was sorry that Camelia, for the moment, had effaced that first good impression; but he would not see that he was aggrieved. He

knew that he sat in the heart of the dear labyrinth, and Camelia's peeps at him through the hedges, her slow advances and swift retreats, were all charming, and not too bewildering when one was trained to them.

Mrs. Fox-Darriel, however, was both aggrieved and impatient. Her long visit bored her badly, and Camelia's smiling impenetrability irritated her. Her impatience almost descended to grossness.

"What a hostess you will make, Camelia, at Laversley Castle. I see you on that background of Grinling Gibbons and Titian. To be almost the richest, probably the cleverest, certainly the prettiest woman in England. What a future! An unending golden vista--widening. And for a base of operations, Laversley. Such tapestries, my dear, such porcelains, such a library and park. All in the hollow of your hand."

Camelia stretched it out. "Yes," she said, surveying its capabilities, "I have only to close it."

"You will close it, of course."

"No doubt," said Camelia blandly, a blandness that snubbed and did not satisfy her friend's grossness.

But under the blandness something struggled. Must she close the hand? Would no power outside her hold open and unstained by greed that pretty palm? The absurdity of the accusation gave her the melancholy comfort of an only half reassuring smile. Sir Arthur's excellence, not his millions, had turned the scale; yet the accusation, for all its folly, cut. And Perior did not come. He too joined forces with fate, made the closing of the hand inevitable. She defied him with the sustaining thought, "Sir Arthur is best, best in all. I close my hand on his heart because no better heart could be offered me."

CHAPTER XVI

A week had passed since Perior had received the first pleading note from Enthorpe, and one afternoon, when he was busy in his laboratory, another arrived, more a command than a supplication.

"Come at once. I must see you. I am very unhappy."

Camelia indeed was very unhappy. She could hardly recognize or define the unusualness of the unfamiliar sensation, and her ignorance helped to hurt her, make her more bewildered under it. She had accepted Sir Arthur that morning, hurried by no impulse, but conscious as she walked with him in the garden of an ill-tempered recklessness, of a fate more easily accepted than evaded uselessly. If he would have it--if every one would have it, including herself, of course, let it be so. She said yes with almost a sigh of exhausted energy, smiled with lifted brows over Sir Arthur's ensuing rapture, and then wondered that under the lightness with which she braved the decisive moment a sudden sickness of fear, of sorrow, should seize her. Reality this, then. No more choice. No more playing. The game ended. She was not being led into the Garden of Eden, but out of it, and a new world, a world bleak, leaden, a sunless immensity of dreariness stretched before her. She was frightened, and the lesser feelings of the next hour were dazed by her effort to dismiss this fear. She knew that her mother's tearful, speechless joy, Lady Henge's elevated approbation, Mary's gasping efforts after fitting phrases, Frances' cool, close-lipped little smile of satisfaction, and the background of congratulatory faces were all very irritating, and that she herself was unreasonably angry with them all.

She was glad to find herself alone in the library with Sir Arthur, even though strangely helpless before his joyous possession. His arm was about her, and she could hear Lady Henge thundering on the piano in the drawing-room.

"The dear mater is improvising an epithalamium," said Arthur, with a laugh. To Camelia it seemed cynically in keeping with her jarred and jangled mood that her marriage should be interpreted by this pretentious music. It symbolized so much. Her own flimsiness and falseness, the immense distance from anything like perfect union. She turned her thought to the attainable pleasures of the future, tried to shut her soul on the lamenting ideal that Lady Henge's music mocked, and her mind rested for a moment on the reassuring certainty of her own appreciation of Sir Arthur's excellence. Strangely enough, though his possession frightened, his arm about her waist consoled her; a warm sense of his kindness and stability held her from inner terrors; she was glad to have him there; she foresaw in solitude an on-coming and chilly stupor. She felt it well to sit beside him, protected from her own fear by his devoted nearness. "There now, you are smiling," said Sir Arthur; "you seemed sad, as though you were conscious of responsibility--and didn't like it." When he spoke of responsibility Camelia felt more keenly that she had received an injury from fate. The "Yes" that had been spoken only a few hours before had belonged to the game, was it quite fair that this solemnity should result? Yet why not take it gaily? Force it into a dancing ring of happy lightness?

"Responsibility? Oh no, you can't saddle me with that!" she said, returning his look, and smiling still more easily as she felt how much his handsome face pleased her; its very expression, an unaccented, humorous gaiety, worn for her sake, was a homage, a warrant of most chivalrous comprehension. "You alone are responsible"--and following her mental picture of the game of hide-and-seek in a Watteau landscape--"You caught me--that was all!"

"That was all!" he repeated; "and you were difficult to catch. Now that you are caught I shall keep you."

"No, I am not sad," Camelia pursued, "I only feel as if I had grown up suddenly."

"No, don't grow up. I must keep you always my laughing child."

"Lady Henge wouldn't approve of that!" said Camelia, yielding to a closer enfolding, but facilitating it by no gracious droopings.

"Ah, mother loves you," said Sir Arthur, with a touch of added pride in his capture.

"Does she?" Camelia's brows lifted a little; the enfolding continuing she was conscious enough of a dart of irritation to wish to add, "I don't love her!" but after a kiss he released her and she checked the naughty impulse, merely adding, with some perversity, keeping him now at arm's length though she abandoned her hand for the purpose, "Would you have dared to love me had she not?"

"Camelia, you know that I did." The perversity had grieved him a little. His clear brown eyes, that always reminded her of a dog's in their widely opened sincerity, dwelt on her, questioning her intention. "She did not know you, that was all."

"Nor did you, quite." Camelia laughed at him gently, and put her hand on his shoulder, half as a reward for the pang, half to still keep him away.

"No, not quite," Sir Arthur confessed, "though even my ignorance loved you. But you let me know you at last."

"But what *do* you know?" Camelia persisted.

"I know my laughing child."

"Her faults the faults of a child?"

"Has she faults?"

"Oh, blinded man!"

"The faults of a child, then," he assented.

When he had left her, for he was to spend the day in London, there was a lull after the stress of change. Camelia found herself in a solitude wherein she might sit and meditate. Every one seemed to fall away from her, and when she was left alone she was sorry for it, though it was she who had withdrawn, not they. Lady Henge had talked to her for half-an-hour, her arm affectionately, but heavily lying about her shoulders, seeming in the massive embrace to claim her with a kindness that knew itself as wiser than mere maternal emotionalism. The low tones of her voice were impressive, and Camelia would have submitted to the newly assumed manner of guardianship, of confidential admonition, with a very ill grace, had not Lady Henge been now so truly indifferent to her.

Mary had been very tiresome, following her at a distance, wanting to kiss her and cry. Mrs. Fox-Darriell's silent complacency was unendurable. Camelia knew that in the new epoch her friend saw only a tightly-closed fist, and this symbol affected her own imagination until she could have shaken Mrs. Fox-Darriell for having suggested it.

Then her mother had fallen upon her breast and wept. Camelia was ashamed of herself for seeing in the great lovingness a Scriptural exaggeration; and being ashamed of herself she was only the more anxious to get rid of the maternal clinging. She ended by locking herself in her own room, only to find that she had locked herself in with a melancholy that had been stepping silently beside her since the morning. She would not look this companion in the face, however. She was alone with it at last; but she feverishly avoided its fixed eyes, and eagerly busied herself with trivialities, a dramatic sense of courage animating all her actions. She emptied and rearranged her wardrobes and boxes, folded ribbons with intensest exactitude, introduced a new plan in the bestowal of her gloves and handkerchiefs, and even found herself unpicking a summer hat with a fictitious eagerness that implied an imperative want of that particular hat in a new trimming. When the hat was quite demolished she put it away, and polished her finger-nails, and, lastly, spent a fatiguing half-hour before the looking-glass in essays at new ways of hair-dressing. None were satisfactory, and with arms aching from their long uplifting, she at last swept the shining tresses into their accustomed lines, unlocked the door, and emerged deliberately, but with a sense of flight.

Every one had gone. The guests to golf at the Havershams; Mary, Lady Paton, and Lady Henge for a long drive. They had all respected the sensitive requirements of her new position. She was to be left alone, and as Camelia walked from room to room, the big house was desolate.

She nourished a sense of resentment, of injury, for it seemed to thrust away the chilly stupor of fear, fear of that new presence walking with her, waiting for her recognition. The loneliness, the melancholy, to which she could only feign blindness, were almost unendurable. The tears rose to her eyes more than once, and her thoughts circled nearer and nearer to Perior's great unkindness. It was when the melancholy seemed suddenly to lay an imperative hand upon her that she flew to the writing-table and wrote the note. She looked at the clock as she heard the groom departing on horseback. Perior might easily arrive at six, and at the thought her spirits rose with a great soaring bound, and laughed down at the cold enemy. When he arrived she would see what would happen. She reined back her imagination from any plan.

According to his manner, she would tell immediately, or delay telling until a favorable moment. Perhaps when he knew he would say that his heart was completely broken, but the thought of his unhappiness only seemed to send her spirits into a higher ecstasy of joyousness. She felt them bubble-like, floating in illusion, but the relief of the unthinking hour--she seemed to live in it only, to breathe only its expectancy--buoyed her above the clouds. In the long drawing-room, where the firelight made the autumnal landscape outside, its distant hills purpling with chilly evening, a mere picture, framed for the contrast in her rosy mood, she danced, trying over new steps. She had always loved her dancing, loved to feel herself so lovely, her loveliness set to such musical motion, the words of the song. She hummed the sad, dead beauty of a pavane, pacing it with stately pleasure; the gracious pathos of an old gavotte; and, feeling herself a brook, her steps slid into the flowing ripple of the courante. Perior had always loved these exquisite old dances. She would dance for him, of course. That thought had been growing, and the gavotte, the courante, the pavane becoming rehearsals. Yes, she would dance for him--at first. Flushed, panting a little from the long preparation, she ran upstairs to put on a white dress, a new one made for dancing, with sleeves looped over bare arms, flowing sash, and skirt like a flower-bell. She lingered on each detail. She must be beautiful for Alceste; dear Alceste, poor, poor Alceste; how unhappy he would be--when he knew. And suppose he should not come. The thought went through her like a dagger as she held a row of pearls against her throat. Over them she looked with terror-stricken eyes at the whiteness of her beauty--useless beauty? Ah, she could not believe it, and she clasped the pearls on a breast that heaved with the great sigh of her negation. She could not believe it. He must come. And when she reentered the drawing-room the sound of a horse's hoofs outside set the time to the full throb of an ecstasied affirmation.

A delicious flood of contentment went through her. She stood smiling in the dark yet luminous room, where only the firelight shone along the polished oak of floor and wainscoting, half unconsciously emphasizing her sense of the moment's drama by pressing her hands on her heart. Of course he had come. How could he not come if she really

wanted him? Dear Alceste. In a moment he had entered. The firelight, as she stood before him, seemed to shine through her pearly glimmering. She looked sprite-like, a transparent fairy. Her dress, her attitude, her eyes, the hovering expectancy. Perior, too, was immediately conscious of drama, and felt as immediately an impulse to flight; but he came forward, a quick look of calm arming his sturdy opposition to the atmosphere of exaggerated meanings.

"Well, here I am," he said, in a manner intended by its commonplace to rebuff the significance, whatever it might be, of eyes, dress, and attitude. Camelia took his hand, joyously entering once more into the dear, enchanted fairy-land--the old sense of a game, only a more delightful, a more exciting game than ever. She could almost have whirled him into the circle--a mad dancing whirl round and round the room. How astonished he would have been! Solemn, staid old Alceste!

"Yes, here you are. At last," she said. "How shamefully you have punished me this time!"

She laughed, but Perior sighed.

"I haven't been punishing you," he said, walking away to the fireplace. Camelia followed him and watched him hold out his hand to the warmth.

"Is it so cold?" she asked.

"Very chilly; the wind catches one on that mile along the common. My hands are half-numbered." Prettily, as she leaned in her illumined whiteness beside him, she took his hands between her own and rubbed them briskly.

"You wrote that you were unhappy," said Perior, looking down at the daintily imprisoned hands; "what is the matter?"

"The telling will keep. I am happier now."

"Did you get me here on false pretences?" He smiled as he now looked at her, and the smile forgave her in advance.

"No, no. I needed you very much; really I did. I am growing melancholy; and I was all alone. I hate being alone."

"There, that will do. They are quite warm now; thanks very much. Where are the others?"

"The others? They are away," said Camelia vaguely.

"Rodrigg?"

"He comes back to-night, I think."

"And Henge?" Perior asked it with a little hesitation. Of late he had wondered much about Arthur and Camelia. There was an effort in the unconscious aloofness of his voice.

"In London too." Camelia looked clearly at him. No, she would not tell him now. The happy half-hour she must guard for them both. Her oblivion, his ignorance, would make a fairy-land. Let him think even that she had sent Arthur away finally. Arthur had no place in fairy-land.

"All the others are out," she repeated, "golfing, calling, driving. But are you not glad to see me, even if I seem happier than strict consistency requires?"

"Yes, I am glad to see you." Perior's eyes showed the half-yielding, half-defiance of his perplexity. "But tell me, what is the matter? Don't be so mysterious."

"But tell me," she returned, stepping backward, her skirt held out for display, "is not my dress pretty?"

"Very pretty." Perior leaned back against the mantelpiece with an air of resignation. "Very exquisite."

"Shall I dance for you?"

"By all means; since the dress was put on for that, I summoned for that. Isn't it so?"

She made no reply, her smile lingering as she turned from him, and showing in its fixedness a certain gravity. He was satisfied that conjecture as to her meaning, her plan in all this, only wearied him, yet sorry that he had come. Under the weariness he was resentfully aware of excitement. And what of Arthur? Camelia's whole manner subtly suggested that Arthur no longer counted. The note might be explained as an after-throb of doubt, or at least of dreariness, in a world momentarily without big issues. If she had refused Arthur definitely? The thought, as his eyes followed Camelia's exquisite steps and slides, shook some careful balancing of self-control. He felt stripped of a shield, unpleasantly exposed to a dangerous moment. Camelia was dancing quite silently, yet the air, to Perior's musical brain, seemed full of melody, and she the soundless embodiment of music made visible--so lovely, so dear to him; so dear in spite of everything. She was like a white flower, tilting, bending in the wind. She skimmed like a swallow, ran with rippled steps like a brook, flitted with light, languid balancings, a butterfly hovering on extended wings. Her slender body, like a fountain, rose and fell in a continuity of changing loveliness. Her golden head shone in the dusk.

Perior watched her, half-dreaming, half-dazzled. The long moments of acute, delicious contemplation drifted by as peacefully, as stilly as falling rose-petals, muffling all outer jars and murmurs, blurring the past, the future, making the present enchanted.

When she was far off his heart beat for her return, and when the swaying, hovering whiteness came near he shrank from the nearness. The unexpected sweeping turn that caught her away suddenly into the half-visionary

distance stabbed him through with a pang of relief and disappointment.

He was entranced, half-mesmerized, conscious only of his delight in her, when her circling at last grew slower, the musical beat of the recovering tilt faltered. She came on a sliding, wavering step, and sank like the softest sigh before him, folded together in her wing-like whiteness.

"You enchanting creature," Perior murmured. He bent over her--he would have lifted her--taking her hands, but Camelia herself rose between his arms, and inevitably they closed about her. It was so natural, so fitting in all its strangeness, that to Camelia the slow circling of the dance seemed still to carry her round and round, unbroken by the crash of a great revelation. She closed her eyes, hardly wondering at her perfect happiness, and from the last revolving mists the reality dawned sweetly upon her--the only reality. She had danced out of the game; it lay far behind her. Through it she had blundered on a mistake, but her mind put that swiftly aside. The mistake mattered nothing, the last act merely of the game--a reckless, angered act. She thought now that the game would hardly have been begun if only Perior had put his arms around her, claimed and reclaimed her foolishness, long ago. Of course she loved him. It needed but that to let her know.

But to Perior the moment, after its irresistible impulse, was merely one of shame and self-disgust. He held her, for she was enchanting, and she had enchanted him. Disloyalty to his friend did not forbid that satisfaction. That she meant to marry Arthur was now impossible. She had tossed him aside, dissatisfied; he could not pity Arthur for his escape, nor credit Camelia with disinterestedness. She was bored, disappointed, reckless in a wish for excitement. He analyzed her present mood brutally--the mood of a vain child, made audacious by childhood intimacy, her appetite for conquest whetted by his apparent indifference; he had not known that she would pay such a price for conquest. It was an ugly revelation of Camelia, but the revelation of himself was uglier. He at least pretended to self-respect. The folly of her coquetry hardly surprised him; his own yielding to it did; yet in the very midst of his self-disgust he fulfilled it to the uttermost by stooping his head to her upturned face, blind to its intrinsic innocence, and kissing her lips. As he kissed her he knew that for angry weeks and months he had longed to kiss her, the unrecognized longing wrestling with his pride, with his finer fondness for her--the firm, grave fondness of years, with even his loyalty to Henge. That barrier gone, the longing rushed over the others. Among the wrecks his humiliation overwhelmed him--a girl he loved, but a girl he would not woo, had wooing been of avail!--in it he was able to be generous.

The moment had not been long. He released her. Feeling most ungentle, he yet put her away gently by the whole thrust of his arm. Leaning on the mantel-shelf, his face averted from hers, he said: "Too enchanting, Camelia. I have forgotten myself," and he added, "Forgive me."

"But *I* did it!" Camelia's tone was one of most dauntless joyousness. She was necessarily as sure of his love as of her own, surer of its long-enduring priority. But his love feared--that was natural: dared not hope for hers--too natural. She could not bear to have him put her away in even a momentary doubt of her sincerity. Claspings both arms about his neck she said quite childishly, in her great unconsciousness of his thoughts about her--

"Why would you never say you were fond of me? Why would you never say you loved me? Say it now--say that you love me."

His bewilderment at her audacity stung him to anger, and in self-defence, for her sake too as well as for his own, almost to brutality. "Ah, I love you enough to kiss you, Camelia," he said; "you are only fit for that. There," he unlocked the clasping arms, "go away." The unmistakable sternness of his face struck her with pained perplexity. He would not meet her eyes; he turned from her, looking wretched. A flashing thought revealed the possibility of tempted loyalty. Did he think her bound? Divine the engagement? He could not have heard of it already. She saw, her heart throbbing at the half-truth, half-falseness of the unbecoming vision, how she must appear to him in that distorting illumination. Free in her own eyes, she hesitated on a lie that would release him from his doubts. But as she stood looking at him, smiling, a little sternly too, at the test, the door burst open with unpleasant suddenness, and Mr. Rodrigg, bull-like in his vehemence, charged into the room.

CHAPTER XVII

CAMELIA felt, in the glaring pause Mr. Rodrigg made before Perior's baffling presence, that she herself was the red scarf he sought. Her mind, alert in self-defence, even in this stress of joy and terror, divined some unknown danger. Mr. Rodrigg had faded into complete insignificance, put away with the other toys; she looked coldly at him, as at a dusty jack-in-the-box, protruding its fatuousness in a grown-up world. Yet she felt the necessity for self-command and quick intelligence. Something ominous shone in Mr. Rodrigg's eye. The lid must be pressed down firmly, fastened securely; she was sure of her complete control over the silly plaything, but an extinguishing dexterity might be requisite.

"Well, Mr. Rodrigg," she said; and her tone fully implied the undesirability of his presence.

"Can I see you alone, Miss Paton?"

Mr. Rodrigg's voice was offensively strident. Camelia looked at Perior, who, from under lowering brows, bent ungracious eyes on Mr. Rodrigg's flushed insistency.

"No, I don't think you can--at present." She did not want to vex Mr. Rodrigg--she spoke not unkindly; but Mr. Rodrigg was dense, coarsely dense, or else coarsely angry. Angry with her; Camelia had time by now to wonder at that, and to feel less amicable with the greater need for feigning amiability.

He closed the door with decision. "Then I will speak before Mr. Perior. As a family friend, Mr. Perior will not be amiss between us. He is a witness of the whole affair. I appeal to Mr. Perior. Miss Paton, I have just met Lady Henge. She tells me that you accepted her son this morning."

Camelia grew white. Though Perior spoke no word, his stillness equalling hers, she felt a fixed stare turned upon her. Unforeseen catastrophe! She had hoped to glide noiselessly from the cardboard stage, to pack up and send away the useless, even though misused puppets; and now the whole scenery, heavy too, fell crushingly upon her, pinning her in the very centre of the stage. There she was held--the mimic properties were stone-like--there she was held in the full glare of the footlights; and he was staring at her.

She drew herself together and clasped her hands behind her back. Her little head, with the intent resoluteness of its look, had never been more beautiful. Even Perior, in the frozen fury of his stupefaction, was aware of that. The mute, white cameo on the dim, rosy background gazing with not a tremor at its own perfidy, stamped itself ineffaceably on his memory as a Medusa type of splendid, pernicious courage. For one brief moment she wondered swiftly--and her thoughts flew like sharp flames--if a round, clear lie would save her, save her in Perior's eyes, for she saw herself as he saw her, was conscious only of him, and cared not a button for Mr. Rodrigg, the ugly raven merely who had croaked out the truth. The uselessness, the hopelessness of a lie, and too--in justice to her struggling better self be it added--shame for its smirch between her and him on the very threshold of true life--this hopelessness, this shame nerved her to the perilous truth-telling. Better his scorn for the moment, than a scorn delayed, but sure to find her out. Could she not explain--confess--on his breast, with tears? She did not look at Perior. Keeping fixed eyes on Mr. Rodrigg, an unpleasant but necessary medium for the communication, "Yes, Mr. Rodrigg, I did," she said.

Perior at her side gave a short laugh, a cruel laugh. The moment was horrid; let it be hurried on, and Mr. Rodrigg, tool of the avenging gods, hurried out.

"Have you anything to say, Mr. Rodrigg?" she asked, conscious of hating Mr. Rodrigg, and, even at that moment, of a shoot of emphasized irritation with his nose, which caught the firelight bluntly.

"May I ask you, Miss Paton, if during these past weeks, you have always had that intention?" he inquired, speaking with some thickness of utterance.

"No, Mr. Rodrigg, you may not ask me that," she returned.

The revelation of the man's hopes was no longer to be evaded; she drank down the bitter draught perforce, her eyes on that squarely luminous nose-tip.

During the pause that followed Mr. Rodrigg's eyes travelled up and down her with mingled scorn, wrath, and humiliation.

"Allow me to congratulate you," he said at last, most venomously, "and to take my leave of you, Miss Paton. I have not understood, I perceive, the part I was supposed to play here."

And Camelia was left alone with Perior. With an impression as of strong boxings on the ears she could only cry out "Odious vulgarian!" She tingled all over with a sense of insult.

"I, too, will bid you good-evening, Camelia," said Perior. He could have taken her by the throat, but in the necessary restraint of that desire his glance, only, seized her as if it would throttle her.

"No! no!" she caught his arm, all thought of Mr. Rodrigg and his slaps burnt from her. "Listen to me--you don't understand! Wait! I can explain everything! everything--so that you must forgive me!"

"I do understand," said Perior, who stood still, scorning, as she felt, to touch and cast her off. "You are engaged to Arthur. You are disgraced--and I am disgraced."

"Through me, then! You were ignorant! But wait--only listen--I am engaged to him; but I love you--don't be too angry--for really I love you--only you--Oh! you must believe me!"

He retreated before her clasped imploring hands, she almost crying, following, indifferent to the indignity of her protesting supplication. "Indeed, I love you!" she reiterated, her chin quivering a little as the cruelty of his withdrawal brought the tears to her eyes.

Perior took the clasped hands by the wrists and held her off. "You love me?--and you love him too?"--she shook her head helplessly. "No; you have accepted him, not loving him, and you dared,"--the cruelty was now physical, as his clench tightened on her wrists--"you *dared* turn to me, to debase me with yourself, you false, you miserable creature!"

Under the double hurt she closed her eyes. "But why--but why did I turn?" she almost sobbed.

"You ask me why? Can I tell what folly, what vanity prompted you? Those are mild words."

"Oh!--how you hurt me!" she breathed; the feminine sensitiveness was a refuge--a reproach. He released her wrists. "Because I love you," she said, and standing still before him she looked at him through tears. "You may be angry, despise me, but I only want to tell you everything. You are so brutal. It was a mistake--I did not know--not till this evening. I accepted him because you would not prevent me--because you didn't come--nor seem to care, and--yes, because I was bad--ambitious--vain--like other women--and I did like him--respect him. But now!"--the appealing monotone, broken by little gasps, wailed up at the inflexibility of his face--"it isn't folly, it isn't vanity--or why should I sacrifice everything for you, as I do--Oh! as I do!"

"Sacrifice everything for me? Go away!"

"Oh!--how can you!" She broke into sobs--"how can you be so cruel to me--when you love me!"

"Love you!"

"You cannot deny it! You know that you love me--dearest Alceste!"--her arms encircled his neck.

Perior plucked them off. "Love you?" he repeated, looking her in the face. "By Heaven I don't!"

And with the negative he cast her away and left her.

CHAPTER XVIII

BUT he did love her. That was the worst of it, as he told himself through the night that followed. His love and his disgrace pursued him. Disgraced, though cruel enough to clearly see her as the temptress, disgraced by the weakness of his yielding to a moment of enchantment, disgraced by having given her the right to reproach him--the woman he loved, but the woman only fit to kiss. He was innocent of real disloyalty, and her perfidy might well exonerate his ignorance; but even Camelia's perfidy could not excuse that kiss. He met the morning jaded, from torturing hours. When the first passion of his rage against her had died away the thought of her astounding declaration, her reiterated devotion, chilled him with the new fear of final yielding. Camelia, imagining herself in love with him, became an ominously alluring figure. She could claim him only through his weakness, but his dishonor gave her power. He accepted the morbid accusation, scourged himself with it, and the thought of her power urged him to escape. She was only fit to kiss, that was the final verdict. To marry such a woman meant a permanent disablement of all that was best in life. The kiss could not bind him to that atonement. It was she, rather, who owed him an infinity of reparation. He determined to treat himself to a trip through Italy, and, alone with the beauty of the past, to shake his soul free from the choking entanglement of the present. He felt sick, battered, bereft of all security; and through everything throbbed the worst hurt of all--that Camelia should have proved herself worthless so utterly.

Early in the afternoon of a day spent in hurried preparations for departure, he heard a horse's hoofs outside, and looking from the library window he saw Arthur Henge dismounting.

Perior felt the blood rush to his head. The first impulse of his thought was to see in Arthur the righteously angered friend come to heap upon him the shame of his discovered betrayal. He would of course bear the responsibility as the chiefly false and traitorous. The woman would shield herself; it was the right of her weakness, and his deep, unreasonable loyalty to Camelia, a loyalty paternal in its force and helplessness, accepted the vicarious position, rushed over and confused every self-asserting instinct. It was with almost the illusion of guilt that he stood upright, waiting. Then, this last straw he snatched at, despising it, as he heard Arthur's step in the hall; was it possible that he had discovered nothing?--possible that he had come to announce his engagement?--possible that Camelia, in the bewilderment of her rejection, had returned to a doubly false, a dastardly allegiance? The irony of such a supposition did not make it by any means impossible. But one look at Arthur's face dismissed the tragic-comic surmise.

It was a face of stiffened gloom, a face difficult for the moment to interpret. Camelia had told the truth, then. Told more than the truth? Buttressed her falseness with his act of folly?

Perior expected nothing less than this craven insincerity. To shield her he must bare his breast for Arthur's shafts. Arthur might as well know that he loved her, but Camelia should never know it, so Perior grimly promised himself as he met his friend's look with some of the sternness necessitated by his pitch of unpleasant resolution.

But Henge's first words proved that Camelia, at all events, had not been cowardly.

"Perior--she has broken our engagement! She accepted me yesterday--and to-day she has broken our engagement!" and the quick change of expression on Perior's face moving him too much, he dropped into a chair, and leaning his arms on the table, bowed his head upon his hands.

Perior's first feeling was a crumbling sense of baseness. The lie between him and his unfortunate friend scorched him, and his recognition of Camelia's courage was swept away by the realization of her cruelty, by the avenging consciousness that owing to her he feared to meet his friend's eyes.

He kept silent, studying the surrendered reticence of the bent head.

"She accepted me yesterday, Perior." Henge repeated it helplessly.

Perior put his hand on his shoulder. "My dear Henge," he said.

Arthur looked up. "I don't know why I should come to you with it. I am broken. I could cry like a baby. I love that child, Perior! You saw her yesterday; yes, that is why I came. She accepted me yesterday, you know. Did she say anything to you about it?--when you saw her? You see"--he smiled miserably--"I want you to turn the knife in my wound."

"I heard it," said Perior, feeling that a rigid adherence to perhaps deceptive truth was all that was left to him.

"But she gave you no reason to think that she had changed her mind?"

"What has Camelia said to you, Arthur? One may interpret it differently," said Perior, detesting himself.

Sir Arthur's face resumed the blankness of its helpless wonder.

"I got back this morning and she sent for me. I found her white, woeful, resolute. She said, 'I made a mistake. I can't marry you. I am unworthy of you.' That to me, Perior! to me! and only yesterday! Oh!--I could have sworn she cared for me! I don't blame her; don't think it. It was all pity--a fancied tenderness; the shock of realization showed her the difference. She can't love me. She unworthy! The courage--the cruelty even, were worthy; but she repeated that again

and again."

"Was that all she said?" Perior asked presently.

"All? Oh no, that was only the beginning. I tortured her for an hour with pleadings and protestations. With her it was mere repetition. She did not love me; she felt it as soon as she had accepted me. She told me that she sent for you--not for counsel, but to see if her misery was not mere morbid fancy; she said that Rodrigg--the brute!--rushed in upon her with implied accusations; to me she confessed--dearest creature--that she had been foolishly hopeful, foolishly confident in her eagerness for my cause. She heaped blame upon herself. She called herself mean, and weak, and shallow--Ah! as if I did not understand the added nobility! I have not one hard thought of her, not a touch of the jilted lover's bitterness. It is my misfortune to see too well the worthiness of the woman I have lost."

"It is the best thing that could happen to you, Arthur." Perior, standing silently beside his friend, absorbed in the contemplation of this pitifully noble idealization, could now defy his own pain, shake from himself the clogging sense of shame, and speak from the fulness of his deep conviction.

"You mean better than marrying an unloving woman," said Sir Arthur; but he had flushed with the effort to misunderstand. Some lack in Perior's feeling for Camelia he had always felt. He shrank now from confronting it.

"Yes, I mean that and more," Perior went on, feeling it good to speak--good for him and good for Arthur--good to shape the hard truth in hard words, yet with an inconsistency in his resolution, since he wished Arthur to recognize her unworthiness, yet would have given his life to keep from him the one supremely blasting instance which he and Camelia alone knew.

"She is not worthy of you. I hope that in saying it she felt its truth, for truth it is."

"Don't, Perior--" Sir Arthur had risen. "You pain me."

"But you must listen, my dear boy--and it has pained me. I have been fond of Camelia--I am fond of her, but I am never with her that she does not pain me. She pains every one who is unlucky enough to care about her; that is her destiny--and theirs."

Sir Arthur's face through a dawning bewilderment now caught a flashing supposition that whitened it, and kept him silent.

"From the first, Arthur, I regretted your depth of feeling for her," said Perior, after the slight involuntary pause with which he recognized in his friend's face his own unconscious revelation. They now stood on as truthful a ground as he could ever hope for. Arthur had guessed what Camelia should never know. He could speak from a certain equality of misfortune--for had not Camelia hurt them both? "In accepting you she did you one wrong, she would have done you a greater had she married you. She is not fit to be your wife. You wouldn't have held her up. Most men don't mind ethical shortcomings in their wives--lying, and meannesses, and the exploiting of other people--they forgive very ugly faults in a pretty woman; but you would mind. It isn't as a pretty woman that you love Camelia, nor even as a clever one, so you would mind--badly. Don't look white; there is nothing gross, vulgar, in Camelia's wrongness. As your wife she would have been faithful, useful, kind, no doubt; there would be no stupidities to complain of. She is a charming creature--don't I know it! But, Arthur, she is false, voraciously selfish, hard as a stone."

Sir Arthur had the look of a man who sees a nightmare, long forgotten as darkest delusion, assuming before his eyes the shape and hue of reality; he retreated before the obsession. "Don't, Perior--I cannot listen. I love her. You are embittered--harsh. Your rigorous conscience is distorting. You misjudge her."

"No, no, Arthur. I judge her."

"Ah!--not before me, then! I love her," Sir Arthur repeated. "Good-bye, Perior. I came to say good-bye. We are going, you know."

"Yes--So am I."

Sir Arthur's eyes dwelt upon him for a compassionate, a magnanimous moment. "You are? Ah! I understand."

"More or less?" said Perior, with a spiritless smile.

"Oh, more--more than you can say."

Perior let him go on that supposition. Arthur understood that Camelia had hurt him. That, after all, was sufficient; left his friend's mind without rancor for his galling truth-telling. And, as Perior walked back into the library, he heaved a long sigh of relief. The Rubicon was crossed. In so speaking to Arthur he had fortified himself. The truth, so spoken, was an eternal barrier between him and Camelia. The barrier was a plain necessity; for Perior was conscious that a possible thrill lurked for him in the contemplation of Camelia's last move. Its reckless disregard of consequences proclaimed a sincerity to which he had done injustice yesterday. She believed she loved him; she gave up all for his subjection. Yes, the thrill required suppression. He must abide in the firm reality of the words spoken to Arthur--"hard, false, voraciously selfish;" yes, she might love him, but her love could be no more than a perplexing combination of these ineradicable qualities.

The short autumn day drew to a close. From the library window the evening grayness dimmed the nearest group of larches, golden through all their erect delicacy. The sad sunset made a mere whiteness in the west. Perior had been at

his writing-table for over an hour, diligently strangling harassing thoughts, a pipe between his teeth, a consolatory cat at his elbow, when, in a tone of commonplace that rang oddly in his ears, "Miss Paton, sir," was announced by the solemn old retainer.

Perior wheeled round, and stumbled to his feet; the papers he held fell in a sprawling heap upon the floor, and the dozing cat jumped down and took nervous refuge under a chair.

Camelia, following old Lane with dexterous determination, saw the astonished commotion and found it encouraging. She was determined but not desperate. Even without encouragement she fancied that she could have held her own, sustained as she was by her inner conviction, and while Lane went out and closed the door, she was even able to cast a reassuring smile at the cat, whose widened eyes shone at her from under the chair edge.

The door safely shut, she turned a steady look upon Perior's rough head, silhouetted in monotone on the pale landscape outside. She herself faced the light. She had walked, and her face showed an exquisite freshness, an imperative youth and energy. In the austere room the sudden rose and white of cheeks and lips and brow, the lustre of her eyes, the pale gold of her hair, dazzled.

Fixing Perior with this steady look, she said: "He has been here."

"Henge? yes," said Perior. Even in the shock of his dismayed confusion he felt with thankfulness a strong throb of an unswerving energy quite fit to match hers. He could look at her, dazzled, but not wavering, and, stooping from the successful encounter of eyes, he picked up the fallen papers, pushed them into shape, and laid them on the table coolly enough.

"You have heard what has happened, then?" Camelia was in nowise disconcerted by these superficialities.

"Yes."

"Did you tell him why I broke my engagement?"

Perior looked again, and very firmly, at the rose and white and gold.

"He gave me the reason you had given him. That was sufficient, wasn't it?"

"Sufficient for him, yes. I gave him only half the truth--I should not have minded, you know, had you given him the whole."

"I should have minded."

"You? Why should you mind? It was my fault--the whole truth could tell him nothing less than that," said Camelia quickly.

"I appreciate your generosity"--Perior laughed a little--"that really is generous." It really was. He put another mark against himself; but a perception of his own past injustice did not weaken him.

"You know why," she said, and her eyes were now solemn; "you know that I don't care about myself any longer--so long as you care. That is all that makes any difference--now. So you might have told him had you wished."

"I didn't want to," Perior leaned back against the writing-table, feeling a certain shrinking. Camelia's power took on new attributes. He could but recognize a baleful nobility in her self-immolation. After all, the falseness of yesterday had held a great sincerity--though the sincerity might only be a morbid folly. He had hardly the excuse of blindness. With a renewed pang of self-disgust he saw that his more subtle falseness to her was a weapon in her hand. She had not turned it against him. Perhaps she did not realize her need. He was glad, by lowering himself, to lift her.

She had come forward into the fuller light, and her face, more clearly revealed, showed the stress that Arthur had seen as a resolute woe. In a pause at a little distance from him, in the very tension of her face, Perior saw that she stooped to no weak appeal; it was an intelligent demand, rather, that he should recognize and do her justice.

"I know how angry you are with me," she said, after the slight pause in which they studied one another. "You believe that I have acted badly; and so I have. I see it too. I entrapped you, made you feel false to him, made you feel that you betrayed him. But if you *understood*. You have never really understood. You have taken the shell of me--the merely external silliness--so seriously."

Perior could wonder at his own firmness before her. He was filled with compunction for the pitiful certainty of success--once his stubborn disbelief were convinced--that spoke through her gravity. He loved her, and knew that he loved her, against his reason, against his will, against his heart even, yet heard himself saying, sure of the kindness of his cruelty--for any prolongation of her security was cruel--

"I hope never to take a merely external silliness seriously, Camelia. Let me think of this as one. You should not have come, it can only hurt you, and me. We had best not see each other again until you have outgrown, shall we say, your present shell?" Yes, he could rely on the decisive clear-sightedness that had made him speak the truth, once for all, to Arthur and to himself. He felt secure in his moral antagonism; the ascetic admonishment of his voice gratified even a sense of humor, quite at his own expense, which he perceived in the rigor of his righteousness. But Camelia made no retreat before that rigor, though the color left her face, as if he had struck her; her eyes betrayed no confusion, but a keenness, a steadiness, almost scornful.

"You think it *that*?" Perior was not sorry to tell her and himself what he did think.

"I think it just that. A phase of your varied existence; a curious experience to sound. You have set your heart on being in love with me--since that was an experience most amusingly improbable. I am another toy to grasp since the last disappointed."

"You are dull," said Camelia. She looked down, clasping her hands behind her. "You are not sincere. It pleases you to blind yourself with your preconceived idea of me. Your self-righteousness would not like to own itself mistaken in believing anything but the worst of me."

"Ah! hasn't it for years been struggling to see only the best of you!" cried Perior; "I don't deserve that, Camelia."

"You see the best now; why won't you believe in it?"

"I don't say I see the worst--by no means; even there is something that surprises me, that makes me confess, gladly, that I have misjudged you; but I can only believe that yesterday, in the impulsive reaction against your false position--you did not love Arthur--the fact frightened you; I am glad of that, too; but in the melting illusion you thought of me as something solid to cling to, and now you are determined to keep on clinging, deceiving yourself with an impossible mirage of fidelity, devotion, and self-forgetting, which you'll never reach, Camelia --never, never." Camelia contemplated him.

"Yes, you believed that, or something even less pathetic; that accounts for your cruelty--the cruelty of your last words yesterday--so false as I knew them; but I understood them, saw all you thought, though your wrath, your injury, your impatience to punish--how fond you are of punishing!--wouldn't let me explain. You did not believe that I loved you--*loved* you. You do not believe it now. You can't believe that I, who could have anybody, should choose you. It looks to you like an aberration. You are afraid of being hurt by believing, afraid I'll treat you as I treated him, afraid that you will be another toy--that was what cut yesterday. You were being played with--I saw you thought it. But I do love you; you will have to believe it. I do--choose you." Her head raised, she was looking at him with the clear command of this inflexible choice. The sublimity of confidence was touching. Perior, grimly conscious of its illusory foothold over chasms, could afford a certain chivalry, could at least restrain the brutality of a push into the void. He didn't like the idea of Camelia, his smiling Camelia, really scared, tumbling from her pinnacles into the abyss where rocky facts awaited her.

"I am sensible to the compliment"--the mild irony of his tone was a warning of insecurity--"though you will own that it is, in some senses, a dubious one; but it's very kind in you, who could have anybody, to stoop to a nobody. My obscurity is gilded by the preference; it will console, illuminate my solitude." She flushed, interrupting him with a quick, sharp--

"I didn't intend that! You know it! You are cruel, yes, and mean; for only my sincerity gives you the power to wound me. You *are* a somebody; though the whole world were blind, I can see; that is why I love you. Do you believe me when I tell you that I love you?" Camelia did not come closer as she asked it, but her poised expectancy of look seemed to claim him. Perior folded his arms and stared at her. "I would rather not," he said.

"Why?"--her voice at last showed a tremor. "You debase me by your incredulity. If I do not love you--what did yesterday mean?--what does *this* mean? It is my only excuse."

"Excuse?"--in this nearing antagonism his voice flamed up at the sudden outlet--"Excuse? There was no excuse--for yesterday." Saved from the direct brutality of refusing her love, the memory of Arthur's betrayed trust rose hot within him. Arthur's sincerity shone in its noble unconsciousness of the falseness of friend and sweetheart, one falseness forced, one willing and frivolous; his grief was mocked by her indifference.

"Nothing can excuse that," he said. "What right had you to accept him? What right had you to keep me in ignorance? Why did you not break with him before turning to me? By Heaven, Camelia! even knowing you as I do I cannot understand how you did it! I could hardly look him in the face when he was here, the thought of it sickened me so."

"Yes, that was horrible," said Camelia.

"Horrible?" Perior repeated. Her judicial tone exasperated him. He walked away to the window repeating, "Horrible!" as though exclaiming at inadequacy.

"But have I not atoned?" Camelia asked.

"Atoned?" he stared round at her.

"I have set him free. I have owned myself unworthy. I did not know you cared for me when I accepted him, or, at least, I did not know I cared for you--so much."

Perior continued to look at her for a silent moment, contemplating the monstrousness, yet strangely intuitive truth of her amendment. He let it pass, feeling rather helpless before it.

"So that is the way you pave the way to penitence? You atone to the broken toys by walking over them? No, Camelia, no, nothing atones, either to him or to me, for that unspoken lie." He came back to her, feeling the need to face her for the solemn moment of the contest.

Camelia was speaking hurriedly at last, losing a little her sustaining calm--"And had I told you?--Had I said at once that I was engaged to him?--Would that have helped us?--Could you have said, then, that you loved me? You would have been too angry--for his sake--to say it, when I had told you that in one day I had accepted and meant to reject him"--the questions came eagerly.

He looked at her face, strong with its still unshaken certainty, white, delicate, insistent. Loving it and her, his eyes held hers intently, and he asked, "Did I say I loved you?"

A serene dignity rose to meet his look. "You did not *say* it, perhaps. You said you did *not* love me," she added, with a little smile.

"I was base--and I spoke basely. I said that I loved you enough to kiss you. You may scorn me for it."

"Ah!" she said quickly, "that was because you did not believe that I loved you! You are exonerated."

"Not even then. But if you do love me--choose me, as you say; if I do love you--which I have not said--and will not say, will not say even to exculpate my folly of last night--even then, Camelia! I would not marry a woman whom I despise."

"Despise?" she repeated. Her voice was a toneless echo of his. She weighed the word, and found it heavy, as he saw. Her eyes dwelt on his mutely, and there dawned slowly in them the terror of the eternal negative that rose between her and him.

"You are not good enough for me, Camelia," said Perior.

"Because of yesterday!" she gasped. "You can't forgive that!"

"Not only that, Camelia--I do not love you."

She stood silent, gazing. His heart bled for her. To tell the saving lie, he had faced a jibing self-scorn; yet he continued to face it inflexibly.

"I could not live with you. I think you would kill me. I said to poor Arthur this afternoon what I believe of you--that you are selfish, and false, and hard as a stone. I could not love a woman of whom I could think--of whom I had been forced to say--that."

Compunctions rained upon him--sharp arrows. Her mute, white face appealed--if only to the long devotion, the long tenderness of years.

The crucial moment was past, and the upwelling tenderness, devotion, called to him to hurry her away from it, and support her under his own most necessary cruelty.

His voice broke in a stammer as he said, taking her hands--"How can I tell you how I hate myself for saying this?--it is hideous--it is mean to say."

And Camelia said nothing, seemed merely to await, in a frozen stupor, another blow. He could not see in her now the lying jilt of yesterday.

"Don't think of me again as I've been this afternoon. Forget it, won't you?" he urged; "I am going away to-morrow--and--you will get over it, be able to see me again--some day, as the good old friend who never wanted to be cruel--no, I swear it, Camelia. You must go now; you will let me order the trap? You will let me drive you home?"

She had drawn her hands away; in the dim room her eyes met his--bereft, astonished.

"You will let me drive you?" Perior repeated with some confusion.

"No, I will walk," she said, hardly audibly.

"The five miles back? It is too far--too late." He looked away from her, too much touched by those astonished eyes.

"No--I will walk." Then, as he stood still, rather at a loss--

"You are going to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Because of me?"

"Ah--that pleases you!" he said, with a smile a little forced.

"Pleases me!" The sharpness of her voice cut him, made him feel gross in his unkindness.

"It does not please me, but it is the best thing under the circumstances. Now, Camelia, you must go. I will walk with you. We won't speak of this at all--will pretend it never happened. You must forgive my folly of last night, and get over this touching folly of yours. Come, we won't talk of it any more," he repeated, drawing her hand through his arm, holding it with a clasp consolatory and entreating.

She did not follow him. "No! no!" she said, half-choked, drawing away the hand. Then, suddenly, with a great sob, turning to him, she flung herself upon his breast, clung to him, her hands clutching his shoulders--

"Oh! don't leave me! Don't leave me! I can't bear it!" she cried, shuddering. "I will be good! Oh, I *will* be good! Give me time, just wait--and see--" The words were half lost, as with hidden face she wept. "You are so cruel, so unjust--"

-give me time and see how I will please you--how you will love me. You must love me--you must--you must."

"Camelia! Camelia!" Perior was shocked, shaken as well. The deep note of his own voice warned him in its pity, and amazement, and distress, of the dangerous emotion that seized him. To yield again to an emotion, even though a higher one than last night's--to yield with those thoughts of hers--those spoken thoughts--never, never.

He tried to hold her off; her sobs made her helpless, but with arms outstretched--blindly, as he remembered to have seen a crying, stumbling child, she turned to him--it was too pitiful--as she might have turned to her mother. How repulse the broken creature? He could but take the outstretched hands, let her come to him again; she did not put her arms around him; there was no claim; only a clinging, her face hidden, as she sobbed, "Don't leave me! Don't! I love you! I adore you!"

"My poor child!"

"Yes, yes, your poor child! Be sorry for me, be kind--only a child. I did not mean to deserve that--torture, you--despising! I never *meant* anything--so wrong. Only a silly, a selfish, a frivolous child--won't you see it?--never caring for the toys I played with--never caring for anything but you, *really*. Can't you see it now, as I do? I have grown up, I have put away those things. Can't you forgive me?"

"Yes, yes. Great heavens! I am not such a prig, such a fool! I have always hoped----"

"That you could allow yourself to love me! Ah, say it! say it!" She looked up, lifting her face to his.

"To be fond of you, Camelia," said Perior. "I can't say more than that!"

"Because you won't believe in me! Can't believe in me! And I can't live without you to help me! Haven't you seen, all along, that you were the only one I cared about? Half my little naughtinesses were only to provoke you, to make you angry, to see that you cared enough to be angry. All the rest--the worldliness--the using of people--yes, yes, I own to it!--but no one was better than I! Why should I have been good when no one else is? When all are playing the same game, and most people only fit to play with? Why should I have been better than they?"

"I don't know, Camelia, but--my wife would have to be."

"She *will* be."

"Don't make me hurt you--don't be so cruel to yourself."

"She will be," Camelia repeated.

"I beg of you--I implore you, Camelia." He hardened his face to meet her look, searching, eager, pitiful.

"How could I say this unless I believed you loved me--had always loved me? Don't speak; don't say no; don't send me away. You are angry. You have the right to be; but, ah! if you only knew what I feel for you."

"Don't tell me, Camelia."

"But I must. I love everything about you--I always have. When you were near me I saw every gesture you made, heard every word you spoke, knew every thought you had about me. I love your little ways--I know them all; that wag of your foot when you are angry, the look of your teeth when you smile, your hands, your face, your dear rough hair----"

"

Perior had turned from red to white, and still looking at him, shaking her head a little, she finished very simply on a long sigh--

"I can't live without you. I *can't*."

"Camelia, I can't marry you," he said; and then, taking breath in the ensuing silence, "You are mistaken. I don't love you. I have your welfare at my heart; I wish you all happiness, all good. I am sorry, terribly sorry for you; but I do not love you. You must believe me. I do not love you. I will not marry you.--God forgive me for the lie," he said to himself; "but no, no, no, I *cannot* marry her, poor impulsive, wilful, half noble, half pitiful child, a thousand times no." The strong rebellion of his very soul steadied him. He could yield without a tremor to his pity, could take her hands and hold them in a clasp convincingly paternal and pitying.

Camelia closed her eyes, drawing in a long breath, too sharp in its accepted bitterness for the break of a sob. Her face, with this tragedy of still woe upon it, was almost unrecognizable. Until now it had been a face of triumph. Defeat--and that at last she recognized defeat he saw--changed its very lines; the iron entered her soul, and something left her face for ever. For a long time she did not speak, and her voice seemed dimmed, as though spoken from a great distance, when she said, her eyes still closed, "Then you never loved me!"

"Never," said Perior, who, encompassed by the saving lie, could freely breathe in the tonic atmosphere of his resolute pain.

"But--you are fond of me?" said Camelia; and as she spoke, from under the solemn pressure of her eyelids, pressed down as on a dead hope, great tears came slowly.

"Great Heaven! Fond of you? *Fond* of you? Yes--yes, my dear Camelia." He leaned forward and kissed her forehead above the closed eyes.

"Ah!" she murmured, "I was so sure you loved me!" More than its rigid misery, the humble bewilderment on her

face, as of a creature stricken helpless, and not comprehending its pain, hurt him, warned him that every moment made it more difficult to keep down the fluttering of a longing he would not, must never satisfy. He seemed to crush a harsh hand on its delicate wings as he said--

"And now you will go. You will let me walk home with you?"

She shook her head. "No, no."

She went towards the door, her hand still in his.

"You should not go alone. I beg of you, dear, to let me come."

"I would rather go alone."

They were in the hall, and she had not looked at him again. She put her hand out to the door and then she paused. Perior had also paused.

"Will you kiss me good-bye?" she said.

"Will I? O Camelia!" At that moment he felt himself to be more false than he had been during all the scene with her, for as he kissed her the fluttering wings beat upward with the exultant throb of a released desire. And she did not know. She believed him. All her hope was stricken in the dust. And yet they clung together--lovers; he ashamed of his knowledge; she pathetic, tragic, in her chastened, her humiliated, trust and ignorance.

CHAPTER XIX

Mrs. Fox-Darriell was walking across the hall on her way to the staircase when Camelia entered. She had not seen Camelia since the morning's catastrophe, a catastrophe as yet unannounced, but plainly discernible in the departure of the Henges, in Lady Paton's retirement, Camelia's disappearance, and Mary's heavy silence. Mary herself hardly knew as yet, could only suspect, with a sickening droop of disappointment following a hope, unreasonable perhaps, but delicious while it so briefly lasted.

Mrs. Fox-Darriell plied her with profitless questions during tea-time; she only knew that Sir Arthur had ridden away, that Lady Henge had followed with the boxes, that Aunt Angelica was in her room, and that Camelia had gone out. Mrs. Fox-Darriell was not disposed to let Camelia off easily; and now, undeterred by the almost vacant stare her young hostess bent upon her, she rushed at her imperatively.

"You look quite half mad, Camelia! What is the matter? The Henges are gone, she as gloomy as a hearse. I have not seen your mother since breakfast. Has a thunderbolt struck the house? You accepted Arthur Henge yesterday, and to-day you give him his *conge*. Is it possible?"

Camelia's hand waved her aside. What did this chattering, rattling creature want of her? She belonged to a dim primeval age, the age of yesterday, before the cataclysm had changed everything.

"No; you are not going to get rid of me like that!" Mrs. Fox-Darriell followed her swiftly up the stairs. "That would be a little too bad, to leave me, all curiosity, frying in my own ignorance. Now, Camelia, let me have the whole truth of it. What has happened?" She confronted her in her room.

"Yes, I have broken my engagement."

"Why? great heavens, why?"

"I don't love him. Please go, Frances."

Mrs. Fox-Darriell crossed her arms and surveyed her friend in an exasperated silence.

"Was that so necessary?" she asked presently, while Camelia, sitting in a low chair half turned from her, unbuttoned her muddy boots and gaiters.

"Yes, it was. I wish you would go away."

"You know what every one will think--you know what *I* think!--that you accepted him to prove you could throw him over. You try him on to show that you can fit him, and then kick him away, precisely as you kick away that muddy boot. It is an unheard-of thing. It is distinctly nasty."

Camelia leaned back with closed eyes, hardly hearing, certainly not caring for the words, though their sound was an importunate jangling at her ears, wearisome, irritating.

"As for the egregious folly of it! well, my dear, you may have plans into which I am not initiated, but the day will come, I think, in which you will own that you have behaved like a horrid little fool." Mrs. Fox-Darriell moved towards the door, not caring to outstay her climax, yet urged to an addenda by the exasperating, almost slumbering indifference of Camelia's face. "I will go. You want to finish your cry. Have you been walking about the lanes crying? I am off to the Dormers to-morrow; I only stayed on here because of you; my occupation now is decidedly gone."

"Good-bye," said Camelia.

When she was alone she rose and bolted the door. Her ten miles had tired her physically, and she sank back into her chair, her stockinged feet stretched out, her muddy skirts clinging damply about her ankles.

Yes, let the whole truth surge over her, and find her unresisting.

He did not love her; had never loved her. He despised her. The remembrance of his scorn crept over her like a gnawing flame. The shame of last night's dancing, of his reluctant embrace, that she had courted, came upon her in an awful revelation; and the wilful, desperate passion of to-day, sure of the hidden treasure he withheld from her in punishment only--a child pounding at a locked door. And the room was empty; there had been no treasure. She had forced him to open to her the dreadful vacancy. His sad friendship, smarting still from its momentary debasement, had sheltered her from the keenest pang; it was as if he had held her hand as, together, they went into that vacant room; now, alone, the realization of her own abasement stunned her. But she loved him. It had not been for her love that he had scorned her, though misinterpreting it so cruelly. She had made it impossible that she should ever retrieve herself, or that he should ever see the truth; her falseness had blinded him to her only worth, yet even now the consciousness of that worth held her from utter loss of self-respect, the consciousness of the intrinsic nobility of her devotion, rejected alas! seen with darkest disfigurements, but standing upright and unashamed at the centre of her life. This great love was like an over-soul, a nobler self looking with sad eyes at the prostrate, the utterly confounded Camelia.

Then came throbs of loneliness and terror. He was going away! She sprang up under the knife-like thrust of the thought. Oh! if at least he had believed her! If at least he had seen tragedy, not a poor, silly farce, the only noble thing

in her life distorted to a wretched folly. Only outwardly had she been a child screaming for an unattainable toy. She walked up and down the room, her hands wrung together, until a quivering weakness of fatigue came over her, and she flung herself face downwards on the bed.

Sobs came with the despairing posture. Her whole body shook with them.

A tiny, timid knock at the door broke in on the miserable satisfaction of woe expressed.

Camelia held back her weeping and listened silently.

"Camelia," said her mother's voice, a voice tremulous with tears, "may I not see you, my darling?"

In her agonizing self-absorption Camelia heard the words with a resentment made fierce by sympathy crushed down.

"No," she said, steadying her voice, for her mother must not think her weeping in regret over her act of repudiation, "you can't."

"Please, my child"--Lady Paton evidently began to sob, and Camelia, wrapping herself in a sense of necessary and therefore justified brutality, again buried her head in the pillow. Yes, she was a brute, of course, but--how silly of her mother to stand there crying! How tactless, at least; for Camelia at once hated herself for the other word. What did she expect? She seemed nearly as remote as Frances--not quite, for she could see Frances and repulse her with complete indifference, and she could not meet her mother indifferently. There would be the pain, the irritation of feigning.

"Don't be cruel, dear." The words reached her dimly through the pillow. Cruel! Camelia smiled bitterly. *She* did not know. The apparent cause for grief was slight indeed; the real one was locked forever in her heart, so let them think her cruel.

The hopeless little click of the door-knob showed that her mother's hand had been appealingly laid upon it. Her slow footstep passed along the hall. Camelia lay in her damp, hot pillow, her eyes closed. "Yes I am a brute," she said to herself; and then, thinking of Perior, her tears flowed again.

CHAPTER XX

MRS. JEDSLEY'S visit of curiosity and condolence was of a surprisingly consolatory nature. As an old friend, Mrs. Jedsley permitted herself the curiosity; but even from an old friend Lady Paton had not expected a true-ringing generosity of judgment.

"I came, my dear--yes, because I wanted to know. My ears are buzzing with the talk of it--true or false, who can tell? Not even you, I fancy; but I have my own opinion," said Mrs. Jedsley. "I understand Camelia pretty well; but vulgarly, schemingly cruel--rubbish! rubbish!--so I say!"

That the saying had been at all necessary made poor Lady Paton more white, yet Mrs. Jedsley's denunciation was so sincere that she took her hands, saying, "How can they! It was a mistake. She found she did not love him. *He* understands." Sir Arthur's parting words had haloed her daughter for her during these difficult days.

"Yes, yes, he is a very fine fellow, and idealizes her tremendously," said Mrs. Jedsley, with strict justice. "It was, of course, a great shame for her not to have made up her mind long ago--a great shame to have accepted him"--Mrs. Jedsley shore off Camelia's beams relentlessly--"and a great pity, my dear, that the engagement should have been announced, since a few hours of silence might have shifted the matter, and no one the wiser. But of course we were all as ready as dry kindling for the match--it spread like wildfire--a fine crackling! and then, in a day, a fine cackling! Lady Haversham came running down to me post-haste to say it was off--to wonder, to exult. Of course she is an adherent of the Duchess's, and Lady Elizabeth has her chance again. But yes, yes, I know the child--a vain child, a selfish child; ah! it pains you; one must face that truth to see beyond it--to others; but not vulgarly cruel. She would not play with the man for months to give herself the feline fun of crunching him at the end of it all. She was playing with herself rather, only half in earnest. The engagement brought her to her senses--held her still; she couldn't dance, so she thought. Indeed, it's the first time I've respected Camelia. I do respect a person who has the courage to retrieve a false step. It is quite a good enough match to turn a girl into a schemer. At least she has proved she's not that."

"No! no! My daughter!"

"Quite true; your daughter; that does count, after all. No, she can't be accused of husband-hunting." Mrs. Jedsley laughed dryly. "Now, the question of course remains, who *is* she in love with?" and she fixed on her friend a gaze so keenly interrogative that it certainly suggested tinder ready to flash alight of itself. "Not our Parliamentary big-wig, Mr. Rodrigg? Oh no!"

"No, indeed." Lady Paton's head-shake might have damped the most arduous conjecture. "He went away, you know--very angrily, it seems, and most discourteously, for I did not even see him. He behaved very badly, Michael told me. Michael himself is gone; you knew that too? He just stopped to see me on his way to the station."

"Mr. Perior--yes." Mrs. Jedsley looked ruminative; even to her quickly jumping mind that long leap of inference did not suggest itself except in one connection.

Poor Mr. Perior! Had Camelia been giving the mitten right and left? Buffeting back into hopelessness each suitor who advanced, encouraged by another's failure? Had Mr. Perior really been foolish enough to run his head into that trap?

"Now that the comedy is over, the chief confidant packs up--he quite filled that role, didn't he?" she said. "And our fine jingling lady, Mrs. Fox-Darriel? Has she, too, folded her tents and stolen away?--not silently, I'll be bound. She had staked something on the match."

"She is gone. She spoke unkindly to me of Camelia. I do not like her. I could say nothing, it was so----"

"So neatly done. She implied, merely; you would have accepted inferences by recognizing them. I can hear her!"

"She felt for me. Camelia had gone too far--it didn't look well; a girl must not overstep certain limits; one could make too much of a reputation for audacity; Camelia's charm had been to be audacious, without seeming so. And the sad affair of Mr. Rodrigg--Camelia should not have stooped, and to no purpose; people turned on one so horribly. Poor Sir Arthur would lose his bill as well as his sweetheart, now that Camelia had meddled so disastrously. Oh! she was most unkind." Lady Paton evidently remembered the unkindness--her voice was a curious echo.

Mrs. Jedsley ruminated energetically all the way back to the village, as, her skirts raised in either hand, she marched with heavy-booted splashes through the mud. Near the village she overtook Mary, bending as she walked, an umbrella uncomfortably wedged under one arm, several parcels encumbering her.

"My dear, why walk in this weather?" Mrs. Jedsley herself walked in all weathers, but for Mary, with a pleasant equine background, the necessity was not obvious; she joined her with the ejaculation.

"Oh! I like walking, Mrs. Jedsley," said Mary. "Aunt Angelica always tells me to have the pony-cart, but it seems hardly worth while for this little distance."

"A good mile. Where are you bound for?"

"I want to see Mrs. Brown; Kitty was rather troublesome in Sunday-school last Sunday."

"And how nicely you manage that class. It is a credit to you. Camelia now laughs at it." Mary said nothing to this, and Mrs. Jedsley added, "Not that she has much heart for laughing at anything just now from what I hear. That is the very encouraging feature of the whole case. It is ridiculous to speak of her as setting feathers in her cap with a light heart. She really feels this sad affair."

"Yes," said Mary, looking ahead with a rather rigid settling of her features.

"One might perhaps say affairs," Mrs. Jedsley added, for she could not keep those restless conjectures to herself; out they galloped. "It has been a general *debacle*. Mr. Rodrigg gone in a fury--breathing flame; Sir Arthur flung from his triumph--and, poor Mr. Perior. Now I really did not expect it of Mr. Perior; I thought he knew her so well--yet, for eyes that can see it's very evident, isn't it?"

Mary looked down, making no reply.

"Evidently she has a charm the most metallic male heart can't withstand; a case of molten iron with Mr. Perior--in that condition I can imagine him irresistible to some women. But such a reasonable man; well-seasoned, and her friend for years. Oh! it's a great pity that he let her melt him; no one knows now what shape his despair will cool to?"

Mary, her head bent persistently downward, stared at the muddy road.

"That she was very fond of him there is no denying," Mrs. Jedsley pursued, "but I should have seen that as the most hopeless part of the matter. A girl like Camelia doesn't marry the middle-aged mentor of her youth. But fond of him she is. I have watched her. Her eyes were always sliding round to him. He made a standard to her; she might jibe at it, but she liked to see it standing there--and to hang a wreath on it now and then. Upon my word, Mary!" and Mrs. Jedsley, stopping short in a mud-puddle, turned triumphant eyes on Mary's impassive face, "I shouldn't be surprised if *that* were the real matter with her. She is really fond of him; his tumble hurts her more than the other's. She misses her sign-post pointing steadily at friendship. She is sorry to lose her friend."

Mary after a little pause said, "Yes."

"Yes! You think so too!" cried Mrs. Jedsley delightedly. "You have opportunities, of course----"

"Oh no! No, indeed, Mrs. Jedsley--I only think, only imagine----"

"You have thought and imagined what I have. And that we are right I don't doubt. The double catastrophe accounts very fully for her low spirits--and I really respect her for them, though that the catastrophe should have occurred makes it only just that she should suffer. But Mr. Perior was foolish. Ah yes! in her defence I must say that!"

Mary was saying nothing, standing mutely at the parting of the roads until her companion should have done. She was well prepared for Mrs. Jedsley's unconscious darts.

Mrs. Fox-Darriel's parting look and parting words still rankled in her heavy heart; the look, one of pity; the words: "She has refused the other too! And him she would have liked to keep dangling! She enjoys an interminable sense of drama when he is by; her life is bereft without it. But the man was mad to think that she would take him," and the look had added that the man was a fool not to see and be contented with the minor fact Mary would have been so willing to supply. Mary had felt withered; her nerves scorched to apathy, since that look.

"You must come in and have tea with me, my dear," said Mrs. Jedsley, "it will put strength into you for your talk with Mrs. Brown. Come and have a cup with me--and you know my hot scones; we will talk this over. Your aunt doesn't suspect it, poor dear!"

"No, Mrs. Jedsley, thanks--I can't come, and no, aunt does not know--must not know; it would make her feel very unhappy! she is so fond of Mr. Perior; she doesn't suspect it," Mary spoke with sudden insistence--"and then, it may be pure imagination on my part," she added, flushing before Mrs. Jedsley's smiling and complacent head-shake. "It would be unfair to *them*--would it not?--to Camelia I mean--and----"

"And Mr. Perior; quite true, my dear. We must be as quiet as mice about it. Unfair, as you say. We must not hang out his heart for the daws to peck at. Poor man! You won't come in to tea?"

"Thanks, no. I must be home early." Mary hurried away. She bit her lips hard, staring before her at the wet browns and grays of the lane, dingy, drab, like her life; narrow, dull, chill with on-coming winter, and leading--the lane led to the churchyard. Mary's thoughts followed it to that destination, and suddenly the hot tears rolled down her cheeks, and hard sobs shook her as she walked.

CHAPTER XXI

THESE days were very lonely for Lady Paton. The house was empty, and one could not call companionship Camelia's mute, white presence.

Camelia read all day in the library, where only Siegfried was made welcome, or rode for hours about the wintry country. To all timid questions, as to future plans, she only answered by a coldly decisive, "I don't know." When her mother put her arms around her, Camelia stood impassive in their circling love, locked in her own frozen mood of despairing humiliation.

One day when in her room she had broken down her outward endurance by an impulsive cry of woe, and stood sobbing, her face in her hands, her mother came in, made courageous by pity.

"My dearest child, tell me--what is it? You are breaking your heart and mine. Do you love him? Tell me, darling. Is it some hidden scruple? some fancy? Let me send for him," poor Lady Paton's thoughts dwelt longingly on amorous remedies.

"Love him? Sir Arthur? Are you mad, mother?" Camelia lifted a stern face. "He doesn't enter my mind. He is nothing to me--simply nothing."

"But, Camelia--you are miserable----"

"Ah! I have a right to that dreary liberty."

"And--Oh don't be angry, dearest--is there no one else?"

"No one else?" Camelia repeated it angrily indeed;--that her mother should give this stupid wrench to her heart was intolerable. "Of course there is no one else! How can you be so tiresome, mother. There--don't cry. I am simply sick of everything--myself included, that is all that is the matter with me. Please don't cry!" for sympathetic tears were coming into her own eyes, and above all things, she dreaded a breaking down of reserves, a weakened dignity that might bring her to a sobbing, maudlin confession, that would burn her afterwards, and follow her everywhere in the larger pity of her mother's eyes.

Lady Paton, her handkerchief at her lips, pressed back her grief, saying in a broken entreaty, "But, Camelia--why? How long will it last? You were always such a happy creature."

"How can I tell?" Camelia gave a little laugh that carried her over the vanquished sob to a certain calmness; leaning back against the mantelpiece she added, smiling drearily, "Don't worry, mother; don't *you* be miserable."

Lady Paton looked at her with eyes in which Camelia felt the unconscious dignity of an inarticulate reproof.

"Oh, my child!" she said, "my child! Am I not your mother? Is not your happiness my only happiness?--your sorrow my last and greatest sorrow? You forget me, dear, in your own grief. You shut me out--because you don't love me--as I love you;--it is that that hurts the most."

Camelia stood looking at her. Her artistic sensibility was decidedly impressed by this unexpected revelation of character. How well her mother's white hair and cap looked on the pale greens of the room; the exquisite face, and the more exquisite soul looking from it. How well she had spoken; how truly too. Yes, her own worthlessness clung to her; she, so far inferior in moral worth, made this sweet, fragile creature unhappy; she was everything to her mother, the light that shone through and sustained the white petals of her flower-like being; and her mother was to her only a pretty detail. Camelia analyzed it all very completely, and resting on an achieved self-disgust she said, gravely contemplating her, "It is a great shame, mother. That is the way of this wretched world. The good people are always making beauty for the bad ones. You shouldn't let that lovely, but most irrational maternal instinct dominate you; see me as I am, a horrid creature." She paused, and all thoughts of artistic effects, all poetical and scientific appreciations, were blotted out in a flame-like leap of memory--"false, selfish, hard as a stone," she said.

"Don't say it, dear--you could not say it if it were so."

"Oh, yes!--one can, if one has a devilish clearness of perception about everything. I am horrid--and I know that I am horrid. And you are very lovely. There." And kissing her, Camelia pushed her gently to the door.

Perhaps, however, more than artistic sensibilities had been touched. Camelia shrank as quickly as before from any demonstration that seemed to look too closely at her heart, but she herself would make advances. She was only gentle, now, towards her mother; she never failed to kiss or caress her when they met. A cheerful coldness seemed at once her surest refuge and most becoming medium for an affection that could allow itself no warmer and more dangerous avowals. It was a colorless, still affection, held, as it were, from development, only felt by Lady Paton as a more careful kindness, and by Camelia as a new necessity for incurring no further self-reproach.

Poor Lady Paton, devouring her heart in sorrowful conjecture and helpless sympathy, had no thought but of her child; but by her side, Mary, the silent witness of her grief and anxiety, might have claimed, from disengaged eyes, a foreboding attention. Since the day of her stolen ride Mary had effaced herself in a shadowy taciturnity. She watched

Camelia, and avoided her. Her absorption in every household duty became minutely forced. She slipped early to bed after a day of self-imposed labor. Work and its ensuing weariness, were the only sedatives for intolerable pain; she deadened herself with the drug. The weather was bad, and Lady Paton too depressed to rouse herself to her usual benignant activity. Mary took upon herself her Aunt's abandoned occupations. She went every day to read to the paralyzed girl at the Manor Farm. She made the weekly round of visits through the wet village streets; consulted with the well-worked rector; kept an eye upon the school and almshouses. Mary was not particularly popular in the village. Her kindness was rather flat and flavorless; Jane Hicks at the farm complained to her mother that Miss Fairleigh's reading was "so dull like; one didn't seem to get anything from it."

Jane never forgot the one visit Miss Paton made her, nor how Camelia had sat beside her and kept her laughing the whole hour. Camelia, seeing the effect she made, had promised to return some day, but events had interfered, she now was in no mood for laughing, and Jane was always eager to question Mary about Camelia's doings, and to sigh with the pleasant reminiscence of her "pretty ways." Mary's virtues were all peculiarly unremunerative, they sought, and obtained, no reward.

Towards the beginning of December Camelia's despair threw itself into action. The rankling sense of Perior's scorn at first stupefied, and at last roused her. Before him she had felt her powerlessness. His rocky negative had broken her. He would not change--not a thought of his changing stirred her deep hopelessness; but she herself might change--merit at least a friendship unflawed--cast off crueller accusations.

She must be good, she must struggle from the shell; she must realize, however feebly, his ideal. He would never love her--that delusion of her vanity he had killed forever; but he might be fond of her without a compunction.

Towards this comparatively humble attainment Camelia strove. How to be good was the question. Of course she would never tell lies any more--unless necessary lies of self-defence, in protection of her dear, her dreadful secret--Camelia could address it by both names; the love that sustained and must lift her life, even he should never see again. After all, it was easy enough to tell the truth when one cared no more for any of the things gained by falseness. That was hardly a step upward. Some other mode of development must be found; Camelia pondered this necessity, and one day during a walk past Perior's model cottages the thought came. She, too, would build cottages, beautiful cottages, more beautiful than his! She almost laughed at the delicious, teasing, old friendliness of that addenda.

The Patons' estate boasted only very commonplace residences for its laborers, and delightful visions of co-operative farming, of idealized laboring conditions flashed joyously through Camelia's mind. Vast fields of study opened alluringly, and, immediately in the foreground, these idyllic cottages. They bloomed with trellised flowers on the gray December landscape as she walked. The wall-papers were chosen by the time she reached home. She burst upon her mother in the firelit drawing-room at tea-time with an enthusiasm that made Lady Paton's heart jump.

"Mother! Such an idea! I am going to build."

Mary, who was toasting a muffin to hotter crispness before the fire, turned a thin, flushed face at the announcement.

"Build what, dear?" asked Lady Paton; while Mary, certain in one moment of what Camelia was going to build, and why, silently put the ameliorated muffin on the little plate by her aunt's side.

"Cottages. Model cottages. Beautiful cottages--really beautiful, you know--Elizabethan; beams, white plaster, latticed windows, deep window-seats, and the latest modernity in drains and bath-tubs."

"Like Michael's, you mean," said Lady Paton, a little bewildered; "his are not Elizabethan, but the drains and bath-tubs are very good, I believe."

Camelia's face changed when her mother spoke of "Michael;" and Mary, watching as usual, compressed her lips tightly. The cottages were to be built for him--with him! Ah! he would come back. Camelia would keep him--for building cottages, for adoring her; while she, Mary, would be thrust further and further away.

"Yes, like his, only better than his. My tenants shall be the best housed of the county." Camelia threw herself into an easy-chair, and fixed her eyes thoughtfully upon the fire.

"It will be very expensive, dear."

"Never mind; we'll economize."

Camelia had not so looked or spoken for weeks, and Lady Paton smiled a happy acquiescence.

Camelia took the cup of tea her cousin offered her without looking away from the fire, where she saw the cottages charmingly pictured, and she and Perior looking at them--friends.

"Your boots are wet, dear, are they not?" asked Lady Paton; "it has been raining."

"They are wet, I think. Mary, just ring, will you? Grant must take them off down here. I am too tired, too comfortable, to go upstairs."

Camelia sighed as though the fundamental heaviness of her mood rose through the seeming light-heartedness of tone; sighed, and yet the relief of getting outside herself was filling her with an exhilarating energy.

As she drank her tea, ate a muffin, Mary browning it nicely for her--"How cosy to have tea by ourselves," said

Camelia, "and toast our own muffins!"--she talked as she had not talked for a long time. Her mind ran quickly, escaping its miserable thralldom, from point to point of the project.

She pushed aside the tea-things to make with spoons and saucers a plan of the new scheme.

"That high bit of land, you know, with the beech woods behind it; I'll have six of the cottages, with big gardens; and what a view from the front windows. I will furnish them, too. I must see an architect at once: I'll go up to town for that, and talk it over with Lady Tramley. Where is her last letter, I wonder? I remember her asking me for some date; but that doesn't matter. She wanted me to go out, and of course I won't." Camelia sprang up to rumple over the leaves of the blotter, the drawers of the writing-desk. "Where is the letter? In the library, I wonder?"

"There is a whole pile, dear, in the small cabinet. You did not care to look at them. I think they had better be gone over."

"No; here is hers. I don't care about the others. I don't want to hear anything about any one," Camelia added with some bitterness, as she dropped into her chair again and held out her foot to Grant, who had come in with the shoes. "Yes; she asks me for next week."

"If you won't go out, dear, it may be rather annoying for her."

"Oh! she can get out of things herself while I am with her," said Camelia easily, as her eyes skimmed over the letter.

The new impulse was too strong to be thwarted by the slightest delay. That evening Camelia sent off a bulky letter to Lady Tramley, much astonishing that good friend by her absolute ignoring of important facts in recent history. Sir Arthur was not so much as hinted at. The whole letter bristled with cottages, and Camelia's earnestness panted on every page.

"She is going in for philanthropy, I suppose," Lady Tramley conjectured, shaking her head with a patient smile over the small, flowing handwriting--Camelia hated untidy scrawls. "Let us help her. Camelia is sure to do something interesting in the way of cottages. She'll carry them through like a London season."

Lady Tramley, as may be gathered from these remarks, was one of Camelia's admirers, though not a blind or bigoted one. She shook her head on many occasions, but Camelia's defects were not serious matters to her gay philosophy, and Camelia's qualities in this frivolous world, where nothing should be peered at too closely, were attractively sparkling. As a successful hostess Lady Tramley prized the charming Miss Paton.

"Now mind," Camelia said on arriving at her friend's house, "I am not going to be shown to any one. I am in a monastic frame of mind, and must be kept unspotted from the world. No dances or dinners, if you please," and she fixed her with eyes really grave.

"Very well." Lady Tramley acquiesced as to a humorous and pretty whim. "My doors are closed while you are here--as on a retreat. But when will the season of penance be over? We are all expiating with you, remember."

"Do I imply penance? Is that the habit my retirement wears?"

"People give you credit for all sorts of niceties of feeling." Lady Tramley smiled her significant little smile, a smile not lavished on the nothings of intercourse, and Camelia, taking her by the shoulders, shook her softly.

"No; sly as you are you get nothing out of me, and give me credit for nothing, please, not even for curiosity as to what people *do* say of me."

"You know, dear, he is to meet, I fear, a second disaster as unmerited----"

Camelia had sat down to the tea-tray brought to refresh her after her journey. She looked up from the filling of her cup to meet in a glance the delicate directness of Lady Tramley's look.

"Jack knows the ropes, of course, and I thought you ought to know too--and be sorry." In her heart Lady Tramley hoped for an expansion of sorrow that would carry Camelia past her moment of inexplicable folly.

"I am sorry. The bill, you mean." Camelia folded a slice of bread and butter, adding "Idiots."

"Idiots indeed. It won't be carried, I am afraid. There is a split in the Government, and Mr. Rodrigg has developed a really spiteful acrimony. I always hated that man."

"Ah! I loathe him!" said Camelia. She thought with a pang of self-reproach of an unopened letter among the rejected pile--a letter for Mr. Rodrigg. She had not cared to read his shuffling excuses. His vanity, bulwarked by the strangely apt events succeeding his discomfiture, might well renew hope. He might imagine these events the result of remorse, and that, brought to a timely realization of her folly, his fair one would consent to bury the hatchet and allow his firm hand to tame her finally. All this Camelia had conjectured very rightly on looking at the fat envelope. She had restrained the direct rebuff of returning the unopened letter, but she had neither answered nor cared to read it, and could well imagine that Mr. Rodrigg's cumulative humiliation would urge him to his only possible vengeance. The "I loathe him" was spoken with a most feeling intensity of tone.

"Yes." Lady Tramley's affirmative was meaning, and Camelia looked up alertly. "Lady Henge told me."

"You know everything, I believe," cried Camelia. "Well, I am in good hands."

"I understand--your idea in it. But how unwise. How you mistook the man."

"Rather! Ass that I am!"

"You looked for superlative chivalry, if you come to think of it."

"No, for sincerity; common honesty. I thought I could convince him. I didn't want chivalry without conviction. What did Lady Henge say of me?" Camelia added bluntly.

Lady Tramley replied very frankly, "She said you were a shallow jilt. I quite agreed with her inwardly--though I shamelessly defended you."

"If I say that I agree with you both it will only savor of ostentatious humility--so I refrain. But, Lady Tramley, it was not the breaking of our engagement that was shallow--that I will say. And so the bill is doomed. Can we do nothing? Shear no Samson in the lobbies? Mr. Rodrigg, of course, offers no hirsute possibilities."

"Not a hair. Your Mr. Perior will be disappointed. He came back from the Continent, you know, and put his shoulder to the wheel."

Camelia stirred her tea evenly. Her nerves, as she felt with pride, were very reliable.

"*Our* Mr. Perior then, is he not?" she asked, while her thoughts flew past Sir Arthur to nestle pityingly to Perior. His useless valiancy embittered her against the world of unconvinced opponents. Idiots indeed! But she could not see him yet; even her nerves were not yet tempered to a meeting. She had no comfortable background against which to present herself; when she did, the background must be so unfamiliar that for neither of them could there be the confusion of a hinted memory.

"Ours, by all means," said Lady Tramley. "I only effaced myself before the paramount claim.--Not quite doomed. There is still the final fight, and it is to be heralded by a thunderous article in the *Friday*. Mr. Perior only goes down sword in hand."

CHAPTER XXII

SO he was in London. Camelia, sitting at home in the library, could think of the nearness with a new calm. She was preparing herself to meet its closer approach. She was not leaving herself defenceless. She plunged into her reading--architecture, agriculture, decoration, and sociology. The books came down from London in heavy boxes, and she sat encompassed by the encouraging perfume of freshly-cut leaves.

"Are you happy, dear?" her mother asked her. She would come in with her usual air of deprecatory gentleness, and bend over the absorbed golden head that did not turn at her entrance. On this day the absorption wore a look of eager interest that seemed to justify the question.

Camelia finished her sentence, smiling, however, as she put her hand on her mother's without looking up. Her mind, indeed, was soothed, comparatively comfortable.

"No rude questions, Mamma!"

"You understand all these solemn books?" Over her daughter's shoulder, where she leaned, Lady Paton looked respectfully at the heavy volume.

"I am beginning to understand that whatever one does in philanthropy is wrong from the point of view of some authority!" Camelia said, stretching herself on a long yawn, and then gently pinching her mother's chin, while the smile dwelt upon her appreciatively, "As usual I find that the only thing to do in this world is to do just as one likes."

"If one can," said Lady Paton, with a half sad playfulness.

"If one can;" the words woke in Camelia a painfully personal affirmative, and with the wave of self-pity that swept through her mingled a sense of her mother's unconscious pathos. Still holding her chin she looked up at her, "It has often been *can't* with you, hasn't it?"

Lady Paton's glance fluttered to a shy alarm and surprise at this application.

"With me, dear?"

"Yes--you have had to give up lots of things, haven't you? to put up with any amount of disagreeable inevitables."

"I have had many blessings."

"Oh! of course! You would say that over your last crust! But it has been *can't* with you, decidedly. I wonder if it was because you weren't strong enough to have your own way!"

"That would be a bad way, surely."

"Ah!--not yours!"

"And perhaps I have no way at all," Lady Paton added, and Camelia was obliged to laugh at the subtle simplicity.

"That is being too submissive. Yet--it is comfortable, no doubt. Absolute non-resistance isn't a bad idea. And yet, why shouldn't one make one's struggle?--survive if one is fittest? Why is not having one's own way as good as submitting to somebody else's? Oh dear!" she cried.

"What is it?"

"Nothing, nothing; I am unfittest, that is all!" Camelia stared out of the window.

"What do you mean, dear?"

"I mean that I can't have my own way--I, too, can't. And it wasn't a bad way either. There is the cruelty of it, the irony, the jeer! All the bad ways are given to me, and when I turn from them, don't want them, and try for the *best*--I don't get it! Isn't it intolerable?"

To Lady Paton this was wild, bewildering, pitiful, yet she grasped enough to say, "That would be the punishment, would it not, dear, for the bad ways?"

"Yes, the punishment. Like damnation. One has made one's self too ugly--the best can't recognize one at all."

That evening the last number of the *Friday Review* lay on the drawing-room table. Perior had not written in it for some time, but with the quiver of the heart any association with him now gave her, Camelia picked up the paper and carried it to the fireside. Mary, sewing in the lamp's soft circle of light, looked up quickly, and her hand paused with an outstretched thread as she saw Camelia's literary fare.

Camelia turned the pages in a half fretful search for what she felt sure of not finding; then, abruptly, the rustling leaves came to a standstill. There was the article, at last! a long one, on the Factory Bill. Impossible to question the concise, laconic style; no one else wrote with such absolute directness, such exquisite choice, free from all hint of phrasing.

Camelia's gray eyes kindled as she read, and her lips parted involuntarily; she drew quick, shallow little breaths. Oh! through it all went that fervor, that cold, bracing fervor she knew and loved.

Perior's strong feeling was at times like a clear, indignant wind, sweeping before it cowering littlenesses. Her mind half forgot him as she read, conscious as was her heart. For the first time the intrinsic right of the bill was borne in upon her. She had glibly dressed its merits, laughing at her own theatrical dexterity. She had never really cared for any bill. Now it became the greatest, the only bill in the world. Her ardor rushed past the unfortunate initiator, to fall at the propagator's feet. Ah! if she could but help now, and for his sake! Poor Sir Arthur!

Mary, who from her seat could just see, beyond the sharply held review, the lovely line of Camelia's cheek, the little ear, set in its delicate closeness against the shining hair, Mary, intent on the rising color in this bit of cheek, had quite stopped sewing. Her pale eyes widened in a devouring significance, her lips set tightly on repressed pain. Mary, too, had read the article.

Coming to the end of it, Camelia slanted the paper downwards, and vaguely, over the top of it, looked at the fire. Then suddenly her eyes met Mary's. A violent shock of self-consciousness shook her through and through. She felt herself snatch back her secret from a precipice edge of revelation--revelation to dull Mary, of all people. Mary, against whom, in regard to Perior, she had long felt--not knowing that she felt it--a strong, reasonless antagonism. She could not shake and slap her secret, as a frightened mother slaps and shakes her rescued child; but she could turn the terrified anger on its cause, and, in a strangely pitched voice, she said, "What are you staring at? You look like a spy!"

Mary gave a great start. If indeed she had been slapped outright her guilty amazement could not have been more cruel.

She stammered at a repetition of "staring"; but no words came. Her face was scarlet. Camelia was immediately sorry, but not one whit less angry, more so, perhaps, since pity is often an irritating ingredient; and, too, she felt that to any one less stupid her very outburst might have betrayed her. She was angry with herself as well as with Mary. Mary's very helplessness was repulsive, and she hated to see her light blue eyes set in that scarlet confusion.

"Yes, staring;" she helped the stammering. "Is there anything you want to find out? Do ask, then. Don't let your eyes skulk about in that sneaking fashion. It makes me quite sick to see you."

Mary stood up, looking from side to side in a half-dazed way that Camelia observed with a pitying disgust that indeed sickened her. It reminded her of the gestures of an ugly animal wounded by a stone flung by some cruel boy. The simile came in a flash that it did not at the moment give her time to complete it and see herself as stone-thrower. She felt relief, as well as an added dismay, when Mary broke suddenly into sobs, and stumbled out of the room, her sewing, caught in her skirt, following her with ungainly leaps. Only then Camelia realized that it was her own cruelty that sickened her; her irrational terror, breaking in upon a tender, thrilling absorption, had urged her to it, almost irresistibly; but now, the terror past, its foundationless folly apparent, she really felt quite sick as she still sat looking at the fire.

The *Friday Review* sliding suddenly from her knees gave her a nervous pang that tingled to her finger-tips, and when she stooped to pick it up Perior's personality seemed to confront her. She cowered before it. The hot blood beat in her head. Only by degrees, as her mind faltered over extenuations, did she quiet herself. Her hidden unhappiness--her love, it had been like a blundering hand thrust among her heart-strings; how could she have helped the sharp anger in which her naked anguish clothed itself? Lastly, but with a kind of shame, Mary's displeasing personality made a subtle condonation; her inarticulate stupidity was almost infuriating. Not for one moment did her secret suspect Mary's. Her own pain seemed already an expiation, and, in analyzing it, she could put Mary aside, promising herself that she would atone by a "Forgive me, Mary, I did not mean it," the next time they met. She would even add, "I was a devil." Her sigh of decision left her only half comforted.

CHAPTER XXIII

SHE did not see Mary again until the next morning, and then Camelia gave herself the satisfaction of fulfilling an uncompulsory duty. Mary's mask-like look of endurance met her apology with a dumb confusion that Camelia must assume as accepting it, since she could not imagine Mary as unforgiving.

Holding Mary's hand she repeated with some insistence, "I was devilish, indeed I was. I don't know what evil spirit entered me."

Mary was acute enough to see the apology as a mere poultice on Camelia's bruised conscience, but she did not divine the stir of real pity that had prompted it, nor the embarrassment that concealed itself, half ashamed, under Camelia's bright smile, a smile like the flourishing finality at the end of a conventional letter.

Mary only shrank more coweringly from the circling advance of pain. In her solitude Camelia's whip-like words and Camelia's smile blended to the same scorching; words, Mary thought, so true, that no apology, no smile, could efface them. That Camelia had felt them true was a nightmare suspicion; the instinct for the truth had at least been there, and, like the wounded animal, Mary quaked in her warren, conscious of insecurity. Camelia soon forgot both cruelty and apology.

The news of the defeat of the bill brought her no shock, when it came late in January. She had regretted keenly her own interference for a long time, and found herself prepared to meet the blow with the quiet of exhausted feeling. Camelia was not given in these days to finding excuses for her faults, but she could see that this one had been venial, and escape an unjust self-reproach. It was certainly irritating to have Mrs. Jedsley rub in the undeserved sting.

Coming from the library one afternoon Camelia found this lady ensconced before the drawing-room fire, her muddy boots outstretched to the blaze--Mrs. Jedsley's boots were chronically muddy--a muffin in one hand, a cup of tea in the other, her expression divided among the triple pleasure of warmth, tea, and interesting news.

"Well, my dear, you've all had your brushes cut off, it seems," was her consolatory greeting.

Camelia sank into a chair, languidly detesting Mrs. Jedsley's bad taste.

"You did so much for the cause, too, didn't you?" said Mrs. Jedsley, deterred by no delicate scruples. "Come, Camelia, confess that it has been a tumble for you all!"

"Too evident a tumble I think to require confession."

"And Mr. Rodrigg here for such a time! You are less clever than I thought you--don't be offended--I mean it in a complimentary sense. Then, after all, it isn't a brush you need mind losing. I never thought much of the bill myself."

Camelia sat coldly unresponsive, and Lady Paton tried to smile at Mrs. Jedsley's remarks and to believe them purely humorous.

"I am sorry for poor Michael," she said, "I fear he has taken it to heart." This unconscious opening was only too gratefully seized upon by Mrs. Jedsley, who, after a meaning glance at Mary, fixed, over her tea-cup, sharp eyes on Camelia.

"Ah!" she said, "he is a man cut out for misfortunes--they all fit him. He is bound to fail in everything he undertakes."

"I can't agree with you there," Camelia spoke acidly. "I think he succeeds at a great many things."

"Things he doesn't care about, then, you may be sure of that. Fortune follows such men like a stray dog they have no use for, while they are looking for their own lost pet."

Camelia drank her tea in silence, priding herself somewhat on her forbearance, pondering, too, on the pathos of Mrs. Jedsley's simile in which she could only see a purely personal applicability. It was not him the stray dog followed, but any number followed her--and it was she who had lost her all.

But would he not come back? Might she not see him again? To be with him--brave, self-controlled, and reticent, how well worth the fuller pain! Pain was so far preferable to these dragging mists where she waited. She might be--she must be--developing, but she must measure herself beside him to know just how much she had grown. It pleased her to see herself smiling sadly upon his unwitting kindness--for since he had thought it a folly he should think it now a folly outgrown. It pleased her to think that now exterior things mattered less to her than to him; he, for all his self-defence of calm, still winced under the whips of material circumstance; no doubt he was now tearing his heart out over the defeat of the bill, and trying to persuade himself that he had always expected it! She saw all material circumstance with Buddhistic indifference. This thought dwelt pleasantly while she drank her tea. Looking from the window she saw the winter afternoon not yet gray, and her contemplative mood impatient of the chiming sharp and mild which her mother and Mrs. Jedsley made, she left them to go out. First, though, she bent over her mother and kissed her. It gave her content to find tender demonstration becoming more and more an unforced habit.

"Nice, pretty little mamma," she whispered.

In her long coat, Siegfried trotting in front of her, Camelia breasted the tonic January wind. There was just a crispness of snow on the ground; in the lanes thin patches of ice made walking wary. She emerged from the shelter of the hedges on to the fine billowy stretch of common, where the wind sang, and the sunset in the west made a wide red bar. Siegfried's adventurous spirit soon warmed him to an energetic gallop through the dead fern and heather, and Camelia followed his lead, intending to cut across to the highroad, and by its long curve return home. It was in lifting her eyes to this road that she saw suddenly a distant figure walking along it at a quick pace that would bring them together at the very point she aimed for. It needed only the very first brush of a glance to tell her that it was Perior. For a moment joy and fear, courage and cowardice, pride and shame, struggled within her. Her step faltered, stopped even, and Siegfried stopping too, looked round at her, interrogation in the prick of his ears.

Camelia walked on slowly. Perior had seen and recognized her--that was evident. Whatever might be his own press of feeling he did not hesitate. He took off his cap and hailed her gaily, and Camelia felt that her answering hand-wave helped to prepare the way for a meeting most creditable to them both.

He did not fear the meeting, or would not show he did, for he advanced over the heather at a pace resolutely unembarrassed. In another moment they were face to face, and then she could see that his repressed a tremor, and was conscious that her own was, with the same attempt, a little rigid in its smile. Partly to recover from this shock of seeing her again, partly to give her time to recover from her own emotion, Perior raised her outstretched hand to his lips. He was so determined in his entrenched resistance to the lover he knew himself to be (the lover whose complaints had brought him rebelliously back again, his coming a sop angrily thrown at the uncontrollable gentleman on condition, that satisfied so far, he would keep still), so sure was Perior, the friend, of the bargain, that the kiss was most successfully friendly. It sealed delicately the bond he insisted on recognizing between himself and Camelia. His relief was great, in looking at her again, to see that she, too, fully recognized it, and that perhaps her courage was helped by the fact that the mood--the astonishing mood--had passed. It would much simplify matters if it had. He longed to be with her again, a longing her tacit acquiescence in the old friendship could alone justify him in satisfying. That his coming had not been indelicately ill-judged the directness of her eyes seemed to assure him; but however much the friend might rejoice in believing that he alone had anything to conceal, the repressed lover, most inconsistently, felt a pang. Perior only consented to recognize his own contentment with the safe footing upon which he found himself.

Camelia smiled at him, and he smiled at her, smiles that might have been children kissing and "making up"; frank, and bravely light.

"I thought you were in London," said Camelia. "No; come back, Siegfried, we are going no farther; for you were coming to us, I suppose, Alceste?" She could look at him quite directly. She was not ashamed, no, mercifully she was not ashamed, that was her jubilant thought. After the pang of the first moment she felt the strong conviction, borne in upon her by her own calmness, that her love for him could never shame her, nor her confession of it. The warm power of his friendship kept her from petty terrors. She felt, in a moment, that on her courage depended their future relationship. To ignore the past, to make him ignore it, would be to regain, to keep her friend.

"Yes, I was going to you--of course," said Perior, smiling, as they went towards the road together.

"I have been to Italy, you know, but I came back some time ago. I thought I might be of use."

"Ah! I should have liked to have been of use! but I had been too badly bitten to dare put out a finger!"

"I wouldn't put out fingers, if I were you; it isn't safe--when, they are so pretty." The intimacy was almost caressing; she leaned against it thankfully. Proud to show him that of the crying child there was not a trace, she determined on a swift glance at the past that would put him quite at ease.

"And you are coming back? Since this dreary business of the worsted right is over you won't exile yourself any longer--and rob us? All your friends will be glad to have you again!"

"Will they indeed?" his eyes sought hers for a moment, seemed to see in them the past's triumphant mausoleum, presented for inspection quite magnificently.

"Thanks, Camelia." The boldness delighted him, delighted all of him except that grumbling prisoner who, in his dungeon, felt foolishly aggrieved. "Yes, I am coming back--since I am welcome," he said, adding while they went along the road, "As for the worsted right, the right usually is worsted, in the first place. One must try to keep one's faith in eventual winning."

"Tell me," said Camelia, feeling foundations quite secure, since each had helped the other, "Mr. Rodrigg's opposition, that last speech of his--the satanic eloquence of it!--you don't think--ah! say you don't think me altogether responsible?"

"Would it please you--a little--to think you were?" The old rallying smile pained her.

"Ah, don't! That has been knocked out of me--really! Don't imply such a monstrous perversion of vanity."

"I retract. No, Camelia, I don't think you *altogether* responsible. The eloquence would always have been against us, its satanic quality was, I fear, your doing."

"Yet, I meant for the best--indeed I did. Say you believe that."

"Indeed, I do believe it, Camelia."

They were nearing home when he said, "You were in London--I heard from Lady Tramley."

"Yes, I went up on business."

"Did you? How are Lady Paton and Mary?"

"Very well. You don't ask about my business,"--Camelia smiled round at him.

"Very blunt in me. What was the business, Camelia?" His answering smile made amends.

Camelia placed herself against her background.

"I am building model cottages! You should see how economical we have become! *Your* glory is diminished!"

"With all my heart!" cried Perior, with a laugh of real surprise and pleasure. "Lady Tramley did not tell me. Good for you, Celimene!"

It was delightful to bring him into the drawing-room that she had left only an hour before. Camelia almost fancied herself perfectly happy as she flung open the door with the announcement--

"Here is Alceste, Mamma!" No nervousness was possible before her mother and Mary; it required no effort to act for them since she had so successfully performed her part to him. Mrs. Jedsley was gone, but Mary and Lady Paton sat before the fire, Mary reading aloud. She dropped the book; Camelia's voice, in her ears, sounded with a brazen clang of victory, and Perior seemed to her conquered, brought captive in an old bondage. She could hardly speak, hardly welcome him; his return crushed every hope of his liberation, the joy of seeing him was a mere desolation. With a settled dulness she listened to them--all three talking and exclaiming.

Perior had taken her hand, had shaken it warmly, looking at her with kindest eyes; but now he listened to Lady Paton, and Lady Paton, of course, after the first flood of rejoicing, condolences, and questionings, was talking of Camelia.

The resentment that had smouldered in Mary for many months seemed now to leap, and lick her heart with little flames of hatred. How she hated Camelia; she turned the black thought quite calmly in her mind--it was not unfamiliar.

Lady Paton was telling Perior about the cottages; she was rather proud of Camelia's beneficent schemes, though gently teasing her about some of their phases: "And, Michael, she is going to make them into veritable palaces of art. Specially designed furniture--and Japanese prints on the walls! Now they won't care about prints, will they?"

"They ought to, Camelia thinks," laughed Perior, looking at Camelia, who, hat and coat thrown aside, leaned forward in the lamplight, smiling and radiant, the pathos that her thinner face had gained emphasizing its enchanting loveliness.

Mary looked at her too, at the curves of the figure in the perfect black dress, at the narrow white hands, one lying on her knee, like a flower, with the almost exaggerated length and delicacy of the fingers; at the profile, the frank upraised eyes, the smiling mouth, the flashing white and gold that rose from the nun-like white and black of the dress, and the wide cambric collar falling about her shoulders and clasping her throat. Beautiful! Mary felt the beauty with a sort of sickening. Of course he looked at her, had no eyes but for her. Of course he had come back.

"They must like them," said Camelia, "I don't see why such people should not grow into good taste; and taste is often such a negative thing--a mere leaving out of all ugliness. I have a lot of these prints; I picked them up in Paris--the arcade of the Odion, Alceste--cheap things, but excellent in their way; then a few good photographs. The rooms are to be very bare. I should ask for all decoration a vase of flowers on the table--I think I shall offer prizes to my cottagers for the best arrangement of flowers."

"A very civilizing system!" Perior still laughed, for he found the prints and the flower-arrangements highly amusing, and he still looked at Camelia.

So that first meeting was over. It had passed so easily, with an inevitable ease, based on long years that would not be disowned. Yet when he had gone, Camelia was conscious of a sinking of the heart. The exhilarating moment could not last. Her friend had come back, fond, gently mocking, tender, yet unimpressed, blind to the change in herself she passionately clung to as consummated. As her love was noble, she thought that she had grown to match it. Her self-complacency, though on a higher plane, circled her more completely, and as the days went on, his blindness gave her a new sense of defeat. The ease remained, a tacit agreement to shut their eyes on a certain incident; it was done most successfully; they were quite prepared to meet *tete-a-tete*, and the inner wonder of each as to the other's unconsciousness betrayed itself only in a certain gentle formality that grew between them. That he should come--and so often--fulfilled the only hope left her, and yet her heart was darkened at moments by the thought that in these visits there was an effort. She missed something of the old intimacy; it was not quite the same--how could it be? that, after all, would have been too big a feat of forgetfulness. He did not laugh at her, nor grow angry and rage at her, as he had used to do, yet she could not feel that he approved of her the more. He was fond of her--that was evident, even though he might find this rebuilding difficult, and undertake it from a sense of duty; but the fondness was graver than before, at least, it made no pretence of hiding its gravity.

CHAPTER XXIV

MARY came for Camelia one morning while Perior was with her, to tell her that Jane Hicks was dying and asking for her. Mary saw that Camelia's promptitude, where compunction blushed, gratified Perior, as did Jane's devotion; she knew that he supposed the devotion based upon some new blossoming of thoughtful kindness in Camelia, and the ironic bitterness of this reflection was in no way made easier to Mary as she heard Camelia, while they all three walked to the farm, confess dejectedly to the one visit.

"I should have gone again!" Camelia repeated with sincerest self-reproach, and Mary could see that though he assented to the reproach her contrition lifted her in his estimation. Perior waited below while Camelia and Mary went up together. Camelia came down weeping; Mary's face was quite impassive.

The poor girl had died with her hand in Camelia's, her eyes fixed on the lovely Madonna head that bent over her with a beautiful piteousness, like a vision at the gates of heaven. Jane closed her eyes on that vision. She had not had one look for Mary, though her perfunctory thanks--the winding up of the trifling duties remaining to her on earth--had been feebly breathed out to her some hours before. Mary saw that she had been very unnecessary to Jane, and that the unknown Camelia, Camelia's one smile, the one golden hour Camelia's beauty had given her, made the brightness, the poetry, the symbolized radiance of things unseen and hoped for that had remained with the dying girl during the last months of her life. Mary was very still in walking back with the others. Camelia sobbed, and stumbled in the heavy road, so that Perior gave her his arm and held her, looking pityingly, more than pityingly, at the bent head and shaking shoulders. Mary felt her own lack of emotion to be unbecoming, but, indeed, she had none, was conscious instead of a dislike for poor, dead Jane.

For Mary was a most unhappy creature. Outside the inner circle, where Perior and Camelia wondered about, and evaded, one another, the very closeness of constant intercourse making blindness easy, Mary saw the truth, that Camelia did not see, very clearly. With her preconceived and half-mistaken ideas as to that truth, it remained one-sided. Perior loved Camelia; loved, and had weakly crawled back to her, craving at least the crumbs of friendship,--and that she was lavish with her crumbs who could deny?--since all else had been refused to him. Mary spent her days in a quivering contemplation of this fact. The bitter, sweet consolation of the whole truth never entered her mind. Camelia loving, and Camelia repulsed, was an imagining too monstrous for vaguest embodiment. Camelia's own naive vanity would not have surpassed in stupefaction Mary's sensations, had such a possibility been suggested to her. Camelia, who could have anybody, love Mr. Perior? She would have voiced her astonishment even more baldly. Not that Mary thought Mr. Perior nobody. To her he was everybody; but that knowledge was her painful joy, a perception lifting her above Camelia. Camelia judged by the world's gross standards, and, by those standards, she must stoop in loving Perior.

That Camelia should stoop in the world's eyes, that Camelia should do anything but soar, were unimaginable things. So her ignorance made her knowledge more bitter. The man she loved, adored,--her bleached, starved nature spreading every flower, stretching every tendril, her ideal and her rapture towards him,--that man did not see her, even. She was no one; a dusty little moth beating dying wings near the ground, and his eyes were fixed on the exquisite butterfly tilting its white loveliness in the sunshine. Under her stolid silence Mary was burning, panting. His misery, her doom, and Camelia's indifference,--at the thought of all these a madness of helpless rebellion swam about her; and with a growing sense of weakness came a growing terror of self-betrayal. For she was dying, that was Mary's second secret; there was even a savage pleasure in the thought of absolute and consummated wretchedness hidden so carefully. Hysterical sobs rose in her throat when she thought of it, and of their blindness. The sobs were nearly choking her one day as she sat alone in the morning-room casting up accounts.

Perior had been with Camelia in the library for two hours, and he had not come into the morning-room, though over two hours ago poor Mary had stationed herself there in the sorry hope of seeing him. The little touch of abandonment stabbed more deeply than ever on this morning, when her head was so heavy, her chest so hollow, breathing so difficult, all her sick self so in need of pitying gentleness and sympathy; and though no tears fell, that rising, strangling sob was in her throat. There was shame, too; her very rectitude was crumbling in her weakness and wretchedness; the wretchedness had seemed to exonerate her when, exasperated by envy and long waiting, she had gone to the library door and put her ear to the key-hole, like a base thing, to listen.

Since everything had abandoned her she might as well abandon herself, so she told herself recklessly; but she had only heard Camelia's clear, sweet voice; and Camelia was reading Greek! Mary could only feel the irony as cruel, and on regaining her place at the writing-table she found herself shaking, and overwhelmed with self-disgust and a sort of desperation.

When Perior came in very shortly afterwards she could almost have risen to meet him with a scream of reproach. The mere imagining of such a strange revelation made her dizzy as he approached her.

"I had not seen you. I am just off. How are you, Mary?" he asked. In spite of the mad imaginings Mary's mask was

on in one moment, the white, stolid mask, as she turned her face to him.

"Very well, thanks."

"You don't look very well."

"Oh, I am, thanks." Mary averted her eyes.

Perior's brow had an added look of gloom this morning. His eyes followed hers. The drizzling rain half blotted out the first faint purpling of the trees. "What a dreary day!" he ejaculated, with a long, involuntary sigh. He was not thinking of Mary; she saw that very plainly, though her eyes were fixed on the blurred tree-tops.

"Very dreary," she echoed. He looked down at her again, this time with a certain pain and interest that Mary did not see. On his own thoughts, the perplexing juggling of "If she still loves me as I love her, why resist?" the ensuing fear of yielding, and yielding for no better reason than that he could not resist, broke the thought of Mary. It could not be a very big thought. Mary was a quiet, uneventful little person, spending a contented existence under her aunt's wings, useful often as a whip wherewith to lash Camelia, but pitiful mainly from his sense of the contrast of which he really believed Mary quite unconscious. Something, now, in her still face, in the lax weariness of her thin hand, lying on the account book, roused in him a groping instinct. He looked at the hand with a certain surprise. Its thinness was remarkable.

"You do look badly, Mary," he said. "Tell me, are you dreary, too? Can I do anything for you? We must have some rides when it grows finer." His thoughts, as usual, gave Camelia an accusing blow.

"You are bored, tired, unhappy like the rest of us, Mary. Is that any consolation?" He smiled at her. She felt the smile in his voice, but did not dare to meet it, bending her head over the account books.

"Don't do those stupid sums!"

"Oh, I like them!" Indeed, the scrupulous duties were her one frail barrier against the black sea of engulfing thought. And then, her heart just rising in the false but delicious joy of his kind presence, came a call, a call not dreary like the day, but fatally sweet and clear, the sound of it as if a flower had suddenly flung open rosy petals on the grayness.

"Alceste, come here! I want you."

"Our imperious Camelia," said Perior with a slight laugh. "Well, good-bye, Mary. Don't do any more sums, and don't look at the rain. Get a nice, cheerful book and sit down at the fire. Amuse yourself, won't you?" He clasped her hand and was gone.

Mary sat quite still, moving her pen in slow curves, waves, meaningless figures over the paper. The arrested sob seemed frozen, and no tears came. She looked dully at the black zigzags on the paper while she listened to the distant sound of voices in the hall, Camelia's laugh, a lower tone from Perior, Camelia's cheerful good-bye.

A sudden fit of coughing seized her, and while she shook with it Camelia came in. Mary's coughing irritated Camelia, but she did not want to hurt her feelings by departing before it after getting the newspaper she had come for, so, walking to the table, she said, taking up and opening the *Times* with a large rustling--

"All alone, Mary?"

"Yes," Mary replied. The coughing left her, and she clenched her handkerchief in her hand. The madness rose again, lit by a keener sense of horror.

"But Mr. Perior came in, did he not?" Camelia scanned the columns, her back to the light.

"Yes," Mary repeated.

"Well, what did he have to say?" Camelia felt her tone to be satisfactorily detached. She wanted to know. That sense of something lacking, something even awkward, had become almost acute this morning; only her quiet gaiety had bridged it over. Mary was again looking out of the window. An inner impulsion made her say in a tone as dull as her look--

"He said he was dreary."

The *Times* rustled with a somewhat aggressive effect of absorption, and then Camelia laid it down. Something in Mary's voice angered her; it implied a sympathy from which she was to be shut out; he had not said to *her* that he was dreary. But she still kept her tone very light as she walked to the fire.

"Well, he is always that--is he not?" she commented, holding out a foot to the blaze; "a very glum person indeed is my good Alceste."

Mary did not reply, and Camelia, with a quick turn of conjecture that seemed to cut her, wondered if there had been further confidences. She paused for a moment, swallowed on a rising tremor of apprehension, before saying, as she turned her back to the fire and faced the figure at the table--the figure's heavy uncouthness of attitude making her a little angrier--"What further moans did my melancholy friend pour into your sympathetic bosom, Mary?" Mary, looking steadily out of the window, felt the flame rising.

"He said that he was bored, tired, unhappy."

After a morning spent with *her!* Camelia clasped her hands behind her back, and tried to still her quick breathing. She eyed Mary, but she did not think much of Mary.

"Really!" she said.

"Yes. Really." Suddenly Mary rose from her chair; she clutched the chair-back. "Oh, you cruel creature! you bad creature!" she cried hoarsely.

Camelia stared, open-mouthed.

"Oh, you bad creature," Mary repeated. Camelia never forgot the look of her--the ghastly white, stricken out of sharp shadows, the splash of garish color on either cheek, the pale intensity of her eyes. She noticed, too, the sharp prominence of Mary's knuckles as she clutched the chair-back, and in her amazement stirred a certain, quite different discomfort. She could find no words, and stared speechlessly at the apparition.

"You are cruel to every one," said Mary. "You don't care about any one. You don't care about your mother--or about *him*, though you like to have him there--loving you; you don't care about me--you never did--nor thought of me. Well, listen, Camelia. I am dying; in a month I will be dead; and *I* love him. There! Now do you see what you have done?"

A fierce joy filled her as she spoke the words out. To tear the bleeding tragedy from its hiding-place, and make Camelia shudder, scream at it--it brought relief, lightness; she breathed deeply, with a sense of bodily dissolution; and Camelia's look was better than screams or shudders. Let the truths go like knives to the heart that deserved them. As she spoke Mary felt her wrongs gather around her like an army. She had no fear. She straightened herself to send to her cousin a solemn look of power.

"You did not know I was dying; of course you would not know it--for you think of nothing but yourself. There, do you see that handkerchief? I have been coughing blood for a long time. Nothing can be done for me. You know how my father died. And when I am dead, Camelia, you may say to yourself, 'I helped to make the last year of her life black and terrible--quite hideous and awful.' Yes; say it. Perhaps it will make you feel a little badly." With the words all the anguish of those baffled, suffering months came upon her. The sobs rose, panting; the tears gushed forth. Staggering, she came round the chair and dropped into it, and her sobs filled the silence.

Camelia stood rooted in terror. She expected to see the sudden horror fulfil itself, to see Mary die before her eyes, Mary's curse upon her, and all her misdeeds one vague, menacing blackness. To clutch at any doubt was impossible. From the first moment of her uprising Mary's body had been like a shattered casket from which streamed a relentless light. Camelia's eyes were unsealed; she saw that the casket was shattered--the light convicted her.

"What have I done?" she gasped. "Tell me, Mary, what is it?"

She found a difficulty in speaking. She did not dare approach her cousin.

"I will tell you what you have done," said Mary, raising her head, and again Camelia felt the hoarse intentness of her voice, like a steady aiming of daggers. "You have taken from me the one thing--the only thing--I had. I love him! He is nothing to you; and you took him from me."

"Oh, Mary! Took him from you!"

"Yes, yes; you did not know. He did not know. *I* saw it all. He might have loved me had you not come back. He must have loved me, when I loved him so much! oh, so much!" and, sobbing again, she pressed to her eyes the blood-stained handkerchief, careless now of its revelations.

"Oh, Mary!" cried Camelia, shuddering.

"I was so happy last winter. He would come and read, and ride. He was so kind. Auntie, and he, and I--it was the happiest time of my life. But you came, and he never looked at me again! Oh, how horrible! how unjust! Why should you have everything?--I nothing! nothing! I suppose you thought me contented, since I was ugly, and poor, and stupid. And you, because you are beautiful, and rich, and clever, you have everything! That is all that counts! I am not selfish and cruel; at least, I used not to be. I have thought about other people always! I have tried to do right, and what have I got for it? My life has been a cheat! and I hate it! And I am glad to die, because I see that you, who are bad, get all the love, and that I will never have anything! And I see that I am bad--that I have been made bad through having had nothing!"

"Oh, Mary! forgive me! oh, forgive me!" Camelia found her knees failing beneath her. She stretched her clasped hands towards her cousin.

"I did not know; indeed, I did not! Indeed, I love you, Mary!--oh, I do love you! We all love you!" She felt herself struggling, with weak, desperate hands, against Mary's awful fate and her own guilt. "How can you say that, when we all love you? know how good you are!--how sweet and good--love you for it!" She buried her face in her hands, sobbing. Mary, who herself no longer sobbed, observed her.

"Oh, you are a little sorry now," she said, in a voice of cold impassiveness that froze Camelia's sobs to instant silence. "I make you uncomfortable--a little more uncomfortable than when I cough. It is strange that when I never did you any harm--always tried to please you--you should have found pleasure in hurting me. Do you remember all the

little jeers at me before him? You mocked my dulness, my ugliness. He did not laugh. It made him sad, because he did not like to see you unbeautiful in anything; but he must have seen me more stupid, more ugly than before. And when he was with me for one moment you would take him away. And you lied to keep him to yourself, like that day we were to have ridden together; and if you had known that I loved him you would have been all the more anxious to have him--to hurt me."

"No, no, Mary!" Camelia's helpless sobs burst out again.

"Yes; why can I speak to you like this? because I am dying, you see that I am dying--that gives me my only advantage; I can tell you what I think of you, and you don't dare reply. You would not dare say to me now that I am a spy--that I have sneaking eyes. I hate you, Camelia! I hate you! Oh! oh!" She rose to her feet suddenly, and at the change of tone--the wail--Camelia uncovered her eyes.

"I am going to die! I am going to die! And I love him, and he does not care." Mary groped blindly to a sofa, fell upon it, buried her head in the cushions.

Camelia rose to her feet, for she had been kneeling, and stood listening to the dreadful sobs.

Her life had never known a comparable terror. The blackness of Mary's point of view encompassed her. She felt like a murderer in the night. She crept towards the sofa. "Oh, forgive me, say a word to me."

"Leave me; go away. I hate you."

"Won't you forgive me?" The tears streamed down Camelia's cheeks.

"Go away. I hate you," Mary repeated. There was a compulsion in the voice Camelia could not disobey. Trembling and weeping she went out of the room.

Mary lay there sobbing. She had never so realized to the full the extent and depth of her woe, yet there was relief in the realization, relief in the flinging off of secrecy and shame. That Camelia should suffer, however slightly, restored a little the balance of justice, satisfied a little the outraged sense of solitary suffering, atoned a very little for fate's shameful unfairness. To poor Mary, sobbing over her one triumph, the morality of the universe seemed a little vindicated now that she had taken into her own hand the long-delayed lash of vengeance.

Her weakened religious formalities and conventionalities withered under this devouring, pagan flame. It was good to hate, and to revenge one's self, good to see the smooth and smiling favorite of the cruel gods, weeping and helpless. She was tired of rightness--tired of swallowing her tears.

The best thing in her life had been turned against her; everything was at war with her. Well, she would crouch no longer, she would die fighting, giving blow for blow. She threw her hands up wildly in thinking of it all--beat them down into the cushions. To have had nothing, nothing, and Camelia to have everything! Oh, monstrous iniquity! Camelia, who had done no good, happy; she, who had done no wrong, unutterably miserable.

For a long time she lay sobbing, still beating her hands into the cushion, a mechanical symbolizing of her rebellion and wretchedness. So lying, all the blackness of the past and future surging over her, engulfing her, she heard outside the sound of a horse's hoofs on the wet gravel. A moment afterwards running footsteps came down the stairs and crossed the hall. Mary pulled herself up from the sofa, and, with the outer curiosity of utter indifference, walked to the window. Camelia's horse stood before the door, a groom at his head. The drizzling mist shut out all but the nearest trees, flat, pale silhouettes on the white background, against which the horse's coat gleamed, a warm, beautiful chestnut. Mary's indifference grew wondering. Her sobs ceased as she gazed. The gaze became a stare, hard, fixed, as Camelia, in a flash, sprang to the saddle. Mary saw her profile, bent impatiently, the underlip caught between her teeth, the brows frowning, while the groom adjusted her skirt. In a moment she was off at a quick trot, and soon a sound of galloping died down the avenue.

Mary stood rigidly looking after the sound. A supposition, too horrible, too hideous, had come to her, too hideous, too horrible not to be true. Its truth knocked, fiercely insistent, at her heart. Her knowledge of Camelia, acute yet narrow, and confused by this latter suffering, sprang at a bound to the logical deduction.

Camelia could not bear suffering, revolted against it, snatched at any shield. She had gone now to Perior, that he might lift from her this dreadful load of responsibility, cast upon her so cruelly by Mary. He must tell her that he had never thought of Mary, and that the idea of robbery was a wild figment of Mary's sick brain. Mary's brain, though sick, was clear, clear with the feverish lucidity that sees all with a distinctness glaring and magnified. She saw all now. The meanness, the cowardice of Camelia's proceeding only gave a deepened certainty.

Then indeed shame came upon Mary. She saw herself gibbeted between them, knew too well what he would think. He would himself hang her up, since truth demanded it, and since Camelia must be comforted. The glaring lucidity dazzled Mary a little at times, and now the awful justice of Perior's character assumed in her eyes a Jove-like cruelty, that more than matched Camelia's dastardliness. The past hour seemed painless in comparison with the present moment; its blackness, in looking back at it, was gray. To be debased, utterly debased, in his eyes--that was to drink the very dregs of her cup of agony. Her hatred of Camelia was her only guide in the night. She went into the hall and took down her hat and cloak. She could not wait for Camelia's return. She must herself see the actuality of her betrayal.

Camelia might lie unless she could hold the truth before her face; might say that she had not ridden to Perior's. Mary would see for herself, and then--oh then! confronting Camelia, she would find words, if she died in speaking them.

She ran down the avenue and turned off into the woods by a short cut that led more directly than the curving high road to the Grange. Her weakness was braced by the fierceness of her purpose. She felt herself a flame, hastening relentlessly through the smoke-like mist.

The woods were cold and wet. She pushed past dripping branches, splashed through muddy pools; the inner fire ignored its panting frame. When she arrived at the foot of the hill on which stood the Grange, she knew that Camelia must have been with him there for an hour or more. She could not see the house through the heavy atmosphere, but, hidden by the trees and fog, she could see the road and be herself unseen. On the edge of the wood was a little stile; she shuddered with wet and cold as she sat down on it to wait. She would wait for Camelia to pass, and then, by the same hidden path, she could go home and confront her. Beyond that crash Mary did not look. It seemed final.

CHAPTER XXV

BUT Mary was quite mistaken--as absolute logic is apt to be when dealing with human beings. Camelia, indeed, had gone to Perior, but on a very different errand from the one Mary's imagination painted for her. Camelia was not thinking of herself, nor of throwing off the iron chains of that responsibility with which she felt herself manacled for life. Mary's story had crushed every thought of self, beyond that consciousness of riveted guilt. It was of Mary alone she thought as she galloped through the mist. With terror and pity infinite she looked upon Mary's love and the approaching death that was to end it; their tragedy filled everything, and at the feet of the majestic presences her own personality only felt itself as a cowering criminal. It was as though the ocean of another's suffering had flooded the complacent rivers of her life. They overflowed their narrow channels; they were engulfed, effaced in the mighty desolation; never again could they find their flowering banks, their sunny horizons.

This moan of a suffering universe, heard before only in vaguest whispers, the minor key of the happy melody that she had known, making the melody all the sweeter for its half-realized web of sadness--this moan was now like the tumult of great waters above her head, and a loud outcry of her awakened soul answered it. She was guilty--yes, as guilty as Mary knew her to be, for all the mistaken deductions of Mary's ignorance. She loved Perior, and he did *not* love her; but those facts in no way touched the other unalterable facts--a cruelty, a selfishness, a blindness, hideous beyond words.

Yet now she did not think of this guilt, irrevocable as it was.

Mary--Mary--Mary. The horse's hoofs seemed to beat out the cry! Mary and her fate. Camelia stood with Mary against that fate; but her attitude of rebellion was even fiercer, more determined than poor Mary's flickering light could have sustained. Mary good--with nothing. Virtue *not* its own reward. Suffering, crushing, unmerited suffering, eating away the poor empty life. She herself bad, and the world at her feet. Camelia felt herself capable of taking the immoral universe by the throat and shaking it to death--herself along with it.

She was galloping for help, yes, to Perior. He must help her, he alone could help her, to clutch the malignant cruelty, tear it off Mary, and then give her some gleam of happiness before she died. Camelia straightened herself in the saddle at the thought. "She shall not die," clenched her teeth on the determination. She might be saved. Who could tell? One heard of wonderful cures. And at least, at least, she should not die unhappy. Camelia would wrench happiness for her out of despair itself. She would fight the injustice of the gods until her last breath left her.

All the pitiful humanity in Camelia clung to the human hope of retribution and reward. Her mind fixed in this desperate hope, she could take no thought of the coming interview; that would have implied a retrospective glance at her last visit to the Grange, and Camelia could not think of herself, nor even of Perior.

The Grange was desolate on its background of leafless trees. Camelia, as she dismounted at the door, looked down at the whiteness which brimmed the valley; the tree-tops emerged from it as from a flood; but where she stood there was no mist--a clear, sad air, and a few faint patches of blue in a colorless sky above. She rang, holding the horse's reins over her arm. Her habit was heavy with the wet, and her loosened hair clung damply about her throat and forehead. Old Lane, when he appeared, showed some alarm. She could infer from his expression what her own must be.

"Mr. Perior? Yes, Miss; in the laboratory with Job Masters. Just go up, Miss, and I'll take the horse round to the stables."

The laboratory was at the top of the house. Camelia found herself panting from the swiftness of her ascension when she reached the door. Entering, she faced the white light from the wide expanse of window, which overlooked on bright days miles of wooded, rolling country, to-day the sea of mist. Perior's back was to her, and he was bending with an intent interest over a microscope; a collection of glass jars was on the table, and Job Masters, his elementary features lit by the intelligent gravity of close attention, was standing beside him. Perior was saying--

"Now, Job, take a look at it." His gray head did not turn.

"It's Miss Paton, sir," Job volunteered. At that Perior rose hastily, and Camelia advancing, looked vaguely at Job, at the microscope, at the jars of infusoria.

A thought of the last visit had shot painfully through Perior on hearing her name, but, after one stare at her white face, his fear, freed from any selfish terror, took on a sympathetic acuteness.

"I must speak to you," she said.

"Very well. You may go, Job," and as Job's heavy footsteps passed beyond the door, "What is it, Camelia?" he asked, holding her hands, his anxiety questioning her eyes.

For a moment, the press of all that must be said crowding upon her, of all that must be said with a self-control that must not waver or misinterpret through weakness, Camelia could not speak. She looked at him with a certain helplessness.

"Sit down, you are faint," said Perior, greatly alarmed, but, shaking her head, she only put her hand on the back of a chair he brought forward.

"I have something terrible to tell you, Michael." That she should use his name impressed him even more than her announcement, emphasized the gravity of the situation in which he was to find himself with her. In the ensuing pause their eyes met with a preparatory solemnity.

"Michael, Mary is dying." He saw then that her eyes seized him with a deep severity of demand. The shock, though not unexpected, found him unprepared.

"She knows it?" he asked.

"Yes, she knows it. Listen. She told me everything. It was more horrible than you can imagine. She told me how cruel I had been to her--how I had neglected her--how I had cut again and again into her very soul. She hates me, she hates her life, but she is afraid of death. She is not going to die happily, hopefully, as one would have thought Mary would die. She is dying desperately and miserably, for she sees that being good means merely being trodden on by the bad. She has had nothing, and she regrets everything." Perior dropped again into the chair by the table. He covered his eyes with his hands.

"Poor child! Unhappy child!" he said.

The shuddering horror of the morning came over Camelia. She clasped her hands, pressing them against her lips. It seemed to her suddenly that she must scream.

"What does it mean? What does a life like that mean?" Her eyes, in all their helpless guilt and terror, met his look of non-absolving pity.

"It means that if one is good one is often trodden upon. We must accept the responsibility for Mary's unhappiness. My poor Camelia," Perior added, in tones of saddest comprehension, and he stretched out his hand to her. But Camelia stood still.

"Accept it!" she cried, and her voice was sharp with the repressed scream. "Do you think I am trying to shirk it? Do you think that I do not see that it is I--I, who trod upon her? Don't say 'We'; say 'You,' as you think it. You need have no compunctions. I could have made her happy--happier, at least, and I have made her miserable. I have done--said--looked the cruellest things--confiding in her stupid insensibility. I have crushed her year after year. I am worse than a murderer. Don't talk of me--even to accuse me; don't think of me, but think of *her*. Oh, Michael! let us think of her! Help me to mend--a little--the end of it all!"

"Mend it?" He looked at her, taken aback by her words, the strange insistence of her eyes. "One can't, Camelia--one can't atone for those things."

"Then you mean to say that life *is* the horror she sees it to be? She sees it! There is the pity--the awful pity of it! Not even a merciful blindness, not even the indifference of weakness! Morality is a gibe then? Goodness goes for nothing--is trampled in the mud by the herd of apes snatching for themselves! That is the world, then!" The fierce scorn of her voice claimed him as umpire. Perior put his hand to his head with a gesture of discouragement.

"That is the world--as far as we can see it."

"And there is no hope? no redemption?"

"Not unless we make it ourselves--not unless the ape loses his characteristics." He paused, and a deepened pity entered his voice as he added, "You have lost them, Camelia."

"Yes; I can hear the canting moralist now, with his noisome explanation of vice and misery. Mary has been sacrificed to save *my* soul, forsooth! *My* soul!"

"Yes." Perior's monosyllable held neither assent nor repudiation.

"Yes? And what does my miserable soul count for against her starved and broken life?"

"I don't know. That is for you to say."

"I say that if virtue is to give a reward to vice, life is a nightmare." Perior again put his hands over his eyes. The thought of poor Mary, conscious of injustice, the sight of Camelia writhing in retributory flames, made him feel shattered.

"But I didn't come to talk about my problematic soul," said Camelia in an altered voice; "I came to tell you about Mary." She approached him, and stood over him as she spoke, so that he looked up quickly.

"She will probably be dead in a month. She knows it; and, Michael, she loves you." Perior flushed a deep red, but Camelia whitened to the lips. He would have risen; she put her hand on his shoulder.

"Impossible!" he said.

"No, listen. She told me. She lashed me with it this morning--that hopeless love--for she thinks that you love me--thinks that I am playing with you. She loves you. She has loved you for years."

"Don't say it, Camelia!" Perior cried brokenly. "Mary's disease explains hysteria--melancholia--a pitiful fancy--that will pass--that should never have been told to me."

"Ah, don't shirk it!" her hand pressed heavily on his shoulder. "Her disease made her tell me, I grant you, but you could not have doubted had you heard her!--as I did! You understand that she must never know--that I have told you."

"I understand that, necessarily, and I must ask you from what motive you think your revelation justified; it must be a strong one, for I confess that the revelation seems to me unjustifiable--cruelly so."

"I have a strong motive."

"You did not come to pour out to me the full extent of poor Mary's misfortune for the selfish sake of relieving, by confession, your self-reproach? And, indeed, in this matter I cannot see that you are responsible. It is a cruelty of fate, not yours."

Camelia looked away from him for a moment, looked at the microscope. A swift flicker of shame went through her, one thought of self, then, resolutely raising her eyes, she said, "Am I not at all responsible? Are you sure of that?"

"Responsible for Mary loving me?" Perior stared, losing for a moment, in amazement, his deep and painful confusion.

"No; that is fate, if you will. But had I not come back last summer, had I not claimed you, monopolized you, absorbed you. Ah! you are flushing; don't be ashamed for me! I swear to you, Michael, that I am not giving myself a thought, had I not set myself to work to make love to you--there is the fact;--don't look away, I can bear it--can you tell me that Mary might not have had the chance she so deserved, of slipping sweetly and naturally into your heart--becoming your wife?"

"Camelia!" Perior turned white. "I never loved Mary, never could have loved her. Does that relieve you?" He keenly eyed her.

"Don't accuse me of seeking relief! That is a cruelty I don't deserve. If you never could have loved Mary, it is even more dreadful for me--for it is still crueller for Mary. That she should love you. That you should not care! could never have cared!"

At this Perior rose and walked up and down the room. "Don't!" he repeated several times. His wonder at Camelia interfused intolerably his sorrow for Mary.

Camelia followed him with steady eyes. The eagerness of decisive appeal seemed to burn her lips as she said slowly--

"Ah, had you seen her! Had you heard her crying out that she was dying--that she loved you--that you did not care!"

"You must not say that." Perior stopped and looked at her sternly, "I am not near enough. It is a desecration."

"Ah! but how can I help her if I don't? How can *you* help her? For it is you, Michael, *you*. Can't you see it? You are noble enough. Michael--you will marry Mary! Oh!"--at his start, his white look of stupefaction, she flew to him, grasped his hands--"Oh, you must--you *must*. You can make her happy--you only! And you will--say you will. You cannot let her die in this misery! Say you cannot, Michael--oh, say it!" And, suddenly breathless, panting, her look flashed out the full significance of her demand. In all its stupefaction Perior's face still retained something of its sternness, but he drew her hands to his breast. "Camelia, you are mad," he said.

"Mad?" she repeated. Her eyes scorned him; then, rapidly resuming their appealing dignity, "You can't hesitate before such a chance for making your whole life worth while."

"Quite *mad*, Camelia," he repeated with emphasis. "I could not act such a lie," he added.

"A lie! To love, cherish that dying child! A better lie than most truths, then! You are not a coward--surely. You will not let her die so."

"Indeed I must. Any pretence would be an insult. As it is, if Mary could see you here, she would want to kill us both."

"Not if she understood," said Camelia, curbing the vehemence of her terrified supplication, the very terror warning her to calm. "And what more would there be in it to hurt her?"

"That *I* should know--and should refuse. Good God!"

"Where is the disgrace?" Camelia's eyes gazed at him fixedly. "Then we are both disgraced--Mary and I." Her smile, bitterly impersonal, offered itself to no interpretations, yet before it he steadied his face with an effort. He could not silence her by the truth--that he loved her, her alone; loved now her high, frowning look, her passionate espousal of another's cause. Mary's tragic presence sealed his lips. He said nothing, and Camelia's eyes, as they searched this chilling silence, incredulous of its cruel resolve, filled suddenly and piteously with tears.

"Oh, Michael," she faltered. Scorn and defiance dropped from her face; he saw only the human soul trembling with pity and hope. He did not dare trust himself to speak--he could not answer her. Holding her hands against his breast, he looked at her very sorrowfully.

"Listen to me, Michael. I mustn't expect you to feel it yet as I do--must I? That would be impossible. I only ask you to *think*. You see the pathos, the beauty of Mary's love for you! for years--growing in her narrow life. Think how a

smile from you must have warmed her heart--a look, a little kindness. She adores you. And this consciousness of death, this nearing parting from you--you who do not care--leaving even the dear sight of you. Think of her going out alone, unloved, into the darkness--the everlasting darkness and silence--with never one word, one touch, one smile, to hold in her heart as hers, meant for her, with love. Oh, I see it hurts you!--you are sorry; oh, blessed tears! You cannot bear it, can you? Michael, you will not let her go un comforted? She is not strong, or brave, or confident. She is sick, weak, terrified--a screaming, shuddering child carried away in the night. Michael!--it was a cry; she clasped his hands in hers--"you will walk beside her. You will kiss her, love her, and she will die happy--with her hand in yours!" Her eyes sought his wildly. He had never loved her as he loved her now, and though his tears were for Mary, the power, the freedom of his love for Camelia was a joy to him even in the midst of a great sadness. He could not have kissed her or put his arms around her; the dignity of her abasement was part of the new, the sacred loveliness, and it was more in pity than in love that he took the poor, distraught, beautiful face between his hands and looked at her a negation, pitiful and inarticulate. She closed her eyes. He saw that she would not accept the bitterness.

"I will do all I can," he then said; "but, dear Camelia, dearest Camelia, I cannot marry her."

It was a strange echo. Camelia drew away from him.

"What can you *do*? She knows you are her friend; that only hurts."

"Does it?" He saw now, through the unconscious revelation, the greatness of her love for him, and saw that in the past he had not understood. She loved him so much that there was left her not a thought of self. Her whole nature was merged in the passionate wish that he should fulfil her highest ideal of him. He saw that she would have laid down her life for him--or for Mary, as she stood there, and, for Mary, she expected an equal willingness on his side.

"It would only be an agony to her," Camelia said; "she would fear every moment that she would betray herself to you, as she betrayed herself to me. Can't you see that? Understand that?" Desperately she reiterated: "You must pretend! You must lie! You must tell her that you love her! You must marry her, take her away to some beautiful country--there are places where they live for years; make a paradise about her. You *must*." She looked sternly at him.

"No, Camelia, no."

"You mean that basest no?" She was trembling, holding herself erect as she confronted him; her white face, narrowly framed by the curves of loosened hair, tragic with its look of reprobation.

"I mean it. I will not. You will see that I am right. It would be a cruel folly, a dastardly kindness, a final insult from fate. And I do not think only of Mary--I think of myself; I could not lie like that."

Her silent woe and scorn, frozen now to a bleak despair, dwelt on him for a long moment, then, without another word, she turned from him and left him, making, by the majesty of her defeated wrong, his victorious right look ugly.

CHAPTER XXVI

CAMELIA galloped home furiously. The tragedy was then to be consummated. He would not put out a finger to avert it. Mary would go down into the pit of nothingness, and her love, her agony, her strivings after good, would be as though they had never been.

"And *I* live," thought Camelia, as she galloped, and her thoughts seemed to gallop beside her; they were like phantom shapes pressing on her from without, for she did not want to think. "*I*, thick-skinned, dull-souled *I*. Yes, materialism wins the day. Morality is a lie, evolved for the carpeting of lives like mine, for the preservation of the fittest!--*I* being fittest! To those that have shall be given, and from those who have not shall be taken away--the law of evolution. Oh! hideous, hideous! Oh, horror!--not even the ethical straw of development to grasp at; Mary's suffering has warped her, lowered her. She has been tortured into rebellion against her own sweet rectitude; she, who only asked to love--hates; she, who lived in a peaceful renunciation, now struggles, thinks only of herself."

It was this last thought that seemed to lean beside her, look into her eyes with the most intolerable look. Mary--inevitably lowered. The blackness shuddered through her. Camelia on that ride tasted the very dregs of doubt and despair, and knew the helplessness of man before them. She could have killed herself, had not a sullen spark, the last smouldering from the fire of resolution that had burned in her as she rode to Perior, still lit one path through the darkness. She must throw herself at Mary's feet, seek and give comfort through her own extreme abasement. She must cling to Mary, supplicating her to believe in her infinite love and pity. Could not that love, when all errors were explained, reach and hold her? Camelia felt her defiance of eternity clasp Mary forever. But when she reached home Mary was not there. Camelia panted as she ran from room to room; her desire, thrown back, rose stiflingly. She was afraid of seeing her mother, for at a look, a question, she felt that her suspense of hard self-control would break down; she might scream and rave. She sent a few words to Lady Paton by a servant; she was tired and was going to rest--must not be disturbed--then she locked herself into her own room.

Some hours passed before she heard Mary's voice outside demanding entrance, hours that Camelia was to look back on as the blackest of her life, so black that all in them, every thought and impulse, made an indistinguishable chaos, where only her suffering, a trembling leaf tossing on deepest waters, knew itself. In looking back, she remembered that she had not once moved until the knock came, and that, on going to open the door, her hand had so shaken that it fumbled for some moments with the key.

Mary stood on the threshold. She was splashed with mud. Beside the whiteness of her face, Camelia's was passive in its pain. Mary closed the door, and, as Camelia retreated a little before her, leaned back against it. Her eyes went at once over Camelia's wet habit and dishevelled hair; she had expected a careful effacement of all signs of the guilty errand; Camelia could not now deny the ride. The thought of a brazen avowal made Mary close her eyes for a moment. She had to struggle with a sick faintness, as she leaned against the door, before she could put that monstrous thought aside and say, returning to her first impulse, and opening her eyes as she spoke--

"I know where you have been."

Camelia stood still. This unexpected blow confused the direct vision of appeal and abasement that upheld her. She must face an unlooked-for contingency, and her mind seemed to reel a little as she faced it.

"You followed me, Mary?" she asked, with a gentleness bewildered.

"Yes, I followed you."

Camelia was now becoming conscious of the definiteness of Mary's heavy stare. It was like a stone, and under the weight of it she groped, staggering, in a wilderness of formless conjectures. Mary could not know why she had gone. A pang of terror shot through her. Mary's next words riveted the terror.

"I saw you. I know why you went. I know everything," said Mary. Camelia's horror kept silence, though the room seemed to whirl round with her. Had Mary by some unknown means reached the Grange before she did? Had she been hidden near the laboratory? Had she heard? Were all merciful lies impossible? She felt her very lips freeze in a rigid powerlessness.

"You went to tell him that I loved him?" Mary's eyes opened widely as she spoke, and she walked up to her cousin, close to her.

"You told him that I loved him," she repeated, and Camelia in her nightmare horror felt the hatred of the pale eyes.

"You don't dare deny that you told him." No, Camelia did not dare deny. She looked down spellbound at Mary. She was afraid of her, horribly afraid of her. It was like the approach of a nightmare animal, its familiar seeming making its strangeness the more awful. She did not dare deny. She could not move away from her; she was paralyzed in her dread. Mary looked at her as though conscious of her own power.

"You told him, so that he might comfort you, tell you he had never loved me, never could have loved me. You betrayed me to save yourself from that reproach of robbing me." It was like awakening with a gasp that Camelia now

cried--

"No, no, Mary! Oh no."

She could speak. She could clasp her hands. "No, no, no," she repeated almost with joy.

"You lie. You are lying. What is the good of lying to me now? It is easy for you to lie. You went to ask him the truth, and he gave it to you. For he would never have loved me, whatever I may have hoped--even believed at moments."

"No, Mary; no, no!" Mary's dreadful supposition made Camelia feel the reality as a peace, a refuge. That world of black cruelty where Mary wandered, that at least was untrue, an illusion. Not hatred, not deceit surrounded her, but love, and pity, and tenderness.

"I did not go for that, Mary," she cried. "Listen, Mary, you are wrong; thank God, you are wrong. I did not go because I was sorry for myself; I did not go basely. I was so sorry for you," said Camelia, sobbing and speaking brokenly, while Mary looked at her in a stern tearless silence, "I knew he would be sorry. I knew we both loved you, and I wanted him to marry you, Mary."

"*What!*" Mary's voice was terrible; yet Camelia clung to the courage of her love, confident that the truth alone could now reveal it--all the truth.

"Yes, dearest Mary, yes. There was no hatred, only a longing to make you happy--to help atone; only love, not hatred."

"You are telling me the truth?"

They were standing still before each other. Camelia could not interpret the pale eyes.

"Mary, I swear it before God."

"And he will not marry me!"

"He loves you, as I do."

"He will not marry me!"

"Let me only tell you--everything; it is not you only----"

"You tossed me to him--and he refused me! How dare you! How dare you! How dare you!" And Mary, a revelation of rage and detestation flaming up in her eyes, distorting her face, struck her cousin violently on the cheek.

Camelia stood dazed. The blow interpreted, too well, Mary's attitude. She could not resent, nor even wonder, could only accept the retribution of cruel misunderstanding and bow her head. She covered her face with her hands and wept. Except for this sound of weeping the room was still. In the darkness of her humiliation--shut in behind her hands--Camelia felt, at last, the silence. She looked up. Mary was once more leaning against the door. Her eyes were closed. Camelia went to her, took her hand, and Mary made no motion. Raising the hand to her lips Camelia kissed it; its coldness chilled the smarting of the blow. Mastering her terror Camelia put her arms around her, and, Mary sinking forward into them, she gathered up the piteously light figure and carried it to the bed.

"Mary--Mary--Mary," she murmured, staring at the head which lay so still, so solemnly. Was she dead? Camelia struck aside the thought of a so cruel finality. Strengthened by her rebellion she sprang to open the door, and the house resounded with her cries for help.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE servant, as he showed Perior into the drawing-room, told him that Miss Fairleigh was dying, and the imminence of the tragedy was sorrowfully emphasized by Lady Paton's woe-stricken face, as she came in to him.

"Yes, Michael, dying," she said before he spoke; his look had asked the question. He took her hands, and they sat down, finding a comfort in being together, and Perior was in as much need of it as she, felt not one whit stronger before the approaching end.

"Tell me about it. It has been so sudden."

Lady Paton sobbed out the sad facts. Her own blindness; poor Mary's long concealment--too successful; the doctor's fatal verdict.

"I was blind, too," said Perior, "though I always feared it."

"Ah! that is the cruellest part of it! And her indifference--she does not seem to care; she does not speak to any of us."

"Not to Camelia? Is Camelia with her?"

Perior's heart must spare some of its aching to his unhappy Camelia.

"She has not once left her. She is so brave; I can only cry; but it has made Camelia already different; a strength, a gentleness, yet a despair. She feels it terribly, Michael, and the first shock was hers. Mary was out all yesterday afternoon--in the wet and cold, and when she came in she fainted in Camelia's room."

Perior looked at her, pondering this sinister announcement.

"I should like to see Mary--when she is able," he said.

"Yes. She must have her friends about her, my poor, poor child. Ah Michael! I can never forgive myself."

"Why do you say that? You gave Mary all her sunshine."

"Not enough! not enough! She must have seen that it was Camelia, only Camelia, in whom my heart was bound up. She must have felt it."

Perior sighed heavily. He, too, had regrets. Had he but known, guessed what he had been to Mary! But he said, "Don't exaggerate that; Mary must have understood; it was inevitable, quite, and pardonable. Camelia was your daughter."

"Ah! Camelia had so much, Mary so little!" and to this Perior must perforce assent.

Meanwhile Camelia sat by Mary's side. She divided the vigils with the nurse who came down from London. She found that her eternal self-reproach had strengthened her. She could bear its steady contemplation and soothe her mother's more helpless grief.

Mary was sinking fast. During the next three days she hardly spoke, though her eyes followed the ministering figures that moved about her bed. Conscious that she was dying, but wrapped in an emotionless sadness, she watched them all indifferently, and slept quietly from time to time. It was going to be much easier than she had thought. Hardly a thread bound her to life; even her passionate hatred of Camelia was dimmed by the creeping mists; even her love for Perior wailed, it seemed, at a long distance from her; she listened to it as she lay there; only at moments came a throb of pain for all the happiness she had never had. Camelia meeting the calm eyes would smile tremulously, but Mary gave no answering smile, and her eyes kept all their calm.

Camelia had to hold firmly to the self-abnegation of perfect self-control to keep down the cry of confession that would give her relief, that would perhaps admit her to Mary's heart; it was not until the third night, as she sat beside her, that the yearning allowed itself to grow to hope. Mary's eyes, on this night, turned more than once from their vacant gaze and dwelt upon her with a fixity almost insistent.

Camelia dared, at last, to take in both her own the tragic hand that lay on Mary's chest, and, after a timid pause, she raised it to her lips. It lay resistless; she held it against her cheek; through the dimness, Mary felt the tears wetting it.

The merciful hardness about her heart seemed to melt. She knew a keener pang, a longer aching, that did not end and give her peace again. It was not calm, after all, not good to die with that unloving frost holding one. She lay in silence, looking, in the faint light, at her cousin's bent head, the ruffled outline of the golden hair. The thought of Camelia's beauty bowed in this desolation touched her sharply, intolerably. She felt her heart beating heavily, and suddenly, "Camelia, I am sorry," she said.

Camelia clasped the imprisoned hand to her breast, and leaned forward.

"Sorry! Oh, Mary--what have you to be sorry for?"

"I was wicked--I hated you--I struck you."

"I deserved hatred, dear Mary."

"I should not hate you. It hurts me."

"Oh my darling!" sobbed her cousin, rising, and bending over her.

"It hurts me," Mary repeated, but in a voice unmoved.

"Do you still hate me, Mary?"

There was a pause before she answered--and then with a certain faltering, "I--don't know."

"Will you--can you listen, while I tell you something?" said Camelia almost in a whisper--for Mary's voice was hardly more, "I must tell you, Mary, I deserve everything you said, and yet--you misjudged me. Will you hear the truth?" Camelia clasped the hand more tightly to her breast. "I am not going to defend myself--I only want you to know the truth; perhaps--you will be a little sorry for me then--and be able to love me--a little."

Mary looked up at her silently, and, when she paused, said nothing; yet her intent look seemed to assent.

"It will not give you pain," Camelia said tremblingly, "the pain is all mine here. Mary--I love him too." The words came with a sob. She sank into the chair, and dropping Mary's hand she leaned her elbows on the bed and hid her face.

"I loved him, Mary, and--I imagined that he must love me. My vanity was so great that I thought I could choose or reject him. I accepted Sir Arthur--from spite--partly, and then I was dreadfully frightened. On the very day I accepted Sir Arthur I sent for Mr. Perior. Mary, I made love to him. I did not tell him I was engaged; I wanted to escape from that blunder unscathed. I could not believe in his embarrassment, nor in the reality of his scorn when he found me out. I broke my engagement--as you know. I went to Mr. Perior's house. I entreated him to love me--I hung about his neck, cried, implored. He did not love me; he rejected me. He scorns me--he is sorry for me; he is my friend, but he scorns me. I was not playing with him--you see that now. I adore him--and he does not love me at all."

Uncovering her face, Camelia found Mary's eyes fixed upon her.

"Do you understand now, Mary, why I went to him? I loved you so--was so sorry for you--so infinitely sorry--for had I not felt it all? I never told him that you thought he might have loved you; but I thought it myself, I thought that he might love you, indeed, when he *knew* you--knew the sweetness, the sadness of your hidden love. If he refused, Mary, it was because he respected you too highly and himself--to act any falsity towards you. It was not like my rejection; there was no shame, no abasement for you. You have his reverent pity, his deep, loving devotion. Don't regret, dear Mary, that through my well-meant folly he really knows you now." She paused, and Mary still lay silent, slowly closing and unclosing her hand on the sheet.

"Believe me, Mary," said Camelia, the monotony of her recitative yielding to an appealing tremor, "I have told you the truth--the very truth. I have not hidden a thought from you."

"You love him?" Mary asked, almost musingly.

"Yes, dear, yes. We are together there."

"I never saw it; never guessed it."

"Like you, Mary, I can act."

"And you wanted him to marry me," Mary added presently, pondering it seemed.

"Oh, Mary!" said Camelia, weeping, "I did. I longed for it, prayed for it--I would have given my life to have him marry you. Mary, believe me, when I tell you that to atone in however a little measure for your dreary life, I would die--oh gladly, gladly."

"Would it not have been worse than dying?" Mary asked in a voice that seemed suddenly to subtly smile, though she herself lay unsmiling in the shadowed whiteness of the bed.

"What--worse?"

"To see him marry me." Camelia gazed at her.

"I think, Mary," she said presently, "I could have seen it without one pang for myself; I would have been too glad for you to think of that. And then--he does not love me. The iron entered my soul long ago. I have long since lost even the bitterness of hope."

"And he does not love you," Mary repeated quietly, raising her eyes and looking away a little.

"He does not, indeed."

Camelia's quivering breaths quieted to a waiting depth. But Mary for a long time said nothing more. Her hand lay across her breast, and above it her face now surely smiled.

At last she turned her eyes on her cousin. Looking at her very gently, she said, "But I love you, Camelia."

CHAPTER XXVIII

CAMELIA was sitting again by Mary's bed when Perior was announced the next morning.

"You must go and see him to-day," said Mary.

"Why--must I?"

"I should like to see him," Mary's voice had now a thread only of breath; to speak at all she had to speak very slowly, "and you must tell him first, that I know."

"Mary--dear---"

"I do not mind."

"No, one does not, with him. I will see him, tell him."

"Talk--be nice to him; do not be angry with him because he will not marry me." Her smile hurt Camelia, who bent over her, saying--

"If I had not gone!--you would not be here now; we might have kept you well much longer."

"That would have been a pity--wouldn't it?" said Mary, quite without bitterness.

"Oh, Mary! Could we not have made you happy?"

"Perhaps it is knowing that I can never be well that keeps me now from being sad," Mary answered; "don't cry, Camelia--I am not sad."

But Camelia cried as she went down the stairs.

A pale spring sunshine filled the morning-room, where she found Perior. She had hardly noticed the outside world for the last few days, and it gave her now a sweetly poignant shock to see that the trees were all blurred with green, a web of life embroidering the network of black branches; beyond them a high, pale, spring sky. She saw the green really before seeing Perior, for he was looking at it, his back turned to her as she came in. Then, as he faced her, his aging struck her more forcibly than the world's renewal of youth. As she looked at him, and despite the memory of their last words together, despite the tears upon her cheeks, she smiled. She had forgiven him. He had been right, she wrong; and then--his sad face, surely his hair had whitened? The love for Mary that overflowed her heart seemed to clasp him in its pity and penitence, but she could only feel it as the overflow.

"She wants to see you," she said, giving him her hand, and she added, for the joy of last night must find expression, "She knows everything. She followed me that day--and half guessed the truth--only half; I had to tell her all. And she has forgiven me--for everything." Camelia bent her forehead against his shoulder and sobbed--"She is dying!--and she loves me!"

"My darling Camelia," said Perior, putting his hand on her hair.

To Camelia the words could only mean that he forgave--and loved--as Mary did; but she felt the deep peace of truest union.

"Then she is dying in the sunshine, isn't she?" he added, "not in that horrible darkness."

"Yes--but such a cold, white sunshine. It is because she feels no longer. It is peace--not happiness; just 'peace out of pain.'"

"And cannot we two doubters add, 'With God be the rest'?"

"We must add it. To hope so strongly--is almost to believe, isn't it? Come to her now."

She left him at Mary's door.

The nurse, with her face of hardened patience, rose as he entered.

"I will leave you with Miss Fairleigh, sir. Call me if I am needed."

Her look was significant.

Perior felt his heart shake a little as he went round the white curtain. He was afraid. If he should blunder--stab the ebbing life with some stupidity! Something of this tender fear showed in his look at the dying girl, and the fear deepened for a moment to acutest pain at sight of her. Was that the Mary he had last seen sitting over the account books?--the Mary he had fatuously told to keep cheerful? Remorse wrung his heart. But as for the fear of hurting her, Mary was very far beyond all little mundane tremors, and they faded away, ashamed for having been, as he clasped her hand, and met her eyes; their still smile quieted even his pain, and wrapped him in its awe and beauty.

He sat down beside her, keeping her hand in his.

"Dear Mary," he said.

For a long time she did not speak; indeed Perior thought that she might not wish to employ the coarser medium of communication, could not, perhaps; her eyes, as they rested upon him, seemed amply significant; but he could not

fathom, quite, their ultimate meaning. Perhaps a great sadness underlay their calm. But at last, very faintly and very slowly she said--

"You saw Camelia."

"Yes."

"You know--that I was--cruel to Camelia?"

"No, I did not know."

"I was."

"I cannot believe that, Mary."

"I was, I misjudged her. I struck her. She did not tell you that?"

"No," said Perior, after the little pause his surprise allowed itself.

"I did, I struck her," Mary repeated, with a certain placidity. "You understand?" she added.

Perior was putting two and two together; the result was clearly comprehensible.

"Yes, I understand," he said.

"Camelia understood too."

"Yes," Perior repeated his assent, adding, "You have saved Camelia, Mary; I don't think she can ever again be blind--or stupid."

"Camelia--stupid?" Mary's little smile was almost arch.

"That is the kindest word, isn't it?" Perior smiled back at her, "Let us be kind, for we are all of us stupid--more or less; you very much less, dear Mary."

Mary's look was grave again, though it thanked him. "You are kind. Camelia has been very unhappy," the words were spoken suddenly, and almost with energy.

"I don't doubt that." Mary closed her eyes, as if all effort, even the passive effort of sight, must be concentrated in her words.

"And I am afraid--she will be very unhappy about me."

"That is unavoidable."

"But--unjust. She is nothing--that I thought. Nothing is her fault. It is no one's fault.--I was born--not rich, not pretty, not clever, not even contented; it is no one's fault. I have been cruel. You must comfort her," and Mary suddenly opening her eyes looked at him fixedly. "You must comfort her," she repeated, adding, "I know that you love Camelia."

Perior, with some shame, felt the red go over his face. Mary observed his confusion calmly.

"You need not mind telling me," she said.

"Dear Mary, I am abased before you."

"That isn't kind to me," Mary smiled. "You do love her--do you not?"

"Yes, I love her."

"And she loves you."

"I have thought it--sometimes," said Perior, looking away.

"She has always loved you. You too have misjudged Camelia. She told me--last night--she told me that you had rejected her."

"Did she, Mary?" Perior looked down at the hand in his.

"Yes--through love of me. You understand?"

"Perfectly."

"It brought us together," said Mary, closing her eyes again.

She lay so long without speaking that Perior thought she must, in her weakness, have fallen asleep, but at last she said, the words wavering, for her breath was very shallow, "That is what Camelia needed. Some one--to love--a great deal----" And with an intentness, like the last leap of a dying flame, she added, looking at him, "You will marry Camelia."

"If Camelia will have me," said Perior, bending over her hand and kissing it.

A gleam of gaiety, of pure joyousness, shone on Mary's face. Humorously, without a shadow of bitterness, she said, "I win--where Camelia failed!"

The tears rushed to Perior's eyes. He could not speak. He rose, and stooping over her, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Ah!" she said quickly, "it is much better to die. I love you." She looked up at him from the circle of his arms. "How could I have lived?"

At the great change in her face he wondered if he had done well in yielding to the impulse of pure tenderness; but still supporting her fragile shoulders he said, stammering--

"Dear child--in dying--you have let us know you--and adore you."

The light ebbed softly from her eyes as she still looked up at him. "Perhaps--I told you--hoping it----" she murmured. These words of victorious humility were Mary's last. When Camelia came in a little while afterwards she saw that Mary's smile knew, and drew her near; but standing beside her, holding her hand, she felt that Mary would not speak to her again. Through her tears she looked across the bed at Perior; his head was bowed on the hand he held; his shoulders shook with weeping. At the unaccustomed sight a half dull wonder filled her.

For a long time Mary smiled before her, as they held her hands; and Camelia only felt clearly that the smile was white and beautiful. She waited for it to turn to her again. Only on meeting Perior's solemn look the sense of final awe smote upon her.

"She is dead," he said.

To Camelia the smile seemed still to live.

"Dead!" she repeated. Perior gently put the hand he held on Mary's breast.

"Not dead!" said Camelia, "she had not said good-bye to me!"

Perior came to her; his silence, that could not comfort, answered her. She fell upon her knees beside the bed, and her desperate sobs wailed uselessly against the irretrievable.

CHAPTER XXIX

IT was many weeks afterwards that he told her what Mary had said. Her woe, not selfish, but inconsolable, made it impossible that during the first days of bereavement he should do more than help and sustain her by the fullness of a friendship now recognized as deep and unrestrained.

It was she herself who asked him one day if Mary had said anything that he could tell her, had spoken of her with a continuation of the forgiveness, her trust in which made life possible. Camelia, in her new devotion to her mother, its vehemence almost alarming Lady Paton, controlled for her sake all tears and lamentations, but lying on a sofa this afternoon, alone in the twilight, the tears had risen, and they were falling fast when Perior came in and sat down beside her. It was then that she asked him about Mary.

"She told me what you said to her the night before she died," Perior answered, and Camelia let him take her hand. She lay reflecting for some moments before saying--

"She wanted you to think as well of me as possible."

"She wanted to make me happy. She knew that you were mistaken."

"How mistaken?" Camelia asked from her pillow.

His voice had been unemphatic, but in the slight pause that followed her question she felt that his eyes dwelt upon her, and she looked up at him.

"You told her--that I did not love you." Camelia lay silent, her hand in his, her eyes on his eyes.

"You believed that, didn't you?" he asked.

"How could I help believing it?"

"Ah! that shows a trust in me! Well, Mary did not believe it. Mary told me that I loved you."

"And do you?" cried Camelia. She took her hand away, sat upright, and faced him. Perior was forced to smile a little at the baldness of his answering, "I do, Camelia."

"You did not know till----"

"Oh, I knew all along," Perior confessed, interrupting her. Camelia's eyes widened immensely as she took in the astounding revelation. He replied to their silent interrogations with "I have been a wretched hypocrite. How I convinced you of the lie I don't know."

"And you told that to Mary." He saw now that her gaze passed him, ignored him and his revelation in its personal bearing.

"I told her the truth. It did not hurt her. She was far above such hurts. You had showed her that you were worthy of any love. To share her secret made her happy."

"Happy! Oh, Mary! Mary!" Camelia murmured, looking away from him. "It must have hurt," she added. "Ah, it must have hurt."

"She was as capable of nobility as you--that was all."

"As I!" It was a cry of bitterness.

"As you, indeed. I feel between you both what a poor creature I am. I suppose I did for a test. You proved yourselves on me."

There was silence for a little while. Camelia looked out of the window at the spring evening. It was here they had sat together on that day of their first meeting after her return. Her mind went back to it in all the sorrow of hopeless regret. What had Mary been to her then?

"What more did she say?" she asked at last in a voice of utter sadness. She still looked out of the window, but when he answered, "She said that you loved me," she looked at him.

"Is that still true, Camelia?" he asked, smiling gravely and with a certain timidity.

"So you know, at last, how much."

"My darling." His tone brought the tears to her eyes; they rolled down her cheeks while she said brokenly, "And I told her; I gave her the weapon--and she smiled at us. Oh, that smile!"

"There was triumph in it. She asked me to marry you, Camelia, and I said I would--if you would have me. But, I must not ask you now--must I?" He sat down beside her on the sofa, and kissed her hand.

"Ah, no; don't think of that. It would kill me, I think, if for one moment I forgot."

"You need not forget--yet you may be happy, and make me happy."

"Oh, you don't know," said Camelia, clasping her hands and looking down at them, "you don't know. Even you don't know how wicked I have been."

"We all have such dark closets in our hearts. Don't shut yourself in yours."

"I don't shut myself. I am locked in. That is my punishment. Michael," and she looked round at him without turning her head, "I think of nothing else; that I made her miserable--that I made her glad to die. I must tell you. You don't know how I treated her. I remember it all now--years and years--so plainly. I robbed her of everything. If a sunbeam fell on her path I stood between her and it."

Perior was silent, but putting his hand over hers he held it faithfully.

"Listen. Let me tell you a few--only a few--of the things I remember. I don't know why you love me!--how you can love me! It hurts me to be loved!" she sobbed suddenly.

"If it will help you, tell me everything. And I must love you, even if it hurts you."

And, her hand in that faithful hand, her eyes on his, demanding inflexible judgment, Camelia began the long confession--a piteous tale, indeed. All the blots and failings gathered in a huge blackness; she spoke from it. He felt as she spoke that the clasp of his hand was her one link with revival. It was a piteous tale: for the robbery of Mary's ride, the brutal taunts flung at her on that winter night--these were but the bigger drops in the sea of selfish thoughtlessness. After each incident, rounded with a succinct psychology that showed her pitiless clearness of vision, she paused, as if waiting for him to speak. His silence seemed to acquiesce, and she wanted no soothing denial. And even now his hand held hers, and did not cast her off. When she had done, and after the silence had grown long, he said--

"And so I might lay bare my heart to you."

"I would not be afraid of its dark corner. You have never been meanly selfish, never trodden on people."

"But I might affirm other things. I will open the door if it will help you to sit down with me in the doubled darkness."

"No, dear Michael, no. Mine is enough."

"I have heard you; and may I now tell you again that I love you?"

"Not again. Not now. But I am glad that you love me. I feel it. I should like to sit like this forever, just feeling it, with my hand in yours."

This very debatable love-scene must be Perior's only amorous consolation for many months. Of her quiet content in his presence there could be no doubt. No barrier, no pain, was now between them. Their union was achieved, as if by a mere wave-wash, effacing one misunderstanding--it hardly seemed more now, nor their change of relation apparent; but under all Camelia's courage was the fixed determination to allow herself no happiness. Superficially there was almost gaiety at times; her regret would never become conventional or priggish; but even Lady Paton did not guess that Camelia and Michael were lovers, although a secret hope--very wonderful, and carefully hidden--painted for her future rosy possibilities. With all the sadness, with all the regret, these days were the happiest Lady Paton had known; and as Camelia's devotion was exclusively for her, she could not guess that the secret hope was already realized.

Yet Camelia did not leave her silent lover utterly bereft. After the deep gravity of the first avowal her little demonstrations were of a light, an almost mocking order. In this new phase she returned to the teasing fondness of the old one; and sometimes the central tenderness would pierce the lightness.

Perior could afford patience. Reading one afternoon in the library (his daily presence at Enthorpe was a matter of course), he heard steps behind him, then felt her hand clasp over his eyes.

"You are keeping on--loving me?" she demanded.

"Yes, I am keeping on," said Perior, turning his page with a masterly calm. He knew that the little outburst conceded nothing, and that even when Camelia dropped a swift kiss on his hair he was by no means expected to retaliate.

For the lighter mood the cottages made endless subjects for conversation and discussion. In talking--squabbling amicably--over their interior civilization, Camelia felt that she and Perior had much the playful gravity of children making sand pies at the seaside.

Camelia insisted on her prints and photographs, and on hanging them herself. She had fixed theories on the decoration of wall-spaces.

Perior held the ladder and criticised. "They are quite out of place, you know. That exotic art is most incongruous. It jars." Camelia was hanging up a modern print after Hiroshighe.

"It wouldn't jar on us, would it?" she asked, driving in a nail.

"We are exotic mentally."

"Let us train them to a more cosmopolitan out-look, then."

"They would far prefer the colored prints from Christmas numbers."

"Well, they shan't have them!" Camelia declared, and he laughed at her determined tyranny. But when her tenants were duly installed Camelia was forced to own that the honest forces of the soil were difficult to manage. She came in to

tea one afternoon with the announcement, that the Dawkins had taken down all their prints and put up flower-entwined texts and horrible colored advertisements. Mrs. Dawkins had said that her husband objected to "those outlandish women"; they made him feel "quite creepy like."

Later on she had to confess that the Coles by no means appreciated their photographs of the Sistine Sibyls, so charmingly placed along the walls, and that from among them glared a well-fed maiden with upturned, prayerful, and heavily-lashed eyes; testifying to the Coles' religious instincts and to their only timid opposition.

"How can they be so stupid!" cried Camelia. "And how can I!"

"You can't grow roses on cabbages, Camelia," said Perior, "to say nothing of orchids. You are demanding orchids of your cabbages."

"Desire precedes function," Camelia replied sententiously, "if the cabbages want to, very much, they may grow orchids. I shall still hope."

CHAPTER XXX

ON a beautiful October afternoon a visitor came to Enthorpe.

Camelia was summoned to find Mrs. Fox-Darriel in the drawing-room. Mrs. Fox-Darriel, with a pastoral hat--rather Gallic in its conscious innocence--tipped over her emphasized eyes, her gown of muslin and lace very fluffy on very rigid foundations, looked with her triumphant artificiality of outline quite oppressively smart. Camelia, after her year's seclusion, felt her to be oppressive.

It was rather difficult to smile on meeting her, their parting had such painful associations--the dark turmoil of those days drifted over Camelia's memory as she gave her friend her hand.

"You are surprised to see me, aren't you, Camelia?" said Mrs. Fox-Darriel.

"Yes. Rather surprised."

"No wonder, you faithless young woman. You haven't troubled to toss me a thought for this twelvemonth. Well, I bear you no grudge; it is a psychological phase that will, I hope, wear itself away. Yes, I am stopping down in these parts again, twenty miles away, with the Lambournes. You have not seen them yet, I hear. New importations. Mr. Lambourne is a bloated capitalist, and as my poor Charlie is Labor personified, I hope that my display of four new gowns daily in the Lambourne ancestral halls--they will be ancestral some day--will result in a beneficial return of favors. Charlie is going in very much for companies; Mr. Lambourne's companies are extremely advantageous. Oh, I uphold the uses of Lambournes in our modern world; they make us poor penniless aristocrats so very comfortable; they are good, grateful people."

Mrs. Fox-Darriel, while she talked, was looking Camelia up and down in a slowly cogitating manner.

"No, I can't stop to tea; I must be going back directly, it is a long drive. I only came to have a look at you, and, if possible, to solve the mystery. What's up, Camelia? That is what I want to know. Is this all the result of last year's little *esclandre*?"

Camelia evaded the question.

"We have had trouble. You heard that my cousin was dead."

Mrs. Fox-Darriel's eye travelled again over Camelia's black dress. "Yes--I heard. Poor little thing. And she would never appreciate how charming was the mourning being worn for her; that gown is really--well, there is a great deal in it, a great deal. I don't know how you manage to make your clothes so significant. You've got all Chopin's Funeral March into those lines. Well, it makes you feel badly, of course."

"Yes. Very badly." From the very patience of Camelia's voice Mrs. Fox-Darriel was keenly aware of barriers. How Camelia had disappointed her! A certain baffled, angry affection rose within her.

"You certainly treated her horribly, my dear. I understand regrets." Camelia made no reply, and looked at her with a steady sadness.

"And--she was in love with the vial of wrath. You knew that, I suppose."

"I knew that I was in love with him, Frances."

At that Mrs. Fox-Darriel gasped. Her eyes took on an unblinking fixity. "So you own to it?"

"Yes, I certainly own to it."

"Camelia! You are not going to--" The conjecture made her really white.

"To what?" and Camelia smiled irrepressibly.

"Camelia, I am fond of you. I did wish best things for you. I did hope to see you *somebody*. You would have been. You *can* be. Sir Arthur will be on his knees before you if you lift a finger."

"Oh! I hope not," cried Camelia.

"You know it. You know it. Lady Elizabeth hasn't a chance. She has become literary--is writing the life of her great-grandfather, deep in archives--that means hopelessness.--Camelia!" and Mrs. Fox-Darriel's cry gathered from Camelia's impassive smile a frenzied energy. "You are not--tell me you are not--going to marry that man--relapse into a country matron! He will swamp you. You have nothing in common. It is calf-love, pure and simple. I felt it all along; hoped he would see the incongruity of it--take your poor little cousin, who was cut out for submission and nurseries."

"Oh, I don't think a superfluity of either will be expected of me," said Camelia, with a laugh really unkind.

"Oh, heavens! You are going to marry him?"

"Yes, immediately," said Camelia, somewhat to her own surprise. She had not expected her rather indefinite views on this subject to crystallize so suddenly and so irrevocably. "Console yourself, Frances," she added, really feeling some compunction before Mrs. Fox-Darriel's tragic contemplation, "it won't be my funeral. He dug me out, and I am going to dig him out. You may hear of me yet--as his wife."

"Ah!" Mrs. Fox-Darriel had found the calm of her despair. "It is the same old story. His indifference has done it all. It may be brutal, but I must say it, you threw yourself at his head. The flattery at last penetrated his priggishness; Endymion stooped to Selena."

Camelia's serenity held good.

"You can't make me angry. I like your disinterestedness, Frances. Let me thank you for Endymion; I am sure the simile would flatter his forty-five years."

"And I came hoping----"

"Hoping what my kind Frances?"

"That I was to be a link; that I would find you sane again--willing to pay me a visit, and meet *him*."

"But, as you see, I am on Latmos, and like it."

"Yes, I see. I am disillusionized, Camelia; I confess it. I didn't expect that sort of floppiness from you. And there is a self-righteousness about your whole manner that is insufferable, quite; I tell you so frankly." Mrs. Fox-Darriel, as she spoke, shouldered her closed parasol, and clasped her hands over it in a militant antagonism of attitude. "The sheep looking suavely from its fold at the goat. We are all goats to you now."

"Come, let us kiss through the bars, then."

"Oh, you are miles away--aeons away!"

Mrs. Fox-Darriel submitted drearily. "You are lost! done for! And the name, the power, the future you might have had! You were clever."

"I rather doubt that."

"Ah! of course you doubt it; you must doubt it. As the wife of a crusty country squire it would be a corroding cleverness merely. You turn your back on it."

"We won't be hopelessly provincial. You will see us in London. He may get into Parliament."

"Us! He! Alas! he will swamp you," she repeated. "He will turn you into a pillar of salt--looking back, and being sorry. *You* to be wasted!" was the last Camelia heard.

When she had gone Camelia went slowly across the lawn; Perior, she knew, was lurking about the garden waiting for her. Some of Mrs. Fox-Darriel's remarks had cut--so far less deeply, though, than her own thoughts during past months. It was the strong revival of these thoughts that pained her more than the mode of revival.

It was dusk, a pensive dusk, the evening sky faintly barred with pink. Perior was walking up and down the garden between rows of tall growing flowers. Was the thought of his patience and loneliness, of her selfishness in prolonging them, a mere sophistry meant to hide her own longing for happiness? As she walked down the path towards him her mind juggled with this thought; it was very confusing.

"Who do you think it was?" she asked, putting her hand in his, a little *douceur* Perior had never presumed upon.

"Mrs. Jedsley? Mrs. Grier? Lady Haversham?" he asked affably, but scanning, as she felt, the sadness of her face.

"No--the past has been having a flick at me--Mrs. Fox-Darriel the whip."

"Ah yes. I never liked her."

"There is not much harm in her."

"No, perhaps not," Perior acquiesced.

"I told her," said Camelia, after a little pause in which they turned a corner of the garden, and walked down it again by an outward path.

"Well, what did you tell her? She has hurt you. I can see that."

"No, not she. She asked me if I had never seen that Mary loved you, so, in reply, I said that I had only seen that *I* loved you."

"Did that excellent piece of truth-telling pain you?"

"No; it was a delicious mouthful. But, she said too, that the flattery of my love had pierced your indifference--or your priggishness, she called it"--and Camelia gave him a rather arch glance, "and I didn't really wonder, not *really*; but you were so much more indifferent than I was, weren't you?" and she paused in the path to look at him, not archly, but very seriously. Her candor was so charming, with its little touch of fear, that Perior's answer could not resist an emphasis.

"Dearest," he said, and Camelia's wonder was not unpleasant, and his daring went unrebuked, as he put his arm around her.

"That means you were not?"

"It means a great deal more. I was in love with you when I was nothing to you. I've always been in love with you--horribly in love with you. Indifference! Great heavens! that was what I prayed for, that was what I tried to feign, for I thought you such an abominable little siren. All the time that you were picking me up, and putting me down, and

whisking past me, and torturing and teasing me, all the time I was adoring you, I couldn't help myself! adoring you with all your crimes upon you! thinking myself a fool for it, I grant."

"Putting you down? No, I never did that," Camelia demurred.

"Well, I thought so. And at all events you know that you were most comfortably indifferent until you found out that you couldn't get me for the asking."

"No, no!" cried Camelia. "From the first, if you had really let me think you loved me, told me so, nicely, and begged a little, I should have fallen straight into your arms, and perhaps never have found out how bad I was!"

"And that would have been a pity, eh? No," he added, with an argumentative gravity that touched and made her smile sadly. "You were never *bad*. It was always half my fault. I misjudged you, and you danced to my lugubrious piping."

"This is the very madness of devotion! Oh, dear Alceste, with you, perhaps, with you I have not dealt so badly; but, *but*----" She walked on again, turning away her head.

"Don't," said Perior gently.

"Ah, I must, I must remember."

For a long time they were silent during the rounding of the whole garden, where the high walls grew dark against the sky, and the flowers, in the faint light, were ghostly.

"Michael," she said at last, "I rebel sometimes against my own unhappiness. I want to crush it--I am afraid of it; but I am more afraid of being happy."

"Why can't they go together?" he asked.

"Ah! but can they?"

"They must, sooner or later. Then you won't be afraid of either. Doesn't this all mean," he added, "that *now* I may tell you how much I love you?" and he stopped to look at her. Her face was like a white flower in the dusk. Far away, over long sweeps of thin purpling cloud, shone one star, faint and steady. He saw together her face, the sky, and the star.

"Oh!" said Camelia, "*do* you know me? Even now, do you know me? I'm not one bit good! I am still the horrid child who clamored for your love; my love for you the only good thing in me! You love me, all the same? You don't mind? don't expect anything? I want so much, but I will have nothing, not a kiss, not your hand holding mine,--there, let it go,--on false pretences."

"I can only retaliate. *I* am not one bit good. Dear, horrid child, will you put up with me?"

"Oh, I never minded!" she cried. "I loved you, good or bad."

"And I you; only I minded. That is all the difference. There isn't a falsity between us, Camelia," he added.

"No, there isn't."

"Then, may I kiss you, and hold your hand?"

"Yes; only--first--first--" she held him off, smiling, yet still doubting, still tremulously grave, "I am not good enough; no, I am not good enough."

"Quite good enough for me," said Perior. "I am getting tired of your conscience, Camelia."

THE END.