SHADOWS OF FLAMES

AMÉLIE RIVES

(PRINCESS TROUBETZKOY)

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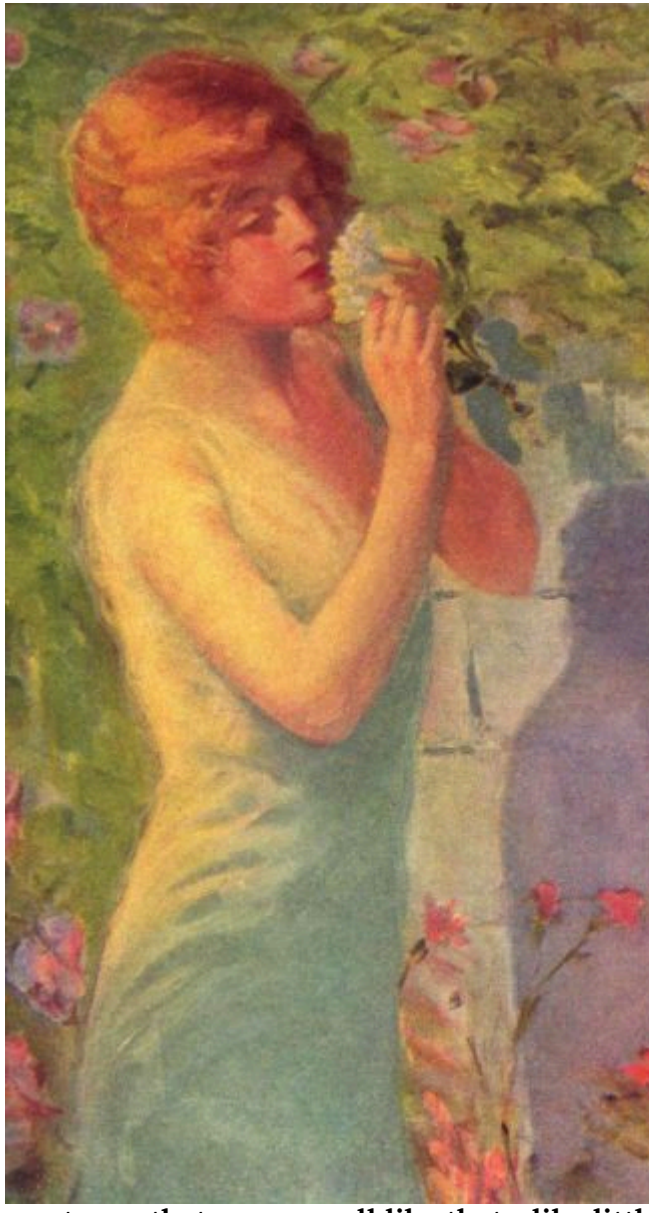
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SHADOWS OF FLAMES: A NOVEL ***

Shadows of Flames

Amélie Rives, Alfred James

Dewey, Frederick A. Stokes Company

SHADOWS OF FLAMES



"'And it came to me that we were all like that—like littl
in some greater light. And that our passions were also l

shadows—of sorrow ... regret ... despair ... weari

SHADOWS OF

FLAMES

A Novel

BY

AMÉLIE RIVES

(PRINCESS TROUBETZKOY)

Author of "The Quick or the Dead," "World's-End," etc.

WITH FRONTISPIECE IN COLOR BY

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AMÉLIE TROUBETZKOY

TO

MY FRIEND

VIOLA ROSEBORO

WITH MUCH LOVE

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I

Sophy smiled at her image in the mirror, and her grey eyes smiled back at her. The shadows under them—warm, golden stains like those on a bruised magnolia leaf—gave them a mysterious, impassioned look. She felt that she was going to have a happy evening.

In those days, in the early '90s, electric light was not much used in the houses in Regent's Park. Candles in brass sconces lighted her dressing-table. They brought out flickering shimmers from her gown of white brocade. Sleeves were full that year. The transparent masses of azalea pink, drooping on either side of her slender body, made it look slenderer. These sleeves were like huge orchids, and from them her arms drooped stamenlike in the soft, gold wash from the candles.

Matilda, her little Kentish maid, could not keep her eyes away from her. As she hooked the long, tightly wound sash of azalea pink she kept peering at her lady's image in the glass. There, Sophy's eyes met hers. She smiled again—at Tilda this time.

"Will you wear anything on your hair, m'm?" asked the girl, smiling shyly in return.

Sophy considered, looking at the curve of her head from different angles in a little hand-glass.

"No," she said, at last; "just the pearls to-night."

Her hair, dark and richly shaded like a breadth of

veined mahogany, was drawn loosely back into a big, shining knot low on her neck. Her eyebrows were darker than her hair, long, slender, and straight. When she laughed or smiled her eyes too grew long and slender.

She glanced at the pearls that the girl was now clasping about her throat. They had been a wedding-gift from her brother-in-law, Lord Wychcote. Poor Gerald! She was fond of him. He was the only one of the family who had been really nice to her. Yes, they were fond of each other. She touched the cold, heavy pearls and thought pityingly of his dark eyes so often full of pain. Then she thought of how Cecil sometimes spoke brutally to him, and she shivered.

"A goose on your grave, m'm?" said Tilda. "Let me fetch a scarf."

She brought a scarf of old lace, delicate as the skeleton of an elm-leaf left by caterpillars, and threw it over Sophy's shoulders. Then handed her her fan, gloves, and handkerchief, and taking the white evening-cloak on her arm, waited for her mistress to leave the room.

Sophy gave a last look over her shoulder as she turned from the mirror. Yes, she liked the dark curve of her head unbroken by any ornament—besides, she did not wish to wear anything that Cecil had given her, to-night. The pink-and-white gown was three years old—had been part of her trousseau. She had had it remodelled in the house by a clever little seamstress.

She went slowly down the stairway, through the square white hall. The Georgian house was simple and cheerful. Sophy especially liked the Sheraton

furniture and white panelling, because they reminded her of her Virginia home "Sweet-Waters." How happy she could have been in a house like this, if only.... Her eyes darkened. She stood still for a moment in the middle of the stairway, and Tilda halted patiently behind her. Then, before the girl could ask if anything were needed, she went on again with her swift, light step, and passed across the hall into the drawing-room.

As she had expected, her husband was there already. He was seated at one end of a deep, chintz-covered sofa holding a book close to his bent face and the light of a lamp that stood on a little table near-by. His great figure seemed hunched and crouched together. Sophy hated these crouching attitudes of his. They made her feel that he was preparing to spring on something—to worry it. And she noticed how dull his thick, fair hair looked in the lamplight —"staring" like the coat of a horse out of condition. She knew that he had not been well for the last two years, but his illness puzzled her—with its violent interruptions of alternate rage and high spirits, its long stretches of indifferent apathy.

She did not go up to him, but stood in the middle of the room as she had stood in the middle of the stairway, watching him. Was he going to be "nice," and let her enjoy her rare outing? Or was he going to be?... There were several things that Cecil Chesney could be which made his wife shiver again and draw her underlip between her teeth.

He was so absorbed in his book that he did not know she stood there watching him, studying him. His face had a curious expression. It seemed to her that it looked slightly swollen. His lips hung apart. Every

now and then he moistened them slowly with his tongue. It was so like a cat licking its chops that Sophy shivered again. She was not exactly afraid of him but she felt dread.

Then she said in her warm, clear contralto:

"I'm ready, Cecil."

He did not start, but his eyelids drew together and his lips closed. He laid one hand flat upon the open pages of the book and sat gazing at her between his drawn-up lids. Then his face loosened; he hunched his shoulders still more, giving a short, harsh laugh.

"By God!" he said. "You *are* a beauty!"

Sophy went white. She stood still, moving one slight foot nervously on the polished floor. Chesney sat looking at her. He smiled and his upper lip curled in the middle and at the corners.

"Come here," he said.

She dropped her chin slightly and looked steadily back at him from under her straight brows. Her dilated pupils made her eyes seem black.

"What for?" she said, in a low voice.

"I'll show you when you come."

"We'll be late, Cecil. It takes over half an hour from here to the Arundels'."

The smile left his lips.

"Come here to me," he said slowly. His voice had no expression in it; he spoke as an automaton might have spoken, but Sophy took a few reluctant steps in his direction. Then she stopped again and said:

"I do so hate to be late! Won't you start now?"

His eyes opened wide, and he threw a look at her like a missile. It was what Sophy knew as his "red look." She went swiftly up to him.

"There," she said; "show me what you want to, and then we'll go."

But his eyelids had drawn together again, and he looked up at her with his mocking smile. Yes; his face was slightly swollen—puffy about the lips and eyes.

"Won't you show it to me, Cecil?" she asked.

"I've changed my mind," he drawled.

Something in Sophy's breast shrivelled.

"Very well," she said quietly; "then we can go at once."

Chesney sank his head deeper in his shoulders, settled his body deeper in the sofa.

"That's what I've changed my mind about," he said. "I'm not going."

"But...."

"I'm not going."

"It's a dinner, Cecil.... It will be very rude."

"I'm not going."

"Shall I say you're ill?"

"You're not going, either."

He grinned it at her, gloating on the expression of

her face. She went pale again, then crimson. Her eyebrows flickered passionately.

"I am going," she said, in a still voice.

Then she felt his fingers go softly round her arm.

"Sit down by me," he said, drawing her delicately downward by the arm he held. Her dignity kept her from resisting. She was drawn down among the deep cushions beside him. The warmth that his great body had left on them struck her bare arms and shoulders, giving her a feeling of repulsion. As she sat there, armed within against him, she could not escape from breathing his breath, his face was so close to hers. Its odour of mingled wines, cognac, cigarette smoke, sickened her. The strong, sooty smell of cloth from the arm against her own added a new pang, for this smell of London cloth, which was so distinct to her foreign sense, had been once associated with the fascination of love.

Now he leaned his face forward and looked into her eyes, and she noticed with that inward shrivelling how strange his were—so much paler than they used to be—curiously glassy—the pupils mere specks of black in the centre of the greenish iris.

"What's the use of posing to me?" he said, with a sort of blandness.

"Posing to you?"

"Yes—quite so. Doing the 'chastest icicle on Dian's Temple.' You forget—don't you? I've seen the hidden fire."

Sophy said nothing. The blood started to her cheek again as under a whip.

He moistened his lips in that slow way, and smiled.

"Haven't I? Eh?"

She turned him a very quiet, haughty profile.

"I don't pretend to understand your moods, Cecil."

"You shall share this present one."

"I think not."

"I think—'yes.'"

He flung his arm suddenly around her, drawing her close.

"Look here," he said; and, taking his hand from the pages of the book where it had been resting, he lifted the volume toward her. As her eyes lowered themselves to the book, his fastened upon her face. The next moment she had sprung up, thrusting him from her. The book lay sprawled on the floor between them. It was a very rare volume of morbidly licentious engravings, repulsive, abominable.

She was livid with scorn and loathing. Her breast heaved. She felt the scalding of furious tears against her eyelids. She could not speak; and with that bracelet of his big, soft fingers about her wrist, he held her, laughing silently, convulsed with laughter.

But in Sophy there sprang to life something that was as dangerous as anything in him.

She said, whispering: "You'll be sorry all your life if you don't take your hand from me."

The light eyes wavered. Then he flung back her hand.

"Damme if you're worth the candle!" he said.

She turned and began walking quietly away from him.

This seemed quite to frenzy him.

He leaped over the fallen book and came at her like a bull, his head lowered. He took her by both shoulders.

"Look here!" he said. "What do you mean by wearing those pearls of Gerald's all the time?"

Sophy looked at him whitely. She smiled.

"They were given me to wear, I believe."

"He's in love with you—with his brother's wife! But I'll not have his baubles on your neck, nor antlers on my own head. Off with them!"

She stood frozenly. Her dark eyes poured scorn upon him. He made a snatch at the necklace—another. She stood quite motionless, while the great, angry hands snatched at her throat. His last clutch broke the string. The pearls rained down, some into her bosom, the greater part upon the polished floor. He stood heavily, gazing at the little white drops, as they rolled over the dark wood of the parquet.

While he gazed as if hypnotised, Sophy went swiftly out into the hall. She closed the door behind her. Her voice roused him, saying: "Mr. Chesney isn't feeling well enough to go out to-night. I shall go alone. Is the cab there?"

He heard the butler's voice answering.

She knew that he would not make a scene before the

servants. Changing quickly to another mood, he glanced at the closed, door, grinning at her astuteness. Then carefully he gathered up the fallen pearls and dropped them into his pocket.

Filling a liqueur glass with cognac from the table which the butler had already arranged for the evening, he slouched back to the sofa and lifted the fallen volume. The brandy calmed him still further. He sat there for two hours sipping the cognac, moistening his lips slowly every now and then, poring over the licentious pictures.

II

In the hansom, glad to be alone, Sophy sat with her arms tight against her breast as though she would keep something in her from bursting. She felt singing from head to foot like a twanged bowstring. She sat gazing at the rhythmic play of the horse's glossy quarters, and the soft blur of the May night. There had been a slight shower. The pavements were sleek and dark. There was a smell of soot and wet young leaves in the air, as of town and country oddly mingled in a kiss.

As this idea occurred to her, she made a movement of irritation. Kisses! Why should she think of kisses? They were nature's most banal lures—nauseous. And moodily, her eyes still black from the spread pupils, she recalled Cecil's first kiss and what it had meant to her. Something golden, vague, wonderful, fulfilling, yet promising more—more than fulfilment

—an opening of new desires, new aspirations, future fulfilments more splendid still. He had been a great lover. A line flashed to her. It sparkled through her mind, searing and cynical:

As wolves love lambs—so lovers love their loves.

He was wolf, now—she, lamb. Ah, well; no! He was mistaken—she was jaguar, leopard, catamount (he had called her a "silky catamount" in one of his rages), anything but lamb. She could feel her fangs growing. They were no longer little milk-teeth at which he laughed. Some day—if he continued to treat her in this way—some day she would strike and strike with them—deep into some vital part of that which still lived and which had once been love. Yes; it would be better to drag a corpse between them than this fierce, bloated, soulless body that had once been inhabited by love.

But what was it? What had changed him? She had not been unhappy at first, though shocked by a certain violence in his passion for her which had verged on the brutal. In her own impassioned ignorance she had told herself that this must be the man in him. Later, something finer, surer, stronger than reason, convinced her that this was not so—that the blazing bowels of a smelting furnace have nothing in common with the star-sown flame of love. She mused on the origin of the word desire. "*De sidera*"—a turning from the stars. Yes; his back was toward the stars.

A waft of perfume from the rose-geraniums in the window-boxes of a house near which they were passing overcame her with homesickness.

She saw the lawn at "Sweet-Waters," the ring of old

acacia trees, the little round, green wooden tables in their midst, covered with pots of mignonette and rose-geranium—herself and Charlotte swinging in the hammocks near-by—the peep of blue mountains through the hedge of box. Oh! to feel Charlotte's arms around her!

She pinched the back of her hand sharply, feeling the tears start. Virginia was far away, like her childhood, like her dead mother, like all the other simple, lovely things that had made life joyous.

How strange it seemed to think that the old, familiar life was going on there just the same! She had given her big chestnut, Hal, to Charlotte, when she married Cecil. Charlotte wrote that she rode him every day. Oh, for a ride through the Virginian fields and woods! Oh, to hear the soft jargon of the darkies—to have if only twenty-four hours of the old, free, simple life!

The cab stopped before a house in Bruton Street. This was London. Perhaps there was no Virginia. Perhaps she had only dreamed it.

When she found that her hostess had not yet come down, she was startled.

"Am I too early? Isn't dinner at eight?" she asked the butler.

"At half-past eight, madam."

"Never mind. I will go up to Mrs. Arundel's room."

She went upstairs and knocked at Olive's door.

"Who is it?" said a sweet, slight voice.

"Sophy. I've come too early."

"Oh, you *darling*!" called the voice. "Come in. It isn't locked." Sophy heard her add, "Open the door for Mrs. Chesney, Marie."

She opened the door herself before the maid could reach it, and entered. The room was charming grey and pink. The dressing-table was as elaborate as a lady-altar. Before it sat Olive, with her beautiful powdery brown hair over her shoulders. Only one soft puff was in place at the back of her head. The air was full of the scent of "Chypre," a perfume then very fashionable and which Sophy disliked. She could not understand why Olive used it. "Violet" or "Clover" would have suited her so much better.

She went up to Olive, and they kissed each other.

"You darling!" said Mrs. Arundel again. "How stunning you look! And what luck! Did you think it was for eight?"

"I thought your note said eight o'clock."

"Then it was my beastly handwriting. But I'm awfully glad, all the same. Now we can have a comfy talk."

Sophy sat in a little Louis XVI chair and watched the hair-dressing. She thought, as she so often did, how much prettier it would look dressed simply, without being frizzled so elaborately in front and puffed so intricately behind. Mrs. Arundel's face had taken on the serious look that women's faces wear when their hair is being dressed. Her eyes were large and candid, of a soft Madonna-blue. Her small, prettily shaped mouth was pastel pink. All her features were small and prettily shaped. She was the type of woman who still looks girlish at thirty-five. As Sophy watched her she was also thinking of how even her

friends said that "Olive was never happy unless she had a lover." Three years in England had taught Sophy that a woman may be an excellent mother, a good friend, an attentive wife, and yet have "lovers." How strange it seemed to her! She could not imagine such a thing happening without an upheaval of the universe—her universe, at least. She could understand a woman, made desperate by unhappiness, "running away" from her husband with another man—but to go on living with one man as his wife and having a lover—lovers—— She had given up trying to solve it. She knew that Olive's present flame was a Roman nobleman—Count Varesca—an attaché of the Italian Embassy. She seemed to bloom under it into a sort of recrudescence of virginal charm.

"How you stare with your great eyes, you dear!" said Olive. "Don't I look nice?"

"You look perfectly lovely."

"Wait till you see what a deevy frock Jean has sent me."

"Jean Worth?"

"Is there any other Jean?"

Sophy laughed.

Then Olive sent Marie away.

"You know, Sophy dear, I really have something to tell you."

"Is it nice?"

"No, it's nasty ... perfectly disgusting!"

"What is it about?"

"Your dear mother-in-law—Lady Wychcote."

Sophy stiffened.

"Well?" she said.

"Sophy dear! You mustn't take it too seriously. Only —I thought you ought to know. She's saying it everywhere."

"Saying what?" asked Sophy quietly. "Please go on, Olive."

"She's saying perfectly beastly things about your influence on Cecil. Trying to put it all on you."

"To put what on me?"

"All his—his queerness. She says you've alienated him from his family. And...."

Even Olive's glib little tongue stuck here.

"Well?" said Sophy, as before.

"She's saying—— Oh, she's really a beast, that woman! She's saying that you've given him drugs ... taught him how to take them."

"*Drugs?*" said Sophy. Her brows knitted together. She was very pale. "*Drugs?*" she repeated.

"Yes—opium—morphine ... that kind of thing.... I consulted Jack before telling you." (Jack was Mr. Arundel.) "And he said I *should* by *all* means. You aren't vexed with me for telling you, *are* you?"

Olive's italics were very plaintive.

Sophy was looking down at the tip of her shoe,

which she moved slightly to and fro on the soft carpet. She said in a low voice, very gently:

"No; I thank you."

Then she turned and went to the window, pulling aside the curtains and looking blindly out into the soft, pale night.

Drugs! She had never thought of that in her inexperience. All resentment at her mother-in-law's accusation was engulfed in that appalling revelation.

Behind her back, Mrs. Arundel stole nervous peeps at the little ormolu clock on the mantelpiece. That new frock had quantities of hooks and eyes on it. She wished now that she had not sent Marie away, or that she had waited to tell Sophy until the gown was on. It was unfortunate. One *couldn't* go up to a person who was overcome with righteous wrath and say: "*Would* you mind, dear, just hooking me up, before you give way further to your feelings?"

But just here Sophy turned and came towards her.

"We'd better be getting on with your toilette, Olive," she said.

"What a darling you are!" cried Mrs. Arundel, quite melted. "You're so *unselfish*.... It's perfectly touching."

Sophy couldn't help smiling.

"It isn't unselfishness," she said; "it's the instinct of self-preservation. I can't give way to decent, moderate little angers."

She was talking to keep Olive from seeing how deep the thing had pierced her. And she hooked deftly and lightly, with fingers that were icy cold but nimble.

After she had admired her friend and the new gown sufficiently, she said: "Was there any more? What motive did she say I had?"

Mrs. Arundel glanced slyly at the clock again. She had still a good twenty minutes before her guests would arrive.

"Let's sit here cozily by the window—and I'll tell you *everything*!"

The homely yet amorous fragrance from the white carnations in the window-box flowed gently over them. It drowned out the smell of soot—the London smell. They might have been in a cottage-garden.

"My dear," Olive began, "the old cat hates you. That explains evewything."

"She hates all Americans," said Sophy evenly.

"*So* stupid of her! Yes; I believe she does. And she's wild with rage because poor, dear Gerald is sickly—and won't marry. And Cecil has married *you* and flouted the family politics."

"Those liberal articles he wrote some years ago?"

"'Liberal'! You never read such radical stuff in your life! The Wychcotes are the *Toriest* Tories in England. Yes; he did that. That was bad enough. Then he went exploring in Africa and got laurels from the R. G. S. and chucked *that*. But you know it all——"

"Yes," said Sophy.

"He's really awfully able, Sophy—bwilliant——"

"Yes. I know."

Olive paused a moment.

"Can't you do *anything* with him, Sophy?"

"No."

"Poor dear! Well, I suppose not. He was always as obstinate as—as ... a Behemoth."

Sophy couldn't restrain a tired little laugh.

"Well, you know what I mean. But when one thinks of how...."

Sophy broke in on her firmly:

"Olive dear, this isn't telling me 'everything.' I want to know what motives Lady Wychcote attributes to me."

"Really, dear—it's so disgusting of her!"

"What did she say?"

"You *will* have it?"

"Yes ... please."

"She says you want to get rid of Cecil on account of Gerald."

Sophy was silent for some moments. Olive leaned forward and took her hand, caressing it.

"Don't mind too much, dear," she coaxed. "Only—be on your guard."

III

The dinner was as pleasant and heterogeneous as Olive's dinners always were. But Sophy could not rouse from the dark mood into which Olive's confidences had thrown her. The hateful scene with her husband had already destroyed all the gay anticipation which she had felt at the idea of an evening in the brilliant, whimsical world that liked and spoiled her. She had been kept at home by Cecil's humours and strange illness all during the early spring. Of late, he had been in his gentler frame of mind. Very "nice" to her. He had seemed to want her to have the pleasure of this evening's gaiety. She was only twenty-seven. To be known as a beauty in London society, and petted by some of its most famous circle—this was very bewitching to seven-and-twenty—even with Tragedy glowering in the background. But now all was spoiled for her.

As she went with Olive again to the latter's bedroom, while the other women chattered over their wraps in the hall below, she said: "I don't think I'll go on to this musicale with you, Olive. I'm tired. I think I'll just have Parkson call me a cab and go home."

"*Now* ... I *do* feel a wretch!" Mrs. Arundel exclaimed, turning on her a reproachful face. "It's those horrid things I repeated to you, of course!"

She caught both Sophy's hands in hers.

"*Don't* make me feel a pig by not going, there's a *darling*," she pleaded. "Don't, *don't* be *morbid*!"

"I'm not morbid— I'm really tired," said Sophy, looking down at the tip of her shoe and moving it softly on the carpet, in that way she had when deeply troubled or very angry.

"And if you *will* go home, don't talk about having a *cab*. I'll send you in Jack's brougham. It's *beastly* of Cecil not giving you a carriage!"

"He says we can't afford it."

"Then Gerald ought to give you one. The Wychcotes simply *stink* of money!"

Sophy smiled faintly. She could never get used to hearing such words come so simply from pretty lips. Her black "Mammy" had once washed her little tongue with soap for saying "stink."

"I know," she said; "but Gerald gives Cecil an allowance as it is."

Olive opened her hyacinth-blue eyes frankly.

"But Cecil had quite a fortune of his own! How does that happen?"

"I don't know," said Sophy tiredly. Money did not interest her. She had a thousand dollars a year from her father's estate. That gave her a rich feeling of independence. She loved to feel that her clothes, even her underlinen and shoes and stockings, were bought with her own money. She did not know how much it was that Gerald Wychcote allowed his younger brother. She had never asked. But she knew that the house in Regent's Park belonged to Gerald and that he let them have it for a nominal rent.

"I think it's a shame!" said Olive. "I suppose he made ducks and drakes of it with that exploring fad, and travelling in India and such places. Such *nonsense*!"

Then she took Sophy's hand again.

"*Do* come!" she coaxed. "There's a perfect *dear* of a

man I want you so much to meet. A friend of Varesca's—a Lombard nobleman, the Marchese Amaldi. Italians are perfectly *enchanting*. Don't you think so?— I am like Lord Carlisle ... '*Italianissimo*'!"

Sophy smiled vaguely, remembering when Olive had been Austrianissimo and Irishissimo and Frenchissimo.

"Does that smile mean you're coming? Ah, *do*! Marco Amaldi is the most heavenly man I ever knew ... except Varesca."

"A 'heavenly' man?"

Sophy was still smiling.

"Yes. Perfectly deevy; and *so* clever!"

Suddenly Sophy's smile faded and her eyes grew dark.

"Now you've got your 'fey' look," said Mrs. Arundel, watching her curiously. "What does it mean? Going with me?"

Sophy did not speak at once. Her eyes seemed to watch something forming slowly, far away—something that gathered distinctness against the confused background of life's harlequinade. Suddenly she started, closed her eyelids an instant, then looked at Olive. Her eyes were still wide and vague. They looked slightly out of focus, like the eyes of a baby staring at a flame. Olive felt a little shiver go over her.

"What is it?" she asked. "What do you see?"

"Nothing. It's just a feeling. I'll go with you. Something is going to happen to me to-night.

Something important. The room will have three windows——"

She broke off again, and looked from Olive's face, far away.

Mrs. Arundel's voice took on an awed tone. "Are you really superstitious, Sophy?"

"About that, I am."

"About what?"

"About a room with three windows. Don't ask me. I can't explain it. It's just a feeling."

"Olive!... Come along! We'll be late!" shouted Arundel, from the hall.

The two women went down together, Mrs. Arundel still rather awed. Sophy's eyes were really so uncanny sometimes. Very, very beautiful, of course, but eerie. Now if she, Olive Arundel, were a man—she would prefer something less peculiar, more "human." Olive was very fond of this word, "human." She felt that, like charity, it covered a multitude of sins—pretty, pleasant little sins.

When they reached the Ponceforths', the musicale was in full swing. Some one was singing a song by Maude Valerie White. Sophy heard a little gasp from Olive—her arm was impetuously seized.

"Sophy," she whispered, in spite of the singing, "there *are* three windows!"

Sophy, too, was gazing at the windows. She said

nothing. An artist had lent his flat to the Ponceforths for their musicale. The big studio made such a capital place for singing. There were three wide windows at one end.

Sophy moved forward as in a sort of daze, half pleasant, half fearful. That feeling as of an imminent crisis grew on her. Some one brought her to a chair. It was a little apart from the other chairs. She sat rather rigidly, her hands one over the other in her lap. Her profile shone like pearly gold against a curtain of brown velvet. Presently she felt that some one was watching her with peculiar intentness. Little spangles of sensation crept over the back of her head. It was as though a little electric feather were being drawn softly along her hair. Then Jean de Reszke began to sing. It was a wild Hungarian folk-song that he sang with that warm, wild voice of his. The words meant nothing to her. The voice told her that it was a song of love and the despair even of love fulfilled.

De Reszke finished his song on a slow, melancholy note like a ray of fading sunlight in autumn. All the melancholy of late autumn seemed to penetrate Sophy's bosom. Then a quick revulsion of feeling seized her. That "something"—that "something" that was going to "happen" was near her—drawing closer.

Varesca's handsome little face bent smiling towards her.

"Mrs. Chesney, I have a friend who cannot wait for the music to be done for being introduced to you. May I bring him?—the Marchese Amaldi—a good friend of mine." Varesca's rather quaint English sounded pleasant to her.

"Why, yes—do," she said, smiling at him.

"Marco——" said Varesca, half turning. Amaldi, who had stood just behind Sophy, came forward. They looked gravely at each other while she gave him her hand. Before they could speak, the girl who had been at first singing began another song. For a second longer, Sophy and Amaldi continued to look at each other in that quiet, serious way. Then she turned her eyes on the singer. That had been a strange feeling—the feeling which had come over her as she met Amaldi's eyes. It was as if they were recognising each other, rather than just becoming acquainted. As the girl went on with the rather tiresome song, Sophy turned her head and glanced at him again. This time he smiled, very slightly. She smiled in answer. Yes; it was really as if they were old friends meeting thus unexpectedly again.

And how charming his face was—dark and irregular! Now, again, that she saw him without looking at him, in that way women have, she thought he had a reserved air. She always noticed at once the colour of people's eyes. Amaldi's were a clear olive. His figure showed a lithe symmetry as he leaned relaxed against the curtain of brown velvet. He was not very tall; but, though slender, he looked strong. It was odd how everything about him seemed familiar to her.

IV

The songs followed one another quickly. There was no time for conversation in between. Now and then,

Sophy glanced at Amaldi. "If I were a Roman Catholic and he were a priest," she thought oddly, "I could confess anything to him." Then she smiled, her eyes on the open mouth of the singer. That had been such a queer thought! Amaldi looked so little like a priest. Rather as if he might make an impetuous soldier. Yes—one of those young, fierce soldiers of the *Risorgimento*. With her quick, visualising fancy, she tried to place him in his proper setting—as a child. What sort of home had he lived in as a child? What sort of countryside held his dearest memories as "Sweet-Waters" held hers? Como? Had he lived in a beautiful old villa on Como? Had he played with the little peasants of Cadenabbia? She saw the lovely lake floating purplish blue before her—the dull silver of snow-peaks. Amaldi as a brown-legged boy wrestling with the little villagers—swimming naked with them in the purplish water like a little brown fish.

Suddenly Olive leaned over and whispered:

"This is getting dreadfully dull and stuffy. Don't you think so? Jean won't sing any more. Do come with me. I'm going on to Kitty Illingham's ball."

Without waiting for Sophy to answer, she said to Varesca:

"*Do* help me to persuade her—you and Amaldi."

Varesca obediently began to gush forth entreaties. Amaldi said nothing. She had not yet heard the sound of his voice. But his eyes said: "Please come."

"Very well," said Sophy to Olive.

When she entered the ballroom, she felt, rather than saw, people turning to look after her. She had the

oddest feeling of being glad that she was tall—that there was so much of her to feel that keen flame of life that had sprung up so suddenly within her.

A woman who admired her said to a man:

"Do look at Sophy Chesney! It does her good to be immured by her ogre. She's simply ablaze, to-night!"

The man said:

"I know she's been called the most beautiful American in England. But I never thought so till to-night."

Sophy herself wondered if this queer, super-vitalised sensation that she had was happiness. She could not tell. She was only one throb of exultation at being alive.

A voice spoke close beside her.

"Will you dance this with me?" Amaldi was asking.

And as she moved off with him, it seemed as if they had often danced together before.

When they stopped they found themselves near the conservatory.

"Let us sit in there a while," she said.

They sat down near a bank of gardenias, and Amaldi fanned her with her fan of white peacock feathers.

"You're not afraid to use peacock's feathers?" he asked, smiling. "In Italy we are superstitious about them."

She answered, smiling also: "I have my full share of superstition, but not about things like that. Are you

really afraid of peacock's feathers?"

"No; but my mother wouldn't have one near her for worlds. She says that she has added all the Italian superstitions to the American ones."

"Is your mother an American?" said Sophy, surprised and pleased at this idea. If Amaldi's mother was an American, that would account in a great measure, she thought, for her feeling towards him—that odd feeling of having known him before.

"Yes," Amaldi was saying. "I am half American through my mother. She was a Miss Brainton."

"I am an American," said Sophy; "a Virginian. My name was Sophy Taliaferro. And that's odd"—she broke off, realising that her maiden name was probably of Italian origin—"because, though it's pronounced 'Tolliver,' it's spelt 'Taliaferro.' I never really thought of it before—but the first Taliaferro must have been an Italian!"

"Why, yes," said Amaldi eagerly, "There is a Tagliaferro family in Italy."

"So you're half American and I'm half Italian," she went on, looking at him pleasedly out of her candid eyes. "Such coincidences *are* strange, aren't they?"

"They're very delightful," said Amaldi, in a voice as frank as her look. He was thinking: "You are the woman I have imagined all my life. It seems very wonderful that you should have Italian blood."

Sophy liked this frank voice of his and the clear look in his eyes so much that she gave way to impulse.

"It seems to me," she said with the smile that he was beginning to watch for, "that Fate means us to

become friends."

Amaldi thought: "And there is something of the child in you that makes me worship."

He said a little formally, but with feeling:

"I should consider that the greatest honour that could come to me." Then he added, also under impulse: "Since you're so kind, I'd like to confess something. May I?"

"Yes—do!" said Sophy, still smiling.

"It is this: When Varesca introduced me to you this evening, I had the feeling of having known you before. Strange, wasn't it?"

She was looking at him, her lips parted. She hesitated an instant, then said:

"It was even stranger than you know—because I, too, had that feeling about you. Such things almost make one believe in the old Hindu ideas. Perhaps in some other world and age we have been friends already. It's really very mysterious...."

"But, after all," said Amaldi, "mystery is what makes life worth while."

"I know," she said; "yet people are always trying to solve it...."

"Yes; that's one of its chief uses, I suppose—but not its end."

Sophy looked at him, interested.

"What do you think its end is?" she asked.

"Itself," he answered. He went on in a lighter tone:

"The destiny of the Churchly God has always seemed so dreary to me. Think of it! A supremely well-informed Supreme Man—for whom there could be no mystery. An immortality of sound information that couldn't be added to or subtracted from!"

"We really couldn't help being friends, you know!" said Sophy, smiling. "You must come to see me. My husband is not very well—so I don't give dinners or parties or go out much myself. But I like to have my friends come to see me."

Amaldi thought:

"You have the most beautiful heart, and I don't misunderstand it. It is full only of kindness. I shall suffer ... *ma ciao!*"

"*Ciao*" is Milanese, and it means many things.

V

It was four o'clock when Sophy and Mrs. Arundel left the ball. Olive would not hear of her taking a cab, but sent her home in her own carriage. As she rolled through the empty streets, above which the dawn was beginning to quicken, Sophy had a queer feeling of driving through the echoing halls of a vast and sinister house from which the roof had been lifted.

Above Regent's Park a late moon hung bleak and glassy. It shone with that wan glare as of a planet sick to death. Richard Burton's line about the moon occurred to her: "A corpse upon the way of night."

The reaction of her extraordinary exhilaration of the early evening was upon her. All about her seemed eldritch, sinister. Even the sparrows, the town's familiars, the excellent, shrewd gossips of the pavement, seemed unlike real birds.

When she entered her own hall, the sight of the pallid, heavy-eyed footman who admitted her distressed her still further. She hated servants to have to wait up for her. She always gave Tilda strict orders to go to bed.

The footman lighted and gave her her bedroom candle. Chesney disliked gas to burn all night.

"Good-night, William. I'm afraid you are very tired," said Sophy.

"Not at all, madam," said William politely. His tone suggested that he really preferred taking his rest on a hard hall-chair with an hour's nap in bed before rising at six o'clock.

Sophy sighed as she went upstairs. All her exultant feeling of the evening had been only another illusion. The time was out of joint again. As she passed Chesney's door, a thick, heavy smell of lamp-smoke made her turn. She tried the knob softly. The door opened, and the nauseous smell flooded her. Yes; he had gone to sleep still poring over that odious book. The lamp, almost burnt out, was sending up a thick, brownish smoke—the wick, barely moist with oil, was fringed with little mushrooms of fire. Sophy extinguished the lamp and stood gazing down at her husband. He had been a magnificent looking man, three years ago. He was still handsome, but in the way that a fine stallion is still handsome when its withers and back begin to sink. It was as if he were

sinking in on himself—as if the great muscles and sinews were relaxing like elastic that has been over-used. Holding the candle closer, Sophy gazed and gazed at him. It was as if she were gazing at a stranger. There was a fine spangling of sweat on his broad forehead; as he breathed his lips puffed in and out. They looked dry and cracked. He slept heavily, as though his veins held lead, as though his limbs were weighted. The solid heaviness of his sleep struck her as appalling. And, suddenly, what Olive had told her rushed over her again. Standing motionless, her eyes took frightened scurries about the room, over the bed, the dressing-table, the little stand that supported the lamp. A glass and bottle that had held cognac stood empty. She bent closer—then suddenly drew back ashamed. She was not like Psyche spying on Love with her candle; but a woman gazing at defenceless sensuality—at the degraded body that had once housed love. An immense pity came over her. She felt that she had been guilty towards him—guilty of staring at his bare degradation with calm eyes while he lay unconscious. She was not being his wife but a cold critic. And perhaps—perhaps, it was only she who could save him, who could restore to him his real self.

Setting down her candle, she drew away the obscene book from under his heavy hands, closed it, and laid it to one side. He did not stir or mutter. Then she knelt down beside him, hiding her face against the bed. She wished to pray for him and for herself. But her thoughts scattered, whirled with the coiling sparkles against her closed eyelids.

"Mystery ... Mystery ... Mystery ..." This word kept beating through her mind. Yes; it was all mysterious

—pain, joy, illness, health, goodness, vice—even love. But love was the greatest mystery of all. Whence did it come, and whither go? Where was her love for Cecil?

"Mystery ... Mystery ... Mystery."

When she reached her own bedroom, and found herself once more alone, that overkeyed, excited feeling came back upon her. She glanced at the bed with distaste. It was impossible to think of stretching her limbs out calmly and resting her head on a pillow. She went from one window to the other, drawing back the curtains. Her room was a corner one and looked south and east. The sun was now rising. The whole lower heaven was covered by a dull-red down of cloudlets. It looked softly convex above the quiet tops of the trees, like the breast of a vast bird. Somewhere, far above, out of sight in the pale-grey vault of air, she fancied its golden crest and beak, darting among the stars, that were as little, shining gnats to it. She went and glanced at her watch which Tilda had placed on the table beside her bed. A quarter to five. She would wait until a quarter past, then she would ring up the butler (he, at least, had had a night's rest) and order her horse.

As the sun rose higher, a thin white mist began to coil softly like steam among the trees of Regent's Park. At five minutes to six she was mounted. The brown gelding seemed as glad to be abroad as she was. He *quhirred* with pleasure and good spirits at every step. She loved the creaking of the saddle, and the massive satin of his shoulders as each step sent the great joint in rotary motion, making a shining ripple along the sleek hide. She felt all lifted up high above the normal griefs and trials of life. As she

galloped to and fro, she thought of Amaldi, and recalled her presentiment of something important about to happen to her last evening. Had it happened? Was her meeting with Amaldi an important thing? Perhaps his friendship was to prove vital. He, too, had known unhappiness—of that she was certain. She thought of her fancying how, if he were a priest, she could confess anything to him. It came to her suddenly that it was because he would be sure to understand—even things alien to his own nature.

She did not see her husband that day. He sent word that he had waked feeling badly and would "sleep it off." Towards evening, when she wished to go to him, his man told her that he was still sleeping. She went to bed herself without seeing him. The next morning again he sent word that he felt better, but would not be up till after luncheon and wished to be left quiet. This made her uneasy; she would have liked to go to him in spite of his wish, but she dared not. Such intrusions only made him furious.

As she had some shopping to do for the baby, she spent the early afternoon in this manner. When she returned and went to her writing-room, a gay little apartment looking out on the small garden, she found Cecil lounging there in one of the easy-chairs. As soon as she glanced at him she saw that he had what she called his "good" look—that is, his face was quiet and rather pale, and his mouth and eyes gentle. He gave a rather embarrassed smile as she entered, lifting one shoulder slightly in a way he had when nervously self-conscious. She knew that he was

repentant for the way that he had behaved to her on Thursday evening, and would tell her so.

She went up to him, laid one hand on his hair and kissed his forehead. He put up his hand and patted hers softly.

"So you're all right again? I'm so glad," she said, taking a chair in front of him. "I was worried about you yesterday."

"Yes. I had a devilish time," he said. As he spoke, he blew a cloud of cigarette smoke that half veiled his face from her, and again he smiled in that half-sheepish way. This smile always roused in Sophy a feeling mingled of tenderness and irritation. She sat watching him smoke for a few moments without saying anything more. He always seemed to her to smoke feverishly, avidly, as if the cigarette were a sort of food and he very hungry. His cigarettes were enormous, made to order for him. He smoked without a holder, down to the very end. She thought that it must be bad for him to smoke so fast, and such quantities of these huge cigarettes. But she dared not say anything. A word only was sufficient to throw him from a "good" mood into a "bad" one.

He broke the silence himself.

"I say, Daphne," he blurted suddenly. "I was a beast to you the other night. Beg pardon."

Sophy looked at him consideringly without replying. Somehow this casual apology roused anew all the feeling of outraged anger that she had then felt. She hated, too, for him to call her "Daphne" on these occasions. It seemed such a cheap sentimentality. He had given her the name of "Daphne" in their

sweetheart days, because of that book of verse which she had written at twenty-one, and which had brought her a momentary fame.

"Going to sulk a bit—eh?" he now asked, with that self-conscious, conciliatory little grin of his.

"No; it isn't sulkiness," said Sophy. "I'm only wondering how much you really care?"

"I care a deuce of a lot, Daphne. 'Pon my soul I do."

"And you think such things as you said and—and did to me, the other night, can be made all right by a 'beg pardon'?"

Chesney moved uneasily. His eyes slipped from under hers. He lit another cigarette with elaborate care.

"Look here, Daphne," he said in a would-be bluff, frank tone. "What *did* I say ... and do? You know I get confoundedly blurry sometimes, when one of these beastly attacks is coming on."

"You really don't remember?" Sophy asked, looking at him keenly. She saw a slow red cloud his pale face.

"Well ... I've a hazy notion that I went for Gerald ... about those pearls. Nasty things!" he broke off viciously. "Mere pretty diseases—tumours—you know I loathe 'em."

Sophy had wondered many times what had become of her pearls after he had strewn the floor with them. She said now:

"What have you done with them, Cecil?"

His shoulder went up crossly.

"Oh, they're safe enough," he said grudgingly. "I'll have 'em strung over for you. Counted 'em this morning. They're all there. So you haven't got *that* against me."

Sophy sat looking down at her hands, and turning her wedding ring slowly round and round. She had never thought that she could come to hate an inanimate object as fiercely as she sometimes hated her wedding ring. But to-day she did not hate it. It seemed a dreary little symbol of a dreary fact that must be borne somehow, that was all. Suddenly she lifted her eyes to his.

"I don't harbour things 'against you,' Cecil," she said. "The pearls were the least of it all. It was the way you spoke of Gerald and that ... that loathsome book." Her look grew suddenly impassioned with resentment. "Why should you wish to show me such a thing?" she asked very low, and her voice trembled.

Chesney was deeply embarrassed again. He looked away from her, and that slow red rose in his face.

"Oh—men are hell!" he said thickly. "You'd never really understand a man, Sophy. There are abysms ... cess-pools in us."

He got up suddenly and flung himself on his knees beside her, hiding his face in her lap like a child.

"Don't try to understand," she heard him muttering. "Just try to ... to forgive."

There was something at once piteous and repulsive, in that huge figure crouching so humbly at her knee.

Sophy felt a choking sensation.

"Get up ... get up, dear," she pleaded. "I do forgive you! Please, please get up!"

"Will you kiss me then?" came the muttering voice, muffled by her skirts.

"Yes. Yes, I will. Only get up—do, dear, do!"

He knelt up, and, flinging his arms around her, reached his mouth thirstily to hers. That kiss was a deathly draught to Sophy, but pity made her accept it without shrinking visibly. In her mind the thought went round and round: "Mystery—mystery. What was once like life to me is now like death—worse." Then: "I must be kind to him. If I am kind perhaps I can save him."

Chesney was fingering the folds of her gown shyly.

"I say—what a darling you look in this frock, Daphne," he said. "It clings so—shows your lovely Greek body so beautifully. What's it made of?"

"They call it Chudder Cloth," she said, smiling.

Chesney gasped, as if she had sprinkled water in his face, then, sinking back upon the floor at her feet, he went into fits of the most immoderate mirth. "Oh! Ah!" He could scarcely get his breath. "Forgive me, Sophy! But 'Chudder Cloth'—'Chudder'—I never heard anything so ludicrous in my life——"

And he rolled over on the floor, shaken from head to foot with preposterous laughter, beating the carpet with his hands.

Sophy was used to these outbursts caused by some especial, yet apparently trivial, word. Sometimes they took the form of mirth, as to-day, sometimes that of rage. She remembered what Olive had told

her. Her heart felt very heavy.

There came a knock at the door. Chesney sprang to his feet, scowling at the closed door.

"Come in!" said Sophy.

It was William, with a card on a tray.

"The Marquis Amaldi to see you, madam."

"Very well," said Sophy.

Cecil lighted another of his huge cigarettes.

"Who's this——foreigner?" he asked, amiably enough.

Inwardly Sophy contracted at the brutal adjective that she detested. Outwardly she was unmoved.

"A friend of Count Varesca's. I met him at the Illinghams'—no, at the Ponceforths' the other night."

"Mh!—— Well, so long. I'll make myself scarce for a bit. Can't stand foreigners."

He started towards a side door, turned, came back, and lifting her hand kissed it tenderly.

"You're a splendid thing!" he said very low. "I'm often a beast to you—but I love you—always."

He was gone. Sophy stood looking after him for some seconds, then she lowered her eyes to Amaldi's card, which she still held. She left the room thinking ... thinking....

VI

When Sophy entered the drawing-room, Amaldi was standing with his hands behind him, looking down at a drawing of herself that stood on a table near the fireplace. The drawing had been made when she was eighteen by a young Polish artist. It was done in yellow-and-brown chalks and had a curious glow—a look of golden light about it. Chesney disliked it. He pronounced it too "mystical." The truth was that it revealed a side of Sophy's nature which was forever inaccessible to him.

As she gave Amaldi her hand, she said: "You were looking at that old drawing. It's a strange thing, isn't it?"

"Yes. Like 'the shadow of a flame,'" he answered. Then as Sophy started and looked at him inquiringly, he added, smiling: "Varesca told me of your poems. I read them yesterday. I won't bore you by telling you how beautiful I thought them. And the title— I wondered so much how you came to think of that lovely title. That, in itself, is a poem."

Sophy blushed like a girl. She was very sensitive about that book of verse. Since she had known more of life, she had often wondered at her own naïveté which had allowed her to pour out from her heart, as from a cup, those inmost feelings, for any chance buyer to possess in common with her. The voice in that little volume was the voice of one crying in the wilderness of youth; now she was a woman, and she blushed for the passionate ignorance of the girl she had been.

Amaldi said quickly:

"Have I been indiscreet? Perhaps you don't like to talk of your writing. Please forgive me if I've been indiscreet."

"No, no; indeed you haven't been," she answered. "I'm very glad you like my verses. Only—well— I wrote them so long ago. One changes— I was very young...."

"And now," said Amaldi, smiling, "you feel very old, I suppose?"

She smiled in answer.

"I certainly feel older," she said lightly.

Amaldi was thinking how much like a young girl she looked, sitting there in her plain white gown, with her hands clasped about one knee. Having read those impassioned early poems, he marvelled at a spirit that could be at once so fiery and so virginal. He felt sure that there could be no other like her in the world—so deeply was he in love with her already. But this love was quite different from anything that he had ever felt before. It had in it both mysticism and fatality. It was a desire of the soul as well as of the body. He had had "loves" before—this was Love.

And in Sophy's mind was the consciousness of what Olive Arundel had told her, only the day before, about the tragedy of Amaldi's life. It seemed that when he was only twenty-three he had made a *mariage de convenance* to please his father. He had married his cousin, Clelia Castelli. Two years afterwards she had been unfaithful to him. Amaldi had fought with her lover. Then husband and wife had separated. There is no divorce in Italy.

Sophy was thinking now: "When he was twenty-five

—two years younger than I am—he was fighting his wife's lover with a bare sword. He was living out those real, dreadful things when he was a mere boy."

And she could not help glancing curiously at his hand, to which a seal ring of sapphire engraved with his arms gave such a foreign look.... Only thirty-one, and cut off forever by the laws of his country and its religion from family, from children.... Yes—that was tragic. That was real tragedy.

Amaldi said suddenly in his grave voice:

"May I know how you came to call your book *The Shadow of a Flame*?"

"Yes; it's very simple," she answered. "I was rather unhappy. I had stayed awake all night—reading by candle-light. My window looked to the east. When the sun rose, my candle was still burning. And as I started to blow it out, I noticed that in the sunlight, its flame cast a shadow on the page of my book. And it came to me that we were all like that—like little flames casting shadows in some greater light. And that our passions were also like little flames that cast shadows—of sorrow ... regret ... despair ... weariness...."

"Yes," said Amaldi, "yes—it is like that...."

Something in the timbre of her voice as she said the words, "sorrow ... regret ... despair ... weariness," moved him deeply. He did not dare to say more. He was not at any time a man of fluent speech, now his earnest desire not to be "indiscreet" in the least degree made him feel oddly dumb.

Sophy herself changed the note of their conversation to a lighter key.

"Tell me," she said suddenly, "is the home that you care for most in the town or in the country? I can't help thinking that your real home is in some beautiful country part of Italy."

"Yes," he said, his face lighting. "On Lago Maggiore."

"Ah! I was sure of it! I'd thought of Como. Is your lake as beautiful as Como?"

"I think it more beautiful. I believe you would think so, too. How I should like to show it to you—the Lake and our old *Tenuta*. We have a dear old place. I live there most of the time with my mother. We are great friends, my mother and I."

"Ah! that is beautiful!" she said warmly. "That is what I want my son to feel for me when he grows up."

Amaldi winced. He had not thought of her as having a child. It seemed to set her still farther from him. He had for an instant an almost overpowering sense of the bleakness of his lot. Like all Italians, he adored children. He would never have a son. And now he learned suddenly that she had a son—the child of another man.

"Ah," he said mechanically. "You have a son? Is he like you?"

"No; like himself. But some people think that his eyes are like mine. You shall judge for yourself. Only, please don't be vexed if he doesn't go to you at once. He's a funny mouse. He's rather stiff with strangers."

The butler here brought in tea, and as Sophy finished pouring it, she turned suddenly, exclaiming:

"I think that's my boy coming in now!"

She sprang up and, crossing the room with her light, joyous step, opened the door before Amaldi could overtake her. When she turned again, her little son was in her arms.

"You needn't wait, Miller," she said, over her shoulder, to the nurse. "I'll send him up to you later."

The boy leaned with one arm about his mother's neck, his slim, polished legs, emerging from white socks, hanging down against the soft curve of her breast. His little face, grave and concentrated, regarded the stranger with impartial attention.

Sophy seated herself, slipped off his quaint hat, and ran her hand over the short dark red curls. It seemed to Amaldi that the white hand quivered with ecstasy over the child's head like a white moth over a flower. The boy was not beautiful, but he had his mother's eyes, though he did not look like his mother.

"This is my little man ... this is Bobby," said Sophy, smiling from the boy to Amaldi, and sliding the child from her knee upon his feet.

"You really mustn't mind if he isn't friendly—he doesn't seem to like many people—and none, just at first."

Amaldi and the boy were looking gravely at each other. Suddenly Amaldi smiled. His face seemed to put off a certain delicate mask when he smiled like that. He held out his hand.

"Will you come and try my stick, Bobby?" he said. "It makes a splendid horse."

The boy pressed back hard against his mother's knee for an instant, his eyes still on Amaldi's. They

continued to look at each other steadily for some seconds. Then Bobby twisted around as he leaned against Sophy, looked up inquiringly into her face, smiled suddenly, showing his little crimped teeth, and, drawing himself erect, walked straight up to Amaldi.

"Oh!" said Sophy on a hushed breath, as when a bird alights near one. Never before had Bobby gone to a stranger. A feeling of delight came over her. The child was ratifying her own instinct about Amaldi. She looked on with lips parted and eyes softly shining, while Bobby, leaning now against Amaldi's knee, fingered the dark, smooth stick that made "a splendid horse." But while his small hands wandered over the curved handle, he was gazing not at the stick but into Amaldi's face.

Suddenly he pushed the stick aside.

"Take Bobby," he said.

Amaldi lifted him upon his knee, and the child, putting one hand against the young man's breast, continued gazing up into his eyes. Then he said:

"Stan' up.... Bobby! stan' up."

Amaldi put his hands about the firm little body, and raised it, so that Bobby stood like a tiny Rhodian Apollo, with a foot on either knee of his new friend. For some moments he stayed so, looking down into Amaldi's face with deep consideration. Then, as if having thought everything out to his entire satisfaction, he bent forward, and set the soft, damp ring of his small mouth against the young man's cheek.

"Bobby man!" he announced. And at once burst into

the wildest chuckles, hugging Amaldi's head to him with both arms, springing in his grasp like a bewitched india-rubber ball—repeating over and over, "Bobby man!—Bobby man!"

Amaldi clasped him close. His dark face glowed with pleasure. All at once it came back to Sophy afresh that his tragic marriage had been childless. Her heart felt very pitiful towards him.

Here the door opened, and Chesney entered.

Amaldi rose with Bobby still in his arms.

"My husband—Marchese Amaldi," said Sophy.

"How d'ye do?" said Chesney. He was looking at Bobby. Then he turned to Sophy.

"Isn't it rather late for the little chap to be downstairs?" he asked.

"I was going to send him away in a few moments. But he's made such friends with the Marchese. Isn't it odd? Just look at him."

Chesney sank into an armchair, and Amaldi also sat down, keeping the boy in his arms. Bobby had suddenly grown quite still. He remained with his head against Amaldi's breast, his thumb in his mouth, looking fixedly at his father. His blurs of reddish eyebrow were drawn together.

"Little monkey! He's scowling at me——" observed Chesney, with his short laugh. "He's not a filial character—young Robert," he flung out carelessly, as though he might be addressing Amaldi, but he did not look at him; his eyes were fixed on the boy, and he himself was scowling slightly.

Sophy spoke in a low aside, meant only for his ear.

"Now, Cecil; don't excite him, please. He doesn't sleep well when you worry him."

Chesney acted as though he had not heard her. He sat erect, then leaned forward, and with his great hands hanging loose between his knees, said in a firm tone: "Come here, Bobby."

The child did not stir. Then he took his thumb from his mouth.

"No," he said in a clear, distinct little voice. He put back his thumb and began sucking it vigorously, swinging one foot to and fro in a sort of accompaniment.

Sophy knew well this sign in Bobby. It meant flat rebellion and rising temper.

"Cecil...." she murmured. "Cecil...."

He took not the slightest notice of her.

"Charmingly you're brought up, ain't you ... you cheeky little brat," said he to his son, in a lazy sort of drawl. Then he barked it at him: "Come here to me when I tell you!"

Again Bobby removed his thumb, and again he said, "No," clearly and firmly.

Chesney got up.

When the child saw this, he relinquished his small arms of mutiny, and flattening himself against Amaldi's breast, clung to him, crying: "No! No! Teep Bobby—teep Bobby."

Amaldi was very pale. Sophy stepped in front of

Chesney. She tried to take Bobby in her arms, but nervous dread made him refuse, and he clung like a burr to Amaldi, hiding his face in his neck, clutching with his little hands.

"*Cecil*——" said Sophy again, for he had actually laid his hand on her arm as though to put her from his way.

Amaldi felt in an impossible nightmare. An icy rage congealed him. And suddenly, over the boy's head, the eyes of the two men met. Strange to say, Amaldi's were absolutely expressionless. Something in their still, blank look checked Chesney. He stood a second undetermined, then gave that self-conscious, embarrassed laugh that Sophy knew so well. It was over, then. That especial laugh always meant yielding on Cecil's part. She turned again to Bobby, her lip quivering in spite of her will.

"Come, darling.... Come to mother...." she whispered.

Suddenly the boy let her take him. He was trembling all over, but scorned to cry.

Amaldi murmured a few formalities and left. With Bobby close in her arms, Sophy went quickly past her husband out of the room. He made no effort to detain her.

VII

It was very hard to get Bobby to sleep that night. At last, however, he wearily subsided against Sophy's

breast and, thumb in mouth, demanded "All a gees." This meant the old nursery song of "All the pretty little horses." Obediently she began to sing in her rich contralto that was like the flutes and viols of love, tempered to the inanity of the nursery rhyme. But though she sang and sang, it was after seven o'clock before the boy fell fast asleep. She dressed hurriedly for dinner, slipping into a tea-gown of dull orange that Cecil particularly liked. She had made up her mind to talk to him about his attitude towards Bobby. She wished it to be as quiet a talk as possible, so she put on the orange tea-gown to please him, and set in her hair some tiny, orange lilies that had been sent down from Dynehurst that morning. He liked her to wear flowers in her hair. But though she made these preparations, she was quite determined to face anything in the matter of having "her say out" about his relations with the boy. She had long realised, in silence, that there was a strong antagonism between father and son. It seemed terrible, but she knew that such things were. It had been the same between Cecil and his own father. But she would not have the child terrorised and herself treated with indignity because of Cecil's moods. No; not even his illness could make her put up with that. And she thought, with a hot wave of pain and shame, of the scene that Amaldi had just witnessed.

Chesney came in to dinner, rather late and very much excited. He began rattling politics to her. The damned government was going under. He'd give it two more years. Then, by Jove! he was going to cut in and give his Radicalism a fling! The Conservatives were pretty well played out; they'd been in just four years too long, confound 'em! 'Twas Kitty O'Shea had saved the Union for 'em, and none of those rotters in office. As a clever Irish Unionist had said, they ought

to raise statues to Kitty O'Shea all over Ulster—and so on and so on.

Sophy listened pleasantly, putting in a word every now and then to show that she was really attentive. She was thinking all the time how pale his face was, and how dark and excited his eyes. This last was all the more noticeable, as of late his eyes had been so dull and faded looking. Now the pupils almost covered the iris. And she noticed, too, that, though he helped himself freely from every dish, he ate scarcely anything. This made her apprehensive. He was so much more apt to be irritable when he did not eat. Then he suddenly ordered a pint of champagne.

"Will you have some, too?" he asked her. "But you don't like it, do you?"

"Sometimes—when I'm thirsty. Not to-night."

"And just send another pint up to my room, Parkson. I shall read late to-night," he added, as an explanation to Sophy.

In the drawing-room after dinner he was very restless, roaming to and fro, smoking those great cigarettes, one after the other. He kept glancing at the clock. Sophy had drawn on a pair of long gardening-gloves and was peeling the stems of some roses. The butler had placed a great trayful of them on a low table before her, and as she peeled the long, thorn-armed stems, she arranged the roses in a crystal vase. They kept for days longer when stripped of their outer rind in this way. The tranquil monotony of her movements seemed to get on Chesney's nerves.

"For God's sake," he said finally, halting near her, "get through with that business and sing me something."

She sat down at once to the piano and sang some of Schumann's *Lieder* and soft, melancholy Russian folk-songs—the songs of a people bowed immemorially by oppression—almost in love with sorrow, as a prisoner comes to love his prison. She was glad that he had asked her to sing. Many a time had she played David to his Saul. Music, her singing especially, always softened him. Now it would be easier to talk with him of Bobby.

When she paused, he looked up at her from the chair in which he had stretched himself, his head sunk moodily forward. "By God! You're a sweet woman," he said.

Sophy rose, and, going over to him, sat on the arm of the big chair.

"I want to talk to you about something, Cecil. Something very important. Will you be nice to me?"

She had yielded him her hand, and he was looking at it earnestly, turning it this way and that in his great fingers, which were covered between the knuckles with a light furze of reddish hair—playing with the rings that he had given her. Sophy hated these rings, but he insisted on her wearing them; he was proud of their beauty on the beauty of her white hand. There were three, a pink pearl, an emerald, a ruby.

As she spoke, he clutched the hand with which he had been toying and looked up at her.

"Eh?" he said. "What's up?"

"It's about you and Bobby, Cecil."

He put her hand back upon her knee.

"Oh, the tigress and her cub. I see."

"No, Cecil, you don't see. I don't want to be disagreeable. I only want to try to explain things to you."

"Your son's high priestess interpreter?"

"No, dear; just a woman who understands babies better than a man could."

"Well?"

"I think the boy gets on your nerves, Cecil, and——"

"He does. Cross-grained little beggar."

"Yes, he is cross-grained. But harshness only makes him worse. He's one of those natures that can only be controlled by love."

"Like yours, eh?"

"Exactly."

Chesney thrust his hands deep into his pockets and smiled. It was an ugly, secretive smile.

"What the little monkey needs is a good thrashing," said he.

Sophy struggled desperately to keep her voice natural. Her heart was beginning to beat so fast that she felt her voice must surely tremble.

"Ah, Cecil, do be nice to me," she murmured. "You were so gentle and kind this afternoon."

"'Gentle and kind!' Oh, Lord!" he went off into a sort of frenzy of smothered laughter. "'Gentle and kind'—that's your ideal of manhood—husbandhood—— Eh? What?"

Sophy retreated from him. She remained standing, very quiet, very pale, her lips pressed together.

"As for being nice to you," he continued between his chuckles, "I thought it was your offspring you wanted me to be nice to."

Sophy said nothing. She was so angry, and so mortified at her own lack of self-command in allowing him to make her angry, that she was literally afraid to speak.

Chesney got up and lounged towards her.

"Look here," he said, putting his face close to hers. "I'd like you to realise, once for all, that that boy is mine as well as yours—at least I hope he is——" he interpolated brutally. "And what's more, if I choose to, I'll go upstairs this moment and thrash him in his crib!"

There is no doubt of it. At that moment Sophy felt the full force of the expression to have murder in one's heart. In her heart there was certainly murder. She felt herself saying over and over in thought, as to some Dark Power: "Let him fall dead. Let him fall dead. Before he can touch my son—let him fall dead, *dead*."

"Pfew! What eyes!" said Chesney, somewhat sobered. "You look a regular Jael—glowering at me like that...."

Sophy's eyes blazed on. She felt them burning in her

head. She said nothing.

Suddenly his mood took another turn. He gave her a glance of would-be shrewdness, very hateful.

"Ill tell you what's at the bottom of all this," he said sullenly. "It's that dirty little foreigner who was coddling the brat when I came in this afternoon. You've been discussing me with him behind my back. A pretty——"

"*How dare you!*" It came in a slow, fierce whisper. "*How dare you!*" she repeated.

"All the better—if I'm mistaken," he retorted, again rather sobered for the moment.

"Oh...." Sophy drew a long breath, another. She shuddered convulsively, then grew rigid. "Oh...." she said finally. "To think I ever thought myself ... *in love* with you!" Her emphasis on the words "in love" was sick with self-contempt.

A ghastly look came over Chesney's face. It turned grey, and moisture sprang out on his forehead. He collapsed all at once into a chair, leaning his forehead on his hands.

"By God—I'm an ill man——" he stammered. Sophy stood an instant in doubt. He was a great actor in his way. But that livid face was not one that could be assumed at will. She rang for help—went over to him.

"What is it? Do you feel faint?" she asked, in a constrained voice. He seemed unable to answer. Parkson appeared in the doorway. "Send Gaynor at once. Mr. Chesney is very ill."

She thrust her handkerchief into the vase of roses,

and drawing his heavy head against her shoulder, moistened his brow and temples. She felt somewhat as if she had risen from the block, to minister to the headsman, who had inadvertently wounded himself with his own axe.

Gaynor came within ten minutes. He was a small, quiet man, a little older than his master. He had been in his service ever since Chesney left Cambridge, had travelled with him, knew his every idiosyncrasy. Chesney would have no one but Gaynor with him during his mysterious attacks. Parkson was waiting at the door to know if he could be of assistance. "It's nothing serious, madam," the valet assured Sophy. "I'll just get the butler to help me to assist Mr. Chesney upstairs. He'll come round in half an hour. Pray don't worry, madam." Gaynor spoke very prim and correct English, when he did speak. He was singularly taciturn. Chesney used to boast that he had trained Gaynor to be silent in season and out of season, as some people train a pet dog to "speak."

Three-quarters of an hour later, as Sophy was sitting before her dressing-table while Tilda brushed out her long hair for the night, there came a knock at the door. Tilda went to answer it, and returned with an envelope in her hand. It was a note from Chesney, written by himself. It said that he felt much better—implored Sophy to come to his room before going to bed. She gazed down at the handwriting, feeling mystified. It was strong, flowing, and abounded in eager flourishes where the pen had glided from word to word without lifting from the paper. Yet she had seen Cecil only a short while ago in a state of collapse that really alarmed her.

"Who gave you this?" she said to Tilda.

"Mr. Gaynor, m'm."

"Very well. Tell Gaynor to say to Mr. Chesney that I will come in a few moments."

VIII

When she entered her husband's bedroom, he was already in bed, lying propped up against a heap of pillows. A shaded lamp burnt on a table close by—the same lamp that Sophy had extinguished at five o'clock the other morning. Gaynor was folding some garments and laying them away in a cupboard. As soon as Sophy came in, he slipped out in the mousey way that she so disliked. She had never been able to overcome her antipathy towards Gaynor. Then she looked earnestly at Chesney and was startled by the change in him. His face was slightly flushed, but looked gay and good-humoured. He had on pyjamas of a light, grey-blue that threw out the gold in his fair hair. There were books all about him—on the bed, and on the table. Writing materials were laid close at hand on a leather blotting-pad. He smiled, with an almost childlike, ingenuous expression, and held out both hands to her.

Sophy felt bewildered. She did not know how to return this look. Her heart felt sore and outraged, yet something in this eager, humble look of his melted her against her will. She went up to the bed and let him take her hands.

"You'll forgive a chap, won't you, eh, Daphne?" (Oh,

if only he wouldn't call her "Daphne" on these occasions!) "A rum, seedy duffer, who's devilish crusty at times, but who worships your shoe-soles!" (So he called it being "crusty"—those ways and words that seared her most intimate womanhood like a hot iron!)

"Are you really better? What was it?" she said, evading a direct answer, and trying to infuse extra kindness into her voice to make up for the evasion.

"Oh, it's just the fag end of that beastly jungle fever I got in India. Gaynor understands it like a native. Gave me some drops. Indian specific for the thing, you know. So I'm forgiven—eh? It's *pax* between us?"

"Yes—*pax*," said Sophy. She felt very tired, and turned as if to draw up a chair, but the big hands held her fast.

"No—no—not an inch away from me, even for a second. Sit here—on the bed—close to me."

She let him draw her down. She could not keep her eyes from his face. There was something in it—a strangeness. It was Cecil's face and yet it was not quite his face. Or was it his voice that was strange? Yes; there was something in his voice. It was almost as though he were imitating himself. She felt that her own thoughts were becoming mixed. But the impression of strangeness—of something queer—grew upon her. And all at once, as she became accustomed to the shaded lamp, she noticed, with an odd little start of the spirit, that his eyes were pale, and dull again—like bits of glass that have been rubbed together—like those pale, greenish glass marbles that boys call "taws." It was doubly striking—this change in his eyes—because of the way that

they had been over-dark and dilated only a little while ago. His lips, too, she noticed, were very dry. As he talked eagerly, volubly, he kept sipping champagne from the glass that Gaynor had filled just before leaving the room. Sometimes his lips stuck to his teeth, they were so dry. And his upper lip caught up for an instant in this way, gave him a peculiar, unnatural look.

"Isn't the medicine that Gaynor gives you very strong?" she asked anxiously. "Isn't it dangerous to take such strong medicine—without a doctor's advice?"

She was so utterly ignorant of the effects of opium or morphia, that she put aside the things that Olive Arundel had told her, as she listened to his excited, garrulous talk. Opium gave wonderful dreams—deep sleep. Morphine was used to quiet delirium. This could not be the effect of either of those drugs. It seemed much more probable to her that what he had said was the simple truth, and that Gaynor had given him some strong Oriental medicine to check the effects of fever.

"No—no—nonsense," he cried, in answer to her suggestion, a fretful look crossing his forehead. Then a sort of slow ecstatic expression crept over his face. He caught her hands in his again.

"Oh, the bliss—the sheer bliss of relief from pain!" he murmured. "Half an hour ago I was in hell—quite so. Now...." He drew away one of his hands, and spread it out slowly at arm's length, smiling at it. It was odd and painful to see the huge man thus reproduce exactly the gesture of a baby who gazes with wonder at its own hand.

"Now," he went on, "my very hands are happy. It's a pleasure—a thrilling joy just to move my fingers—quietly, like that...."

"You aren't feverish now, are you?" asked Sophy. She put her hand on his forehead. It was dry and warm, but not feverish.

"No—no. Not in the least," he said, and again that fretful look crossed his face. But the next instant he was rambling on.

"Yes—bliss just to be—just to breathe. To stretch out—so." He elongated his limbs under the bedclothes, stretching luxuriously like a great cat. "If I were a Titan, by Jove!—I could fill up space just by stretching myself like that. Bum fancy, eh?" He laughed softly, and took several sips of champagne—then lighted a cigarette.

"Ought you to smoke?" faltered Sophy. Somehow, the more gay and garrulous he grew, the more depressed and anxious she felt. She did not trust Gaynor. What was this sinisterly benevolent medicine that could change a man from an angry, brutal invalid, into a huge, merry child as it were, chirping at the toys of fancy?

"Do you know anything about epilepsy, Sophy? Bless you, you darling! don't look so frightened. *I* haven't got epilepsy—but there was that Russian chap—Dostoievsky—who had it. He speaks of a wonderful moment—a luminous moment that comes just before an attack—before the fit, you know. He says you seem to understand everything, and know everything, and be in harmony with everything—as if there were no more time. Well—I have not only one moment like that but hundreds, thousands—

when I'm as I am now—after a collapse like that. By God! It's worth the suffering. That's what Dostoievsky said. He said that moment was worth all the rest of his life. He was right.... Yes, he was right."

Sophy took one of his excited hands and held it in both her own.

"Cecil—dear Cecil," she said. "Please, for my sake—consult a doctor about that medicine Gaynor gives you."

For a second—the merest flash, a look of fury narrowed his eyes. Then he laughed, gaily, good-naturedly, patted her hand.

"My good child, haven't you ever heard the expression 'crazy with joy'? Well, I'm crazy with the joy of relief from pain, that's all. Can't a chap babble a bit to his own wife without being threatened with a doctor? Come— I suppose I *am* talking a bit too much. Tell me a story, as the children say—and I'll keep quiet. By the way—talking of children—I sent for you chiefly to tell you that you were right about the boy. He's a devil of a little individual, that's all. I'm rather an individual myself. Naturally we clash. Relationship doesn't alter such things. Relationship is a big farce. There aren't any true relationships except those of the spirit. You're Queen of Bobs from this time forward. There— I *am* forgiven now, ain't I!"

"Yes; truly—from my heart," said Sophy, quite melted. She put her face down against his hand. "If only...."

"If only what?"

"If only you could always be your true self—*this* self."

Chesney said nothing. He was lighting another cigarette—leaning over and holding it to the lamp clumsily.

"Oh, poor dear! You can't do it that way; here's your other hand," she said, smiling and releasing the hand she held. Chesney closed his eyes for a moment. Dreamily he said:

"Won't you tell me that story? You tell such lovely stories when you're in the mood."

"I can't think of one somehow. *You* tell *me* one."

In that thick dreamy voice, his dry lips cleaving together now and then, he began to speak.

"Once there was a man who was shut by his arch enemy into a dark dungeon. This enemy's name was Bios." (Sophy knew no Greek, and somehow it pleased him to fling out to her this clue to the parable that he was inventing, knowing that she could not use it.) "Bios shut the man up in his foul dungeon. But worse than the darkness and the stone walls was the legend of the place. It was told that out of the crevices there came a horrid Thing like a winged scorpion, with steely horns and a sting of living fire. And in the darkness this Thing would dart upon the prisoner in that dungeon, and drive him round and round. By the light of its fiery sting he could see just enough to run from it but not to escape. This man thought: 'I will not run from this Thing until I die from exhaustion. I will bare my breast to it and die at once, from its sting.' Pour me out a bit more champagne, there's a dear girl."

"Did—did Gaynor say that champagne was good to take with that medicine?"

"Yes—yes"—impatiently. "Don't you want to hear the end of my story?"

"Of course—but—yes, go on."

He drank half a glass of the wine at a draught, and dropping the lighted cigarette on the bedclothes seemed not to notice it. Sophy hastily brushed it upon the floor, then lifted it and put it in the ash-tray. He went on in that sing-song way:

"So the man bared his breast. And he felt the little sting go in—delicately—deliberately——" His slowly modulated voice seemed to make her see this fiery sting going into the man's flesh in the dark. She shivered.

"Oh, finish!" she said. "I don't like this story, Cecil."

"Wait," he murmured. "And as the sting went into his living flesh—there flowed through him, not death—but rapture—rapture—rapture——" His voice trailed off.

He seemed to have fallen suddenly asleep. Sophy hoped that he had. It seemed to her as if he were a little delirious. She started to rise softly—at once his hand gripped her, holding her down. "I'm not asleep," he said. "I'm only thinking. I'm thinking how badly I told that story, when it is really beautiful—quite beautiful. But I don't want to talk any more."

She waited some moments—then said in a soft, even whisper:

"Asleep, dear?"

Only his heavy breathing answered her. She lifted her hand from his breast, little by little, turned down the lamp, and stole from the room. Neutral tinted in

face and figure, quietly alert, Gaynor sat on a chair outside the door. He rose for Sophy to pass. For some reason, that even she herself could not quite make out, she broke down and wept when she reached her own room. Kneeling beside her bed, her face buried in her pillow, her arms clasping it, she kept sobbing: "Oh, poor Cecil! poor Cecil!"

IX

For a week after this Chesney was much better, if rather languid. He seemed in a peaceable, rather indifferent frame of mind—that is, he was apparently detached from immediate matters, such as the life of his little household, which usually "got on his nerves." He kept his room a good deal, or lay on the big, leather lounge in the smoking-room, reading incessantly. His interest in politics, however, seemed suddenly to have revived, and he continually assured Sophy that the party which had been in power since 1886 was on its last legs, and that the G. O. M. would be reinstated as Prime Minister within two years. "If I wasn't so handicapped with this rotten fever, I'd throw off my coat and jump into the ring," he kept telling her.

"With the Liberals?" Sophy ventured.

He scowled, then grinned.

"Do I strike you as Conservative?" he asked.

"No—but your family——"

"Confound the family," he said cheerfully.

He took up his book again—a heavy volume on German politics, and Sophy sat watching him quietly as she embroidered a collar for Bobby. She wished with all her heart that he would "go in" actively for politics. She felt that what he needed, perhaps most of all, was some steady, vital interest and occupation. He was only thirty-three, and she had heard from many people that much had been expected from him by men whose opinion in such things mattered. Of course, his mother was furious at his Radical tendencies and called him "turncoat" to his face, among other terms as frank and equally harsh. He always met this with the secretive smile that so enraged her. At twenty-seven his brilliant series of articles, "The Liberalism of a Tory-Born," had been much talked of. In them he showed originality, a singular grasp of matters for so young a man, and, in addition, that perhaps most valuable gift for the man who wishes to "arrive"—a tremendous power of conviction that there is but one side to a question—the side on which he stands. He saw the other side, of course, but he saw it as the side of the wave which breaks—as froth.

There were people, however, who said that Cecil Chesney was "agin' the Government" as he was against most facts that happened to be established, that they had prophesied from the first that his "staying power" was *nil*, and his brilliancy of the unstable, sky-rockety sort that peters out in talk and scribbling. Certainly he had made an odd *volte-face*, when he whipped about at twenty-eight and went off on that exploring expedition to Africa.

Sophy was very ignorant about politics. She

imagined that if Cecil only chose, he could easily become a member of the House of Commons and make a stir in that august and portly body. This innocent belief shows how really and sincerely and extremely ignorant she was. But then she had had few opportunities of information. The first year of her marriage had been spent chiefly in learning how to adapt herself in some sort to her eccentric, passionate husband, to the new characters and customs with which she found herself surrounded, to the amazing difficulties of her intercourse with Chesney's family. Lady Wychcote had been hostile to her from the first. But Sophy had a gift of natural, fiery dignity, which constrained even her imperious mother-in-law to treat her, if not with kindness, at least with a certain measure of outward respect. Gerald was a kindly, quiet, scholarly man of thirty-six, who cared nothing whatever for politics. His books and the welfare of the miners whose labour was one of the chief sources of the Wychcote riches, amply filled his time. It may be imagined what a severe thorn her eldest son proved in the proud flesh of his mother. And as her disappointment in Cecil waxed, her love for Gerald waned. When she realised that there had sprung up a quiet affection between him and his young sister-in-law—"the daughter of Heth" as Lady Wychcote called her to her own circle—she came near to hating him. That he had not married and showed no inclination to enter that respectable state so incumbent on the heirs of old titles and large fortunes, was like a continual draught on the smouldering embers of her grievance against him for having been born sickly. He had suffered from childhood with an obscure form of heart-trouble.

Sophy's second year of marriage had brought Bobby

and the first serious symptoms of her husband's malady. She had certainly had scant time for the study of politics. What little she did know was gleaned from the glib, rattling talk of Olive Arundel, who, as the wife of an M. P., had the political patter at her tongue's tip.

So Sophy worked on the little collar for Bobby, and dreamed that she was sitting behind the grating of the Ladies' Gallery, in the House of Commons, to hear Cecil's maiden speech. She had just arrived at the pleasant moment when Mr. Gladstone, reinstated as premier, was listening, hand at ear, with unmistakable signs of surprised approval to the eloquence of his new supporter, when Cecil himself destroyed the vision. He let the heavy German book fall to the floor with a bang and said:

"What's on for this week in the way of society? Anything promising?"

"We've had lots of invitations, Cecil, but I've refused them, because you weren't feeling well."

He looked peevish.

"Hang it all! Why didn't you consult me before making such a holocaust as that? I'm feeling much more fit. Think I'd like to mix with pleasant fools for a time."

Sophy looked doubtful.

"Don't you think it's too soon, Cecil? You were awfully ill that night."

"Well, I didn't stay ill, did I?"

"N-no. You recovered wonderfully quickly. But it was that strong medicine that Gaynor gave you." She

stopped stitching on the little collar, and looked at him earnestly. "Somehow, I *am* so afraid of your taking that medicine, Cecil."

"Rubbish!" he said curtly.

"You can't think how it affects you——"

"How that fever affects me, you mean, don't you?"

Sophy did not like to say too much. He was frowning, and he had been so amiable for several days. She began to sew again, saying only:

"Of course, I don't really know. Only—it worries me."

Chesney got up.

"I think I'll go out for a bit," he said. "Just a turn in the Park. It's beastly stuffy indoors."

"Would you like me to come with you?"

"You forget—don't you? You told me Olive Arundel was coming for tea."

"Oh, so I did. Well then—but don't overtire yourself."

He scowled frankly this time.

"Confound it, Sophy—I told you I felt quite fit." He reached the door, then turned. "Mind you hold on to the next invitation that seems promising. I need bucking up a bit. Mixing with my fellows, confound 'em! It will give me something to vent my spleen on, if nothing else. So long."

As it happened, Mrs. Arundel came with an invitation. It was for a dinner at the House of Commons. She had coaxed her Jack to give this dinner. Varesca had never been to a dinner at the

House of Commons.

"You *must* come, Sophy," she said urgently. "It's going to be *bwilliant*." (Whenever Olive grew very intense she missed her "r's" and this suited her Greuze type charmingly.)

Sophy needed no urging. It seemed to her that this was the very thing for which Cecil had been wishing. She accepted for them both.

Olive leaned over and kissed her.

"Oh, I *am* so pleased. And that duck of an Amaldi will be in the seventh heaven."

Sophy could not help smiling at the idea of the quiet, reserved Amaldi being called a "duck."

"Why do you smile, Sophy? Don't you like him? Varesca says he is madly in love with you."

Sophy was annoyed to feel herself blushing, for this blush came wholly from vexation and she knew that Olive would interpret it otherwise.

"It's very stupid of Count Varesca to say such things," she said a little haughtily.

"Oh, *no*, darling!—Attilio may be impulsive—but he *isn't* stupid."

Sophy's grey eyes grew long with laughter. Olive, puzzled, demanded to know what she *could* be laughing at.

"I think Attilio is such a funny name, Olive. Do you really call him Attilio?"

"Of course I do. But I don't think it is a *funny* name exactly—only sweetly quaint. Besides—there's

positively *no* shortening it. Tilio is *too* silly, and one *couldn't* call a *man* 'Tilly' ... an Italian of all things. Now *could* one?"

Sophy laughed and laughed, and Olive, after pouting for a second, joined in.

As Sophy thought, Chesney was much pleased with the idea of this dinner at the House of Commons.

"It will be mostly made up of the Conservative gang, I suppose," he commented. "All the more fun baiting them. I know a thing or two that will wring the withers of the Hon. John—stodgy duffer! Thank God, his career will end in the *cul-de-sac* of the House of Lords!"

He began walking up and down the room, grinning over the "thing or two" with which he would "wring the withers" of his host. Sophy felt suddenly anxious. Suppose he had one of his outbursts of rage at that dinner? She had forgotten his violent antipathy to the Powers that Were, when she accepted the invitation.

"I suppose there'll be Liberals, too, at the dinner," she ventured rather timidly.

"There'll be *one* Liberal there, by Jove!" said Chesney, and he added a few chuckles to his grin.

As the evening of the dinner drew near, Sophy grew more and more apprehensive. Chesney was no longer in the amiably apathetic mood that had followed the first days of his recovery from his last attack. His face had taken on again that waxen pallor, and his

pupils seemed to her unnaturally dilated.

At tea-time an unfortunate incident occurred. Chesney sometimes had tea with Sophy. He would wait until the tea was frightfully strong, then drink two or three cups of it, without milk or sugar. This afternoon they were sitting together while he drank what she called his "tea stew," when William brought in a parcel.

"Fallals for to-night?" asked Chesney.

"No. I haven't bought anything. I can't think what it is," said Sophy, puzzled. She fetched the little scissors from her writing-table and cut the cord on the parcel. It contained an odd little boat, like the fishermen's boats on Lago Maggiore. When it was wound up the little men in it worked their oars. Amaldi's card lay on top. He had written on it:

"For my friend Bobby, from his 'man.'"

Chesney put down his cup, and came over.

"What the devil is that?" he said, scowling at the toy. Then he picked up Amaldi's card. The blood rushed to his face. "I call that a confounded liberty!"

Sophy paled. Amaldi had promised Bobby this toy the afternoon of his call. Then she said, in as commonplace a tone as she could manage:

"I see no liberty in it—only a natural piece of kindness. Bobby took a great fancy to him. He promised to send this toy."

Chesney turned on her.

"Throwing a nubbin to the calf to catch the cow, as you say in Virginia, eh?" he said brutally. She flushed

with such crimson intensity that the tears sprang to her eyes. In a ringing voice she cried out, as she saw him eyeing the flush jeeringly:

"It's for you ... for *you* that I am blushing!"

Without another look at him, she took up the toy and went out of the room.

She was so pale in her gown of white crêpe when she came downstairs, dressed for dinner, that he said, after eyeing her discontentedly:

"Good Lord! You look like the family ghost. Can't you stick on a bit of rouge?"

"No. I don't like rouge."

His eyes fixed on the chaplet of ivy leaves in her shaded hair.

"I suppose that garland is to complete the impression of an Iphigenia about to be sacrificed, eh?"

"Cecil...." she said it earnestly, impressively. "Don't let's quarrel to-night."

"Why not to-night especially?"

"Because...." her lip quivered. "I've so looked forward to being proud of you to-night."

He struggled against it, but she had touched him. His face softened. He just brushed her shoulder with his great hand.

"You're a fine thing, by God!" he said, in a husky voice.

They drove to Westminster in silence.

X

At half-past eight the twilight was still clear and soft. The women's bare shoulders and jewelled heads gleamed charmingly against the dark sheen of the light-scattered river. Such of them as were made up for artificial light looked as though they had strayed from another century and forgotten to have their hair powdered also. Those that were prettily painted reminded Sophy of strange orchids that would show best by candle-light. She herself felt still and listless. Glancing at these men and women gathered together for the evening, she saw as she realised their personalities that the occasion would be "bwilliant" as Olive had said. And she felt so dull—as though the flame of her spirit had died down into pale smoke.

Olive found the chance to whisper a few words. Sophy had told her frankly how ill Cecil had been only two weeks before, and of his renewed interest in present political questions. She had begged Olive to "arrange" things a little. She was so afraid that he would get excited if he found himself surrounded entirely by men who were of the Government or on its side.

"Poor dear," Olive now whispered. "You're so pale. I'm sure it's anxiety. Don't be anxious. I've put Cecil at the uttermost end from Jack. Poor, darling Jack *does* so irritate him with his honest platitudes. *I* know! Then he'll have that rabid Radical, Cunnynham Smythe, near by. He'd have to out-Herod Herod you know, to fall foul of Cunny Smythe. And there's the Russian Ambassador, Suberov, opposite. You told me that Cecil read the Russians, didn't you? Well—that ought to be soothing. I've gathered all the

ultra-Tories at *my* end. Amaldi's to take you in, and I've put Oswald Tyne on your right—two poets together, you know. There's that provoking Sybil Chassilis—at least half an hour late——"

She went forward to greet Lady Chassilis, and Amaldi came up to Sophy. She saw her husband glance their way, then deliberately turn his back and begin talking to the man next him. Something in that great, stolid, well-shaped back struck Sophy as ominous. She felt herself grow even paler. Her very lips felt cold as they rested on each other. She was filled with a presentiment of coming disaster. But, somehow, as she looked into Amaldi's eyes and listened to his quiet voice, a feeling of reassurance stole over her. This feeling was wholly without reason. It was only that his mere presence seemed to give her a feeling of safety, as on that first occasion of their meeting.

"Did Bobby approve of my offering?" he asked, noticing her extreme pallor. He thought that she looked even more lovely pale like this.

"Yes. It was good of you. He went to sleep with the little boat in his arms."

Here Oswald Tyne approached. He was one of the most remarkable characters of his day. Years ago, when she was a schoolgirl, Sophy had heard him lecture in her own country. He himself had then been a youth but just graduated from Oxford. She remembered him, a slender, poetic figure. Now he was a heavy, middle-aged man. The long face had become jowled; the light irises of his eyes showed too broad a crescent of white below them. The sensual, heavy-lipped, good-natured mouth seemed to weigh upon the chin, creasing it downward. He

was always delightful to Sophy, but she always felt ill-at-ease with him. This feeling was obscure to her herself. She had never tried to analyse it. With the oddest contradiction, at one and the same time she admired his gifts, and felt a great compassion for him —the man. And this compassion could not have been called forth by anything in the circumstances of his life.

"Thank you for being so pale to-night, dear lady," he said in his abrupt, whimsical way. "One gets so weary of colour. How Iris must have hated her rainbow at times. Our Englishwomen are too beautifully tinted. One longs sometimes for the sight of an albino. Think of an assembly of negroes and albinos. How austere and weird at the same time. Would you have such an assembly garmented all in black or white or dull orange?"

"But orange is a colour," ventured Sophy, smiling.

Tyne grew extremely serious and impressive. "No; no! Pardon me. Orange is only the earthly body of light. I think we should dress our assembly in orange —the albinos in a clear tulip tint—the negroes in a fierce saffron."

"Oswald! what *fwightful* nonsense you talk at times!" cried Mrs. Arundel, overhearing this. "Please go and take in Countess Hohenfels. She's dying to hear you talk."

Tyne looked at her out of his heavy, swimming eyes.

"A German? You have given me a German for dinner? I see. You divined that my mood would be musical. But Germans have mathematical imaginations. Their music is the integral calculus of

the spheres. It is——"

Olive firmly drew him away, still pouring forth this flood of easy nonsense.

At table, Sophy noticed that her husband glanced from her to Amaldi once or twice. His look was hard and hostile. She determined to try to talk as much as possible with both Tyne and Amaldi. This would be easier—as it became at once evident that the dinner would be one of those delightful occasions on which little groups talk together, even across the table.

"When are you going to make me see another beautiful dawn?" asked Tyne abruptly.

Sophy gazed at him. She wondered what was coming, and as he smiled at her in his slow way, she thought how much worse it seemed for a poet to have black teeth than for a mere, ordinary mortal like John Arundel.

"How did I make you see a beautiful dawn?" she asked, knowing that he wanted her to put the question.

"By writing your 'Shadow of a Flame' and letting me read it. Yes—all night I played with those lovely, flickering verses."

"You are too kind to me," she said shyly. "Tell me when I am to read another of *your* books—that are not shadows of flames, but flames themselves."

"Lovely—lovely!" he murmured. "That is quite lovely of you. But as for a new book—— It is so prosaic to publish a book in London. Nothing really happens. Now in Paris—why—one day all the boulevards blossom like beds of daffodils. You are amazed. You

ask, 'Why this delicious flowering?' You are answered —'Paul Bourget has published a new novel.'"

He went airily on for some moments in this strain. From across the table, a clever critic and man of letters was listening with pleased amusement. Suddenly he said:

"Tell me, Oswald, have you ever read the works of an American called Edgar Saltus?"

"Why Edgar Saltus, like a stiletto from the blue? Yes; I have read some of his productions. But why?"

"Because the American boulevards seem to blossom with his flowers of rhetoric in the way that you describe. I have often wanted to parody him. But parody crouches at his feet."

Tyne held up one of his suave, heavy hands.

"Softly, please," he murmured. "Tread softly there. I have a certain tenderness for Mr. Edgar Saltus. I know nothing in literature more touching than the way that passion and grammar struggle for mastery on every one of his wonderful pages!"

Amaldi listened with his quiet smile. He himself was not in a talkative mood that night. Besides, he was one of those men who, while seeming outwardly unconscious of what is not directly in contact with them, notice everything that takes place, and he had caught those dark looks cast by Cecil Chesney at Sophy and himself. Now he was glad to see that she was becoming diverted and roused from her listlessness by the talk of Oswald Tyne and his friend. He also observed that Chesney, too, had apparently changed his humour and was engaged in an animated conversation with the men and women

nearest him. After a while, he saw that Chesney was holding forth alone. But it was evidently a perfectly amiable harangue, for the others were listening with animated faces. Still Sophy, who could not catch the gist of her husband's talk, looked suddenly anxious, and Amaldi was relieved when the critic, who had been talking with Tyne, and whose name was Ferrars, said to Sophy:

"Your husband's having a brilliant go at Russian literature, Mrs. Chesney. Are you as keen on that subject as he is?"

"Yes, quite, I think."

"Tolstoy and Dostoievsky are our living Pillars of Hercules," said Ferrars, a little didactically. "They guard the portals of modern literature. They are our colossi—we others fuss and potter about under their huge limbs like pygmies."

"Speak for yourself, Charles," said Tyne coolly. "I may not be a colossus, but I have wings. Gauzy, iridescent, little vans maybe, but sufficient to lift me. I am not what sportsmen call a 'heavyweight' of literature—but I can coruscate, which your colossi cannot. And I am not sure that I don't prefer fireflies to eagles."

"Which do you think greater—Tolstoy or Dostoievsky?" Sophy slipped in, before Ferrars could launch a sarcasm.

"Oh, Tolstoy, Tolstoy ... by all means," murmured Tyne.

"Which do *you* think greater?" said Sophy to Amaldi.

"Well...." Amaldi reflected an instant. "When Tolstoy

regards the human race, one feels that he sees it made up of little Tolstoys. When Dostoievsky looks inward—it is as if he saw all humanity in himself—in Dostoievsky."

"Capital!" cried Ferrars. Sophy looked at Amaldi, pleased at hearing her own conviction so well put into words. Tyne regarded the young man dreamily.

"How charming is the multiplicity of opinion," he then said. "If I ever sacrificed it would be to the goddess of Variety. Now to me, Tolstoy is by far the greater figure of the two."

Ferrars had begun to talk to the woman on his right and was not listening any longer. The women on the left and right of Tyne and Amaldi were eagerly attentive.

"Why?" asked several voices at once.

"Because Tolstoy is the greatest Immoralist of his time," said Tyne serenely.

"Oh! Oh!" came several voices.

"He is immoral in spirit where others are only immoral in fact," continued the poet, quite unmoved. "Never was there so irreligious, so immoral a spectacle as that Titan in the throes of religion. For this religion of his violates and thwarts every natural instinct and desire of his pagan nature. To deny one's true nature is irreligion. To be egotistically selfless is the paradox of the inferno. Besides, is there a greater sin against genius than to worship the commonplace? Now virtue is the norm—the level convention invented by civilised man. The crime of virtuous genius is that it becomes null. The cult of virtue is the eighth deadly sin—in a creative mind. Fancy a

virtuous Creator!"

He laughed suddenly into the faces which seemed not to have decided whether to look shocked or to smile.

Sophy turned to Amaldi. But try as she might, she could not overcome the *gêne* cast upon her by those hostile looks of her husband. She felt that she was not being natural with Amaldi, and the more this feeling overcame her, the more she felt it impossible to recover her free, delightful intercourse with him. They talked conventionally, gliding over the surface of things. Once, in spite of herself, her eyes strayed towards Cecil. But he was not looking at her. He was leaning close to Lady Chassilis. A flush had come into his face. His eyes glittered. He seemed to be saying something delightful but rather shocking, for Sybil Chassilis gave him a sidelong flash out of her black eyes—then flushed and cast them down, smiling in a peculiar way. Sophy noticed with a sinking heart that he drank glass after glass of champagne. It must indeed be good wine for Cecil to drink so freely of it. He usually cursed the champagne of his friends.

Suddenly Tyne turned again to Sophy.

"I have a grievance—a sorrow—a real sorrow," he said. "I wonder if you can console me?"

"What is it?" asked Sophy in a low voice. He seemed never to be in earnest, yet, at that moment, the queer feeling of compassion that he always excited in her, rose in her heart.

He drew a deep sigh. Now she was sure that there was a mocking light, far back in his pale eyes.

"It is that no one will believe in my real wickedness —my beautiful vileness. I have no disciple who really believes in me. Yet I am wonderfully vile. Virtue seems like a pale, pock marked wench to me. I feel like crying out on her like old Capulet: 'Out, you tallow-face! You baggage!' But Sin, with the clear black flames curled about her naked feet like the petals of a lotus—Sin, with her delicate, acrid lips that never satiate and are never satiated—her I worship! her I serve!—Do you believe me?"

Sophy sat gazing at him. Something strange and wild, and unbelievable took place in her. She saw—no, she *knew*—not by ratiocination, but as one knows when one falls into the sea that one is wet—she *knew* that this man was truly vile, that he was speaking the truth to her. But even more wonderful, she knew that horror and tragedy unspeakable waited for him. It was as if the poisonous shadow fell over him as she looked—as if its outer hem touched her like a thing of palpable texture.

He was looking at her strangely, too—half as if afraid, but curious. Like a man who knows that the oracle can divine truly—that it may answer to his undoing, and that, if it answers thus, that answer will surely come to pass.

"Do you believe me?" he said again, keeping up the bravado of his light tone, but some chord in his voice stirred oddly.

Sophy drew a long breath. She felt herself shivering, then, "Yes," she said almost inaudibly. He continued to look at her—a strange, musing look.

"Thank you," he said blandly. "So I have a disciple at last."

Then that passion of horror and pity broke down all conventional restraint in Sophy.

"But *why*?" she said, in a passionate whisper. "Why? *Why?*"

He was silent just for an instant's pressure, then he answered by the most extraordinary and appalling piece of blasphemy.

"Because," he said, "'*before Abraham was I am*.'"

XI

Sophy sat white and still, her profile towards Amaldi, playing with the spray of orchids at her plate. Then, all at once, she realised that Cecil was speaking louder than he had been. His words reached her distinctly. She glanced towards him in terror. What a horrible evening! What, what was going to happen?

What Chesney said was this:

"Russia is an epileptic, like so many of her people. She has the inspired moment, the convulsion, the apathy. Again inspiration—again convulsions—apathy—*e da capo—e da capo*."

As he uttered these words, his eyes were fixed insolently on Prince Suberov.

Sophy saw several heads turn hastily in her husband's direction. The faces of those near him wore a scared expression.

Suberov was a tall, impassive man of sixty-five, with a singularly gentle face, and small, deep-set, sad grey eyes.

While every one waited, scarcely daring to glance at him, he replied, tranquilly courteous:

"Yes ... my country is called 'Holy Russia' by us who love her. Her sickness to us is certainly 'the sacred sickness.'"

One felt relief stir like a draught around the table. But Chesney would not let it go at that. His eyes gleamed malevolently. He thrust out his jaw in a way that Sophy knew well.

"*Oui*," he said, in French, which his execrable English accent rendered more brutal. "*Oui—'cette sacrée maladie'!*" His accent on the word "*sacrée*" made it sheer insult.

Suberov looked at him intently.

"I fear *monsieur* is not feeling well this evening," he said gravely. "I have heard that *monsieur* has been ill. Of course an invalid's opinions on sickness are always interesting, though not conclusive."

For a second it was as though every one at the table held his breath. A look of fury crossed Chesney's face; then he thrust out his chin with that self-conscious, slightly embarrassed smile so familiar to his wife, and cried: "*Touché, monsieur, touché!*"

It seemed to Sophy that, at the same moment, a very pandemonium of voices broke out on every side. People seemed saying anything that came uppermost in their minds. Sophy herself found that she was talking feverishly to Amaldi of the little boat that he

had just sent Bobby, of how she had wound it up herself and set it going in his bathtub, of how naturally the little men worked their oars. She talked and talked—telling him anecdotes of Bobby's funny ways and speeches. Her deep, sweet laughter rang out clearly. Every one was laughing a little exaggeratedly over just such trivialities.

And Amaldi took the cue from her. He began to talk lightly, in a vein of real humour that she had not divined in him. He told her of the dry drollery of the Milanese. One little story made her laugh out like a child—quite naturally this time. And so grateful was she to Amaldi for helping her to a rational screen for her terrible nervousness, that she began to chatter gaily to him, and kept on and on, not realising that she was giving him an undue amount of her attention, and that, twice at least, Tyne had tried in vain to get her to talk with him.

The bell rang for a division in the House. Several men got up and left the table to vote. Sophy glanced up vaguely a moment as they went out, then returned to her light chatter with Amaldi.

No one seemed to notice this particularly, or, if they did notice it, it was probable that they understood only too well the nervous excitement which led her to keep up this gay rattle as if not daring to pause.

Tyne understood perfectly. If he had twice attempted to break in on her talk with Amaldi it was only because he saw something very dangerous in the glances which her husband was beginning to cast at her.

Suddenly Chesney leaned his arms on the table, pushing the glasses to one side. He thrust forward his

face in his wife's direction. It was livid. Moisture stood on his forehead. His eyes burned black. The people near him gazed appalled. It was not so much like a face as like a mask of hatred.

Several times Amaldi, who also had caught glimpses of this face, had tried to let the conversation drop naturally. Sophy had been talking steadily with him for at least fifteen minutes. But it was as if she were afraid to stop for a moment—like a nervous skater who knows that if she pauses she will fall.

And all at once it happened—the monstrous—the incredible thing.

What he had thought that she was saying, Sophy could never divine. Even long afterwards when she could think of it with comparative calmness, she could not imagine what he could have thought—or could she ever remember what it was that she had really been saying. But whatever it was, as the words came from her smiling lips, suddenly, barking it out at her, before that brilliant company, before some of the most famous men and women of the day—her husband called down the long table to her:

"You lie!"

She was so startled—the thing was so incredible—that, thinking she had not heard aright, she turned towards him and said:

"What, Cecil?"

He called again, distinctly:

"I say you lied. What you said just now was a lie."

Then, his arms still on the table, his shoulders hunched, he began sipping a fresh glass of wine,

staring moodily before him, with a sort of vacant, bovine ferocity in his fixed eyes.

Every one has noticed how some trivial fact always imprints itself indelibly on one's mind in such ghastly moments. Opposite Sophy sat the beautiful Duchess of Maidsdowne. As Chesney shouted his insult at his wife, the blood rushed in a scarlet wave to the roots of the Duchess's chestnut hair, and the lovely, violent crimson glowed, painfully over-brilliant, on her cheeks for the rest of the evening. This agonised blush was the one thing that Sophy could ever clearly recall of the moments that followed. All went black about her the next instant; then her will conquered, and she sat still, and conscious, but all that she was conscious of was that the Duchess of Maidsdowne had blushed crimson, and that this crimson still dyed her lovely face. Sophy had heard that she was consumptive and that she rouged to conceal her illness. Now she kept thinking, "No. She does not rouge. I must remember to tell Olive. She does not rouge at all. What a wonderful colour. And how it rushed up to the very edge of her hair."

Next there came over her another strange feeling which also every one is familiar with. She felt that she was in one of those dreams, wherein one finds oneself on the street or in a crowded assembly, insufficiently clad, for every one to stare and wonder at.

Beside her sat Amaldi, no paler than some others at that table, yet realising how much worse than death it is to love a woman whose husband insults her, and yet, for the sake of that very woman, to be unable to avenge the insult.

Before the company could assume more than a

strained semblance of naturalness, those guests who had gone out to vote in the division, returned. One of them, a sporting member, a good-natured but typically John Bullish type of M. P. and a country neighbour of John Arundel's, called out as he took his seat:

"Hullo, John! What's gone wrong with your feast? Somebody's been throwing wet blankets over the tablecloth."

He was quickly suppressed. The other men looked curious, but having more "gumption," began talking commonplaces with a commendable show of having noticed nothing unusual. Later on, Oswald Tyne murmured to the Countess Hohenfels:

"I have often thought that the exquisite virtue of Nero's vice is much underestimated. Suppose him as presiding in the present case, for instance. I presume that the brute over there is regarded by many as 'a Christian gentleman.' Think how many 'Christian gentlemen' Nero disposed of by the simple device of wrapping them in pitch and applying fire. Do you not think that this festival would have been much more festive had it been lighted by the Hon. Cecil, as a living torch?"

But the Countess Hohenfels, although she was not noted for sensibility, could not rally, even to the persiflage of Oswald Tyne.

When Arundel was apologising to Prince Suberov after dinner, the impassive Russian said quietly:

"I beg you not to give the matter another thought. The young man is evidently demented. Our sympathy should all be for his wife. What a

beautiful, distinguished creature! When all is said, living is a sad *métier*!"

As soon as the guests rose from table, Chesney left. Sophy's pride would not allow her to go before the usual hour for such things. Every one was charming to her—almost too charming. At moments she felt that she could not bear it—that she must scream frantically, childishly, like Bobby when he had had a bad dream—or throw herself over the parapet into the Thames. But her face, though it had a pinched look, was very quiet.

Olive managed to whisper to her, once as they stood close together:

"He's a cwuel *bwute* ... we must get you out of his power somehow."

"Don't, Olive ... don't speak of it," Sophy had gasped out.

"Very well. But I'll be with you first thing to-morrow."

"No ... please. I must be alone. I must think."

Olive, whose heart was sound though so elastic, understood perfectly.

"Very well," she said again. "But mind you send for me the first moment you feel you need me."

"Thanks," murmured Sophy. "Thanks—dear Olive."

Amaldi did not try to talk to her. She was very grateful to him for this. He understood too well. These others pitied but did not understand. To have felt the close contact of a compassion that comprehended was more than she could have

endured. It would have broken her down utterly. But he watched her from afar with a quiet yet absorbed look, that was not without meaning to Suberov, on whom, also, Sophy had made a deep and poignant impression.

He came near the young man, and said in Italian in his sweet, melancholy voice, after himself regarding Sophy in silence for a moment:

"A strong soul—heroic!"

Amaldi answered dreamily, as though it were quite natural for the old statesman to address him in his native tongue.

"Yes, Excellency, but souls like that are made for sorrow."

"And sorrow for such souls," said Suberov, with his mournful, delicate smile.

XII

Sophy found herself in the grey, rainy dawn, still walking to and fro in her bedroom. She had always thought that it was only in books and plays that people wrung their hands, but now she was twisting her fingers so hard together that the rings bit cruelly. She stripped them off—then stood gazing curiously at the finger where her wedding ring had been. She felt that there should be a little, blistered band where the poisoned ring had rested.

Yes—it was all over. There could be no compromise —no atonement this time. It was over—over. She would take her son and go back to her own country, to her own people. Nothing, no one could move her. And she heard again in imagination that brutal voice, shouting: "You lie!"

She went to a little cupboard and poured out a dose of *sal volatile*. This she drank, then leaned back for a few moments on the couch at the foot of her bed.

A knock at the door roused her. She sat up, gazing about her, at a loss for a few seconds. Then she realised. She must have slept.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"It's me, m'm. Tilda," came the voice of her little maid.

"Wait a moment, Tilda."

She sprang to the glass, smoothed her hair—flung a dressing-gown about her shoulders.

Tilda stared when she saw that white face, with the great dusky circles round the eyes.

"O dear, m'm, how you do look!" she faltered. "Are you ill?"

"No. I felt rather nervous. It's nothing," Sophy said hurriedly. "What o'clock is it?"

"Just seven, m'm. Mr. Gaynor sent me to you. I was against it, knowing that you'd been out last night—but now I'm sure I'm thankful I did come. It's about the Master, m'm. He's very bad, Mr. Gaynor says. He'd like to speak with you, m'm, Mr. Gaynor would. But let me bring you a cup of tea first, m'm—please."

"Yes, bring me some tea. Tell Gaynor I will see him after I have had some tea."

Sophy lay back on the couch. Could it be that Cecil was going to die? She thought: "I am quite honest with myself. I don't try to deceive myself. I hope that he will die. Yes—quickly. But what is curious is that this wish doesn't shock me—that other part of me, that doesn't exactly wish it. I can see that it would be right not to wish it, but I *do* wish it."

Tilda came back with the tea in a few moments. The strong stimulant brought some colour to Sophy's lips —steadied her. When she had drunk it, she said:

"Now send Gaynor to me."

Gaynor was at the door within two moments. Tilda held it open for him rather grudgingly. She thought that her lady's indisposition was of far graver import than that of Gaynor's master.

"Shut the door, Tilda—and don't come back until I ring," said Sophy. "I wish to speak to Gaynor alone."

The man stood near the door, waiting.

"Is Mr. Chesney ill again?" asked Sophy.

"Very ill, indeed, madam—in my opinion."

"Dangerously?"

"I can't say, madam. I think it will be dangerous if it's allowed to go on."

"How do you mean 'allowed to go on'?"

"If a doctor isn't consulted, madam."

"But you know Mr. Chesney's dislike of doctors."

"Yes, madam; but in this instance it seemed to me that it would be better not to regard it."

"Does Mr. Chesney himself wish it?"

"Mr. Chesney is unconscious, madam."

Sophy sat up, supporting herself by one arm along the back of the couch. Her great, dark, passionately tired eyes, and the small, composed, neutral-tinted eyes of the valet met in a look of questioning on her part, of quiet but noncommittal decision on his.

"Unconscious? How? A heavy sleep?"

"No, madam; more a state of syncope, I should say."

"Since when?"

"He sank into it about six o'clock this morning. He was very bad last night, madam—delirious. I had some difficulty in quieting him."

Sophy looked at him steadily, in silence. Then she said:

"Did you give him some of that strong medicine you use—that Indian medicine?"

"Yes, madam."

"Don't you think that might have thrown him into this state?"

"I think not, madam."

Sophy was silent for another moment, looking down at her ringless hands which she had clasped tightly together again. Then she looked up at Gaynor. His face was as noncommittal as that of a diplomatist negotiating a difficult matter. Yet she saw knowledge

in that face, a possession of facts that was hidden from her.

"What sort of doctor do you think should be called in? A specialist?"

"That would seem best, madam."

"What kind of specialist?"

"A nerve-specialist, I should think, madam."

Sophy continued to look at him curiously. At last she said:

"You know, Gaynor, if Mr. Chesney were to find out that you had proposed this it would probably cost you your place!"

"That must be as it may be, madam."

"You are greatly attached to Mr. Chesney, are you not?"

"I have served Mr. Chesney for ten years, madam."

Gaynor's face was as impassive as ever. He was evidently not an emotional character. Sophy looked down again at her knitted fingers; then she said:

"Have you thought of any especial doctor?"

"Doctor Algernon Carfew is considered an excellent nerve-specialist, madam. I believe he studied in the States with Doctor Weir Mitchell."

So Gaynor had thought very carefully and seriously on this subject, long before the present moment!

Sophy gazed at him keenly again. What important knowledge lay locked in that narrow chest, of which

the key would not be given her, she felt sure! And an unwilling conviction seized her: there must be something fundamentally fine in Cecil to make a servant so loyal to him.

She leaned back wearily again on the cushions.

"I must think this over very carefully, Gaynor. It will be a very serious matter to violate Mr. Chesney's wishes in this way."

"Yes, madam."

"How long do you think that we can safely wait before calling in a physician?"

She coupled herself and Gaynor together unconsciously in this "we," because there was no one else in all England that she felt she could consult with on this subject.

"There is no immediate danger, madam. I have given Mr. Chesney a hypodermic of nitro-glycerine. Within the next two or three hours will be time enough, I should say."

Somehow this word "hypodermic" frightened Sophy. She started erect again, her hand grasping the back of the couch as before.

"Is that the strong medicine that you always give him? Why did you give it to him that way? Can't he swallow?"

"He is quite unconscious, madam. Nitro-glycerine is a powerful heart-tonic. The heart action was very bad. But it is better now, madam."

These "madams" of the valet were beginning to fret Sophy cruelly. They were like the *toc-toc* of a sort of

irregular metronome, beating out of time to the jangled clamour of her thoughts. They seemed almost like a respectful mockery of her hesitation. But she only hesitated because of the violent hatred with which Chesney always mentioned physicians of any kind. He had said not once, but on many different occasions, words of this description:

"By God! The unpardonable sin against *me* would be the foisting on me one of those damned fakirs when I was helpless and couldn't throttle him. The mother that bore me couldn't hand me over to a medical ghoul with impunity. So remember—no doctors! I die or I live—but no doctors!"

Then all at once her mind seemed to open like a book that has been closed, and opens of itself at a certain page. On this page of her suddenly opened mind Sophy read as in a neat, short sentence: "This man thinks it very peculiar that you do not ask to see your husband."

She got to her feet, drawing the folds of her dressing-gown about her.

"I wish to see Mr. Chesney," she said, in measured, stilted tones.

"Very good, madam."

He held the door open for her to pass through, then closed it noiselessly, and followed her with soundless footsteps along the corridor.

The shutters of Chesney's room were closed, but the curtains were not drawn. A night-light burnt behind a screen. Sophy went to the foot of the bed and stood looking down on her husband. In the moderate light she saw his face, bluish and dusky against the white

pillow. He was breathing harshly but regularly. His lips—those lips which she had last seen framing a deadly insult—were parted, and seemed as though pasted against his teeth.

She commanded herself, and moving round to the side of the bed, leaned over and put her hand on his forehead. It was dry, like rough paper, and very hot.

What she felt as she bent over him she could not tell. Perhaps more than anything that though he was so huge and fierce a man, he had now only herself and a valet to help him in his helplessness.

She stood thus a moment, then left the room, beckoning Gaynor to follow her. When they were outside, she said:

"What is this Doctor Carfew's address?"

He gave it to her.

She pondered a moment.

"Very well," she then said. "I shall dress and go to see him. Would you like me to get a nurse to assist you?"

"If I might venture, madam," said the man discreetly, "it would be better perhaps to hear first what Doctor Carfew says. He may wish a nurse of his own."

"Yes. That is true. Tell Parkson to call me a cab in half an hour."

She put on a dark-blue linen frock and a little toque of black straw.

"Give me my long grey veil, Tilda," she said. As the girl was winding it about her hat, she asked:

"Haven't you a friend who's a Catholic, Tilda?"

"Yes, m'm—Maria Tonks. A very good girl, though a Papist, m'm."

"And what did you say was the name of the priest who converted her?"

"Father Raphael of the Poor, m'm. But he didn't convert her exactly, m'm, if I may say so. She just took such a fancy to 'im, his bein' so kind to her w'en in distress, m'm—as she went and became a Catholic."

"I see. He is very good to the poor, isn't he?"

"So they say, m'm. He gets his name from that. Anybody 'as only to be unfortunate to find welcome with him—so Maria says."

"Yes.... Yes...." said Sophy absently. Then added: "Where does he live?"

Tilda mentioned the address.

Sophy thanked her mechanically and went out.

XIII

Dr. Carfew lived in Hanover Square. It seemed a cruelly short way there to Sophy, for the motion of the cab, the rolling forward into the fine, calm rain soothed her. The cabby wanted to lower the glass, but she would not have it. The rain was only a thick drizzle. She put up her veil, and let the beaded moisture beat in upon her face. How lovely were the London plane trees against the varied grey ... and how she hated them, and all that was England—England from whence had come her unspeakable humiliation and misery!

But the next moment, with the soft homeliness of the air upon her cheek, came the realisation that she could not hate the land over which it breathed. It was in her blood as a Virginian to love England. It was only disfigured for her as a friend may be disfigured by a cruel accident, yet remain dear as ever. But though she loved England—she was homesick—homesick. She yearned for the foothills of the Blue Ridge as Pilgrim yearned for the Delectable Mountains. During the short drive to Hanover Square, she was conscious only of this gnawing nostalgia and the undercurrent of determination to return to her own land as soon as possible. The old place, Sweet-Waters, had been left equally to her and Charlotte. Now, Charlotte and her husband, Judge Macon, lived there, at her request, but the house was large and rambling—there would be room for her and Bobby—her thousand dollars a year would keep her from being an expense to them. Joe was fond of

her—he would not mind having her live with them....

The cab stopped. She got out and stood face to face with the house of the great specialist. It seemed to regard her superciliously, with a look of hard, callous reticence. Architecture has its misanthropes as well as humanity. This was a forbidding house; it seemed built to hold impartial dooms and the gloomy prosperity that gains by the pain of others. She could not think of healing as going forth of that house. Yet Dr. Carfew had saved many. It was only Sophy's dark mood that thus interpreted to her the expression of the great physician's house.

She went quietly up the steps, after her short pause, and rang the bell.

Dr. Carfew was out of town—would not be back until noon. Sophy thought a moment.

"I will come in and write a note," she said.

The man led her into a gloomy room, and set writing materials to her hand.

"Give this to Doctor Carfew the instant that he returns," she said to the man, handing him the sealed envelope. "It is a matter of life and death."

The sound of her own voice saying this struck her strangely. The "life and death" that she had spoken of meant the life and death of Cecil. She still hoped that he would die. She did not exactly hate him—but she hoped that he would die.

She gave the cabman the address of Father Raphael of the Poor. As they trotted on, she began to wonder what Father Raphael of the Poor would be like. Was

he old—young? She stiffened suddenly, as she sat there all alone in the musty cab. No—she could not talk of such matters with a young man. She could not risk so much as that—the ordeal of finding that the priest was young. But then—she must speak out to some one—some one who did not know her—some one quite removed from such a life as hers. Yes—now she understood the power of the Confessional in the Romish church. To kneel before a little grating and, unseen, whisper out one's agonies and perplexities to another, also invisible.... To speak without identity to one also without identity—that must be a marvellous solace. To believers it must be almost like having God answer them, thus to receive advice and consolation, as it were, out of the void.

They crossed the river, and after twenty minutes entered the street where was the Chapel of Mary of Compassion. Sophy felt herself advancing into the perspective of this hideous street with a shudder. It was as if she were being willingly driven into a wedge of gloomy brick from which somehow she would not be able to withdraw. On each side squatted the low houses, odiously alike. The toy-bricks of a gaoler's child must be fashioned like these houses. A smell of hot tallow and refuse was in the air, mingled with that omnipresent scent of malt that was here stronger and more sweetish acrid than ever.

The chapel itself was not very different from the other houses. It seemed like one of a large family that has been better nourished and dedicated to religion. The shape of its roof and doorway was the equivalent of a priestly habit.

Sophy's heart failed within her. Somehow this street, this chapel, seemed reality—all else illusion.

Then she entered. The little chapel was empty and very still. There was a smell of stale incense in the air. She could see the high altar, very simple. A man was kneeling before it. He rose as Sophy entered, and came towards her. He was a tall man, clad in a plain black soutane. He came and stood near, looking at her gravely.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I would like...." faltered Sophy. "... If I might speak with Father Raphael of the Poor...?" she ended.

"I am Father Raphael," he said. He had a beautiful, deep, tranquil voice. Sophy's mind was beginning to be confused. All sorts of fantasies whirled through it. She imagined that this voice indicated a tragedy far back in the priest's life. That he had suffered in some deeply human way. The church was dim. She could not see his face clearly, but his hair shone out almost white from the shadows. His eyebrows were thick and black.

"I am Father Raphael," he said again. "Will you come this way with me, my daughter?"

He thought her a Catholic, of course; but at the words, "my daughter," spoken in that lovely voice, it seemed to Sophy that a band snapped about her heart, releasing it. It was as if some benign, paternal angel had troubled the pool of tears, far down among the very roots of her being.

She followed him silently, and from her eyes there welled great, slow drops—hot and heavy, like drops of blood from the inmost core of her heart.

XIV

The room into which Father Raphael led her was very bare. There was a clock on the deal mantelpiece, some plain rush-seated deal chairs stained brown, a deal table covered with a cheap cloth stamped in red and black. On a little shrine in one corner stood a plaster statue of the Virgin as the Mater Misericordiæ, with her hands extended in compassion. A nosegay of white geraniums in a thick glass was placed before it.

The priest sat down on one side of the table, and motioned Sophy to a chair opposite. He waited, looking away from her out of the small window that framed a hideous "back yard," until she had somewhat mastered herself. Then he said in his tranquil, tender voice:

"Do not be afraid to speak, my daughter. This place is sacred to The Mother who suffered most. Where there has been most suffering, there is most understanding."

Sophy lifted her eyes to his.

"I ought to tell you, Father, that I am not a Roman Catholic," she said, under her breath. The grave cordiality of his look did not abate.

"All who are in trouble are welcome here," he said gently. But she noticed that after that he said "My child," when speaking to her, instead of "My daughter."

Then, little by little, she told him everything. When she had ended, he sat for some moments, musing. He

had a plain, rugged face, but the eyes, clear and brown, held an expression of the most exquisite comprehension and love—that love which is so wholly of the spirit yet so warm towards the sorrows and needs of humanity that, feeling its power, one can realise how, after looking into eyes like these yet far more wonderful, the great golden Harlot of Magdala cast away her lovers and her jewels, and spread her beautiful hair as a serving-cloth about the sacred feet her tears had washed.

"It is true, my child," said Father Raphael at last, and he smiled tenderly upon her, "that the human heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked—and sometimes it deceives even in regard to its own wickedness. Your heart has deceived you, my child."

"How?" asked Sophy, in a low voice. An inward tremor had seized her. Her voice shook.

"It has deceived you into thinking that you wish your husband's death. You do not wish that. Look deeper into this deceitful heart of yours, and you will see that you do not. Why did you go to that doctor? Why have you come here to me?"

"I ... I needed ... help, Father."

"Just so, my child. You needed help to see the true inwardness of your spirit. You mistook natural indignation and the recoil of pain for the sin of actual desire. You wished to escape—to be free—and so you thought that you wished your husband's death. But you do not wish it."

"I ... I think ... I am afraid I do, Father."

Her voice was touchingly humble, like a child's voice

confessing what it deems a terrible crime with courageous obstinacy.

"No, my child. Think. Could you now—here—by sending forth a sharp thought like a dagger—kill your husband—would you send forth that thought?"

Her brow knitted painfully. She went white as death. Then the blood surged over her face.

"No, Father," she whispered.

"You see, my child? What you craved when you sought me was for another voice, the voice of a human being like yourself, to echo the small, still voice down in the centre of your own spirit. The voice that says we must have the courage to live life as we have made it for ourselves—honestly, righteously, unflinchingly. You must not be too severe with yourself, my child. To deny the hidden good in ourselves is the subtlest form of spiritual pride. It gives death, not life. There was a great Pagan who once uttered a profoundly Christian truth. Wolfgang von Goethe said: 'Life teaches us to be less hard with others and—ourselves.' Do you see what I mean, my child?"

"Yes," said Sophy, in that smothered voice.

"Then what you must do is very simple. First, you must forgive your husband—then you must forgive yourself. After what you have told me, I can see no salvation for him from this sad vice but in your affection and your strong will to help him. Consult with this wise doctor—follow his instructions as best you may. Take your life, your heart, in both hands and lift them up unto the Lord."

"You don't know, Father ... you can't know...." She

shuddered violently. Her grey eyes were fixed on his in desperate appeal.

"Yes, my child— I do know," he said tenderly. "I led the life of an ordinary man before I became a priest. I know well what you are suffering—what lies before you—for you have courage—you will not—desert." He said it firmly, but his kind eyes held her, full of the comprehending compassion that does not wound.

Then Sophy gave a cry—the cry of a child who says: "I wish I were dead!" She put up her hands to her face and sobbed out:

"Oh, I wish I could be a nun ... a nun!"

Very tenderly Father Raphael sat smiling down at her bowed head. Often had he listened to this cry—the cry of those who in a moment of extremity long for a cool refuge from the hot brawls of life. Then he said softly:

"You would make a most unhappy nun, my child."

In a small, ashamed voice she asked:

"Why do you say so, Father?"

"For many reasons. You have heard the expression, 'vocation,' have you not?"

"Yes, Father."

"You have been given brilliant gifts, great beauty, a little child—— There lies your 'vocation.' To live in the world yet not of it, that is the life to which God has called you."

"Oh, Father! You do not know me. Christ said: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' I am very proud,

Father—horribly, wrongly proud."

The priest did not answer her directly. He said in a musing tone:

"I have often thought how that saying of Our Lord's has been misinterpreted. By 'poor in spirit' surely He did not mean poverty of spirit, but that to be truly poor—that is, detached from the things of this world—a man must not only give up those things themselves, but give up even the desire for them. That is how I understand the saying, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.'"

"But, Father—to go back—to be his wife—after——Oh, it is not only that—but in one of his furies he might kill me—he might kill my little son! You don't know—you can't imagine what he is like then——"

"God does not ask impossibilities from His children," said Father Raphael firmly. "'He is faithful that promised. With the temptation He will also make a way of escape.' Should you fail to save your husband from this fatal habit—should your life, or your son's life, be in danger, then your duty would be to save yourself. The commandment is not 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor better than thyself'—but 'as thyself.'"

"And are people ever really saved from opium or morphine, Father?"

"Yes, my child. One of the best men that I know—a fellow worker with me here—was a morphinomaniac."

"How was he saved, Father?"

"By God's mercy and his own desire to be saved."

"Ah, Father—that is just it! Will he—will my husband

desire to be saved? Will he let me help him?"

"The effort must be yours—the result is with God. If, after you have honestly tried by every means in your power—and failed—then—I, a Roman Catholic priest, to whom marriage is a sacrament, say to you: 'Go home to your own land and your own kinsfolk.'"

He spoke solemnly. His face looked stern for the first time.

Sophy rose. Her spirit was stilled, but her body felt as though it had been beaten with staves. Every bone and nerve ached dully. The priest rose too. She looked at him timidly:

"Can you give me your blessing, Father?"

His lovely smile melted the stern look. Instinctively she knelt, and he stretched out his hands, making the sign of the cross in the air above her bent head.

"*Benedicat te omnipotens Deus, Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus.* Amen."

The grave Latin words of benediction rolled solemnly over her. Her spirit felt folded in a soothing peace. She rose, trembling a little.

"I wish I could thank you ... as I want to, Father," she whispered.

"Thank God, my child. He sent you to me."

"Yes. I believe that."

"Would it help you to come here sometimes, to this simple house dedicated to the Mother of Compassion?"

"Yes, Father; but...."

"Would your husband be displeased if he knew that you came?"

"Yes, Father. He hates the Catholic religion."

"Then do not come, my child. But remember that I am here if you need me. My prayers will follow you. I will have a *Novena* for you. Be of good courage."

Sophy gazed at him. The tears gathered again. She could not speak. Going out silently, she got into the musty cab.

She remembered nothing of the drive home. Her eyes were turned inward.

XV

Dr. Carfew came at one o'clock. He was a tall, sinewy man, with light blue, prominent eyes very piercing, and thick yellow-grey curls that stuck out below the brim of his hat as though supporting it. He put a few brief yet searching questions to Sophy, then asked to see the patient. He did not wish Sophy to be present at the examination. Gaynor remained with him at his request. After half an hour he came downstairs. Sophy sat waiting for him, her hands wrung together again. She had put back her rings.

She paled when she saw him enter, and her eyes darkened. He drew up a chair without ceremony, and sat down facing her.

"This is a grave case, Mrs. Chesney," he said, in his

abrupt "no-nonsense-now" voice. "I gathered from your husband's valet that you have not a clear idea of how matters stand."

"No. I have not," she said.

"There is no doubt about it. Your husband is the victim of a most fatal habit."

She continued looking at him in silence.

"Have you never even suspected the cause of his ailment?" he asked brusquely.

"Yes—but I did not know enough to be certain."

"It is a clear case—a very clear case, and an aggravated one," said Carfew. "Mr. Chesney is a morphinomaniac. He is so addicted to the drug that he varies the effect with cocaine—takes them alternately—both drugs hypodermically."

Sophy sat as before, gazing at him without a word. It was as if it paralysed her to hear these long-surmised horrors put into plain words.

Carfew glanced at her with some irritation.

"I hope you are not going to allow yourself to give way to an attack of nerves because I speak frankly," he said.

She gave a little start, as if waking. "I do not have attacks of nerves," she then said quietly.

The great man looked mollified.

"Pardon my blunt speech," he said; "but I am so used to ladies collapsing into hysterics under such circumstances. That—or not believing a word I say," he added grimly.

"I believe all that you say. What must I do?"

"Ah—there is the difficulty! I must tell you at once that it is out of the question to think of trying to deal with such a case in the patient's own home. He should be sent at once to a sanatorium—where he can be properly treated and restrained."

"He would never consent," said Sophy, in a dull voice.

"Good heavens! my dear lady—are you dreaming of consulting the wishes of a maniac?"

"He is not always like this, Doctor Carfew. At times he is perfectly rational."

"Quite so. When he has had neither too much nor too little of either drug. To be in an apparently normal condition, now that he is saturated with the poison, his system must daily absorb a certain amount of either cocaine or morphia. Too little racks his nerves. Too much turns him into a madman."

Sophy paled even more; then she said apathetically:

"I know positively that he would refuse to go to such a place as that you mentioned."

Carfew rose, and took a few turns about the room. Then he came and stood near, looking down at her keenly.

"Mrs. Chesney," he said, "your husband was within an ace of death, last night. I will not enter into medical detail. Only the prompt intelligence of his servant saved him. Do you propose allowing him to destroy himself rather than face his anger?"

"It isn't the question of his anger alone, Doctor

Carfew. It is the question of his family—of his mother. I would not be justified in acting alone. Lady Wychcote must be consulted."

Carfew looked at her intently. His eyebrows were yellow-grey like his hair, and curled also. His eyes seemed buried in them as in hairy nests—like pale, blue eggs, Sophy thought drearily, as she gazed at their hard convex.

"What is Lady Wychcote like? Is she a reasonable woman?" asked Carfew.

Exhausted and wretched as she was, almost Sophy could have smiled. The contrast between the actual Lady Wychcote and the "reasonable woman" surmised by Carfew struck her as so painfully droll.

"Not always, I fear," she said gently.

"Quite so. Just as I thought. A blind alley. Will you tell this ... er ... not always reasonable lady, from me —from Algernon Carfew—that her son is the same as lost to her if she cannot find sufficient reasonableness to have him committed to a sanatorium for his own good?"

"Yes—I will tell her."

"But you think it won't have much effect—eh!"

"I'm afraid she won't believe me."

Carfew glared.

"Then send her to *me*!" he said. It was the voice of an Imperator of Medicine.

"She might not be willing to see you."

"Mh!... This complicates matters. For the present

moment, Mr. Chesney is out of danger. I have given his man—Naylor...!"

"Gaynor."

"I have given Gaynor full instructions. The attack will be over in twenty-four hours. He has taken a most amazing amount of cocaine within the last three days —winding up with a huge dose of morphia. Cocaine excites—morphia soothes—in the end. When was he last violent?"

Sophy felt as though choking.

"Last evening," she managed to articulate.

"Quite so. Very violent, indeed, I presume. Was he abusive?"

"Yes."

"Mh. Well, it rests with you, and—er—Lady Wychfield—Wychcote. Quite so. I will not undertake the case under the present conditions. By the way—make no mistake about this man Naylor. He has been very faithful. If he had not succeeded in persuading his master to moderate the drug at times—well——" He paused; then said abruptly: "Mr. Chesney would probably be dead or a hopeless lunatic."

"Yes," said Sophy.

Carfew looked at her earnestly a few moments. Then his hard, acute visage softened.

"I see you're trying hard to be brave," he said. "You've had a severe shock. Allow me to prescribe for you at least."

"Thank you," she said faintly.

"Then go to bed, and let your maid rub you with alcohol—a soothing friction. Then darken your room and try to sleep."

"Thank you very much," said Sophy again, and this time she smiled faintly.

"Ha!—I know what that smile means. That it's easy for a medical ignoramus to prescribe sleep when there's no dose of that best of physics available. But believe me, my dear lady"—here his voice softened again—"exhaustion is double first-cousin to sleep—you are in a very exhausted condition. Only lie down as I advise you—even without the massage, if you shrink from that—and you will be asleep before you know it."

"I will try," said Sophy patiently.

"Good!" he exclaimed. He went towards the door, then turned again.

"Tell Lady Wych—yes, Wychcote; thanks—tell her if she does not believe what I say, to ask her son to show her his bare arms. Good afternoon."

He was gone.

Before Sophy followed his advice and went to lie down, she sent a telegram to Lady Wychcote, who was on a visit to some friends in Paris. The telegram said:

> "*Cecil seriously but not dangerously ill. Must consult you. When may I expect to see you?*
>
> "SOPHY CHESNEY."

When this was done, she went to her room and let Tilda fuss over her and make her comfortable on the

bed. Carfew was right; scarcely had she lain down than she dropped into a profound sleep which lasted for several hours.

As soon as she woke, she sent for Gaynor. She had made up her mind to speak plainly to him. She felt that her antipathy towards him had come from her instinct that he was hiding something. Now that she understood his reasons for secrecy and the difficulty of his position, she no longer disliked but respected the quiet, dry little man who was so loyal to his master.

"Gaynor," she began. Her lip trembled in spite of her. She turned her head and looked out of the window for a second; then she went on firmly: "I've sent for you to thank you—for what you've tried to do for Mr. Chesney, Gaynor. And for coming to me—about a—about Doctor Carfew this morning."

"I am grateful to you, madam. I only did my duty," said Gaynor; but the impassive expression of his face stirred slightly. "Allow me to thank you for mentioning it, madam," he added, in a low voice.

"And, Gaynor—I have been thinking deeply over this. I shall not mention either to Mr. Chesney or her ladyship that you suggested my sending for a doctor."

A look of faint surprise stole into the man's face; but he kept a respectful silence.

"The reason I do this," continued Sophy, "is because I want you to remain with Mr. Chesney—I want you to...." She paused; then she lifted her eyes to his deferentially expressionless ones, and said with feeling: "I want you to help me to help him, Gaynor."

For one instant the neutral look which was the livery of his face, as it were, fell from it, and Sophy saw a deeply moved fellow being gazing at her.

"I will consider it an honour as well as a duty to be of service to you, madam," he replied.

"Very well, Gaynor. Then we must keep nothing that concerns Mr. Chesney from each other. I will be quite frank with you—you must be equally frank with me. You must keep nothing back."

"It shall be as you wish, madam, in every respect."

"That is all for the moment. Later I shall get you to give me a clear account of ... of everything. So that I shall ... know how to ... to act in emergencies if you should not be there."

"Very good, madam."

"Is Mr. Chesney still—asleep?"

"He will sleep probably until to-morrow afternoon, madam."

"Let me know when he recovers—I shall trust to you to tell me when it is best for me to see him."

"I will, madam."

"Then—good-night, Gaynor."

"Good-night, madam. I hope that you will rest well."

Lady Wychcote arrived next morning and drove straight from the train to the house in Regent's Park. She was still a beautiful woman; but as Cecil had told Sophy during their engagement, with that peculiar British frankness in speaking of the closest relations, she was "as hard as nails," and her beauty

was also adamantine. Though sixty, she did not look more than forty-five, but her "make-up" was judicious and wonderfully well done. There were people who said that Cecily Wychcote had gone to Paris for six months or so, and there, in a mysterious seclusion, had had the skin peeled from her face by some adept in the art of flaying, and that this explained the absence of wrinkles "at her age." True, wrinkles in the ordinary sense of the word she had not; her well-chiselled face was as smooth and empty of expression in repose as a Wedgewood plaque, and its patine was as rare a work of art; but her icy eyes, still as blue as cobalt, could express many things very admirably, as could her delicate thin lips and nostrils. Lady Wychcote's wig was as conservative as the politics of her house. It was a fair brown, and here and there the artist had woven in grey hairs. She dressed well. She was the modern type of young-old woman in its highest perfection. Only her language, like her mind, had a taint of early Victorian; but of this she was totally unaware.

XVI

Lady Wychcote entered the drawing-room abruptly, very smart and untravel-stained in her blue serge gown with little *gilet* and toque of purple velvet. She never suffered from seasickness, and through her veil of black-dotted tulle she certainly did not look more than five-and-forty. She barely gave herself time to brush her daughter-in-law's cheek with the chenille dots of her veil and mutter "How d'ye do?" In the

same breath, in her brittle, imperious voice, she rapped out:

"What's the matter with Cecil? What does Craig Hopkins say?"

Before she could be answered, and in spite of a real anxiety, she seated herself. Though she was a tall woman, Sophy was at least two inches taller; and this always exasperated her. She liked to look down on people literally as well as metaphorically.

"Doctor Hopkins has not seen Cecil," said Sophy. The storm must break sometime; why not at once?

"Eh?" cried Lady Wychcote sharply. "What's that? What d'you say?"

Her voice had the bark in it that Cecil's always had when he was angry, and that he had inherited from her. She reared her head suddenly and looked at Sophy along her delicate nose.

"D'you mean to tell me that you haven't consulted a doctor about your husband?"

"Yes; I have seen a doctor, but not Doctor Hopkins."

"*You have—seen—a—doctor—but not the family doctor?* Your reasons, pray?"

The tone was scathing, even insolent. Sophy felt her blood rise, but her calmness did not forsake her.

"I have some very painful things to tell you, Lady Wychcote. Please try to listen patiently."

"'Patiently'?" She put up her *face-à-main*. The dotted veil prevented her from seeing clearly through it, but the *gêste* was all that she desired. This habit of

sarcastic echoing was one of her most trying and effective methods. "Pray explain yourself!" she added, in a tart voice.

Sophy explained very thoroughly. When she had finished, her mother-in-law drew her eyelids together and said through narrowed lips: "How did you come to think of this Doctor Carfew?"

"I asked for a nerve-specialist's address. Gaynor knew of this one."

"You sent for a doctor for my son at a servant's instigation?"

Sophy frowned a little.

"I went to Doctor Carfew myself—of my own accord. Please take another tone with me, Lady Wychcote," she added. "I think we can arrive at more useful conclusions in that way."

They looked at each other in silence for a moment; then Lady Wychcote said:

"Is Cecil awake?"

"I do not think so. Gaynor was to send me word in that case."

"You evidently rely on this man Gaynor for everything."

"I consider him reliable. I have no one else to rely on."

Lady Wychcote rose.

"I must tell you," she said, "that I intend sending for Craig Hopkins at once."

"I wired for you, to consult you," said Sophy evenly.

"Quite so. And I presume that you are not surprised that I refuse to take the opinion of a quack on a matter so near to me as the health of my son."

"I do not think that Doctor Carfew can be justly called a 'quack.' He is celebrated."

"Pardon me, but that's nonsense. All so-called specialists are quacks, more or less. And I believe that Cagliostro was a very celebrated person."

Sophy shrugged her shoulders.

"I only beg that whatever you decide to do will be done quickly," she said.

"You shall be gratified. Craig Hopkins shall be here within the hour. I will go for him myself—and return with him."

"Thanks," said Sophy gravely.

This "thanks" seemed to irritate Lady Wychcote beyond endurance. She turned pale under her rouge, and bit the shreds of what had once been a lovely, though heartless, mouth.

"I don't doubt," she said at last, "that Hopkins's opinion will coincide with mine. I am convinced that the whole matter has been grossly exaggerated."

"Of course, only a doctor can be the judge of that," said Sophy, still quietly.

Lady Wychcote had reached the age when in mothers of her type the affections wane as the ambitions wax. She desired to have her pride satisfied rather than her heart filled. And of her two sons, one was an

easy-going invalid, and the other a brilliant failure. She was bitterly thinking, as she bruised Sophy's spirit with her hard, implacable eyes, "If Cecil had married a clever woman of his own class and country—she could have made him. How many Englishmen have been made politically by their wives! Even Chatham—one never hears much of his wife, to be sure—but there's the fact. His first really active, successful part in politics was taken shortly after he married her."

When Dr. Hopkins came and had seen Cecil (he also requested to see him alone, and would have neither Sophy nor Lady Wychcote go in with him) he looked very grave, and stated that, in his opinion also, Mr. Chesney was suffering from the overuse of opiates.

"'Opiates'? That is an elastic term," said Lady Wychcote impatiently. "Say plainly what you mean, please."

Hopkins looked pained, but answered straightforwardly that, in his opinion also, Mr. Chesney was in the habit of taking morphine hypodermically.

"Why hypodermically?" asked Lady Wychcote.

"It is self-evident, your ladyship. His arms are in a terrible condition from the use of the syringe."

Lady Wychcote grew pale. And Sophy, looking at her, thought how strange it was that her random slander of herself (Sophy) had so come home to her. She had accused her daughter-in-law of giving her son drugs—idly, as she said such bitter, untrue things of people when displeased with them, not counting the cost to others involved. She had noticed Cecil's

growing eccentricity, and in order to attribute it more directly to what she termed his "disastrous" marriage, had accused Sophy of this dark thing. And now—lo! the dark thing was no lie, but the truth—only it was her son himself who was his own destroyer, not the woman whom she hated.

She rallied suddenly, rearing her head back with the gesture habitual to her.

"I wish to see for myself," she said haughtily, moving towards the door. "He will not know. Show me these marks on his arms."

"No!" said Sophy, in a low voice, stepping in front of her.

"What! You try to prevent me from seeing my son?"

"I shall keep you from going to him while he is helpless—for such a purpose."

She laid her hand on a bell near by.

"Let me pass," said Lady Wychcote, in a suffocated voice. Dr. Hopkins looked the image of respectability in distress. The heavens would not have been enough to cover him. He would have preferred something more solid—the whole earth between him and these incensed ladies.

"No!" said Sophy again. "If you insist, I shall be forced to ring and give orders that no one is to be admitted to my husband's room."

"You would dare do that?"

"I would do it. You are in my house, Lady Wychcote."

"My son's house...."

"I am his wife. I must do what I know that he would wish."

Just here Gaynor knocked at the door.

"Mr. Chesney is asking for you, madam," he said to Sophy.

"Does he know that I am here?" put in Lady Wychcote quickly.

"No, your ladyship. He is hardly himself yet. I have told him nothing."

"Are you going to see him?" asked she, in a hard, angry voice, turning to Sophy.

"Yes."

"I suppose at least that you will have the—the...." She choked on the word. She longed to say "decency," but the servant's presence forbade. "... The civility to tell him that his mother is here and wishes to see him," she wound up sullenly.

"Yes, I will tell him," said Sophy.

She went up to Cecil's room and approached the bed. He recognised her step instantly, and said in a weak voice:

"Sophy?"

"Yes, Cecil—it's Sophy."

"Nearer...." he murmured. "Come nearer...."

She bent down to him. The close, stale after-smell of fever reeked up to her from his unshaven face. She felt very pitiful towards him. All the hatred had ebbed from her heart. Yet she shrank from him; he

was repellent to her. The conflict between repulsion and pity sent an inward tremor like sickness through her.

"Sophy ... what ... what did I do ... that night?" came the dragging voice.

Her hand clenched in the folds of her gown. He had taken the other and was fumbling it in his nerveless fingers.

"You were very excited. We'll talk of that later—when you're stronger."

"No ... now ... now. It hurts my head ... trying to work the damned thing out! Was I ... did I...?"

"You were angry. You said unkind things to me. But that's over. Don't torment yourself."

He was silent. He seemed dozing. Then he roused again.

"It's a hellish ... shame!..." he murmured, in that spent voice. The violent words contrasted painfully with the weak tones.

"What is?" she said, humouring him.

"Your having ... a chap like me ... for a husband."

"You're ill, Cecil. Don't worry. Try to sleep again. But wait a minute—your mother is here. Would you like to see her?"

"Damnation—no!" he said. Then he seemed to think better of it. "Well—since the old lady's lowered her crest enough to come—send her up," he muttered. "Don't let her talk, though—will you?"

"I'll tell her that you can't bear any talking."

She moved towards the door.

"Sophy...."

"Yes?"

"Could you kiss a chap?"

She went back and kissed his forehead.

"Sophy...." he said again weakly. Then he turned his face into the pillow. She heard smothered sobs. This was dreadful. She knelt down by him and put her arm across his heaving shoulders.

"Don't ... don't...!" she pleaded. "Oh, Cecil ... don't! It will all come right. I'm here. I'll stand by you."

His weak fingers fumbled again and found her own.

"I'm all right," he muttered. "Just a bit weak. Go send the mater up.... Don't let her jaw, though."

Lady Wychcote came down from her son's room looking encouraged and triumphant.

"He seems perfectly rational," she said, speaking pointedly to Hopkins. "I really think you must have exaggerated the seriousness of the case."

"Let us hope so," he said cautiously. "But I fear not."

"Will you undertake the case?" she then asked.

Hopkins glanced uncomfortably in Sophy's direction. He faltered out:

"I—er—have not much experience in these—er—cases."

Sophy did not interfere. As soon as Cecil was well enough, she intended to tell him everything and see

if she could not engage his higher self to fight with her against his lower. She listened in calm silence, therefore, to the dialogue between Lady Wychcote and the man who had for years been the family doctor.

"Nonsense!" Lady Wychcote exclaimed sharply, in reply to Hopkins's faltering objection. "It is simply a matter of nurses and régime. You have nurses that you can rely on, I suppose!"

"I can certainly procure suitable nurses, your ladyship. But I believe that in these—er—cases the patient's co-operation is most important. And the—er—conditions should be favourable."

"Good heavens! *You* don't mean to suggest a sanatorium, I hope?"

"No. Not a sanatorium exactly; but—er—in town—in a town like London—there are—the drug is too easily obtained."

"My good man," she cried impatiently, "all this is beside the mark. What better place can you want than Dynehurst? We will take him to Dynehurst!"

"Perhaps that would be a good idea," said Hopkins, looking greatly relieved. "I could attend him here until his system had somewhat recovered tone, and then with—er—a proper nurse, or nurses, in attendance, he could be removed to your country seat. I believe you have an excellent physician there, have you not?"

"Yes. A very able man, indeed."

Hopkins turned nervously to Sophy.

"How does the idea of such an arrangement strike

you, Mrs. Chesney?"

"I think that everything will depend on what my husband himself wishes, when he is stronger, Doctor Hopkins."

"Quite so. Quite so. The patient's co-operation is most important."

Lady Wychcote again addressed him abruptly:

"What is your opinion of this man Gaynor—my son's valet!"

"Why, he seems a very intelligent, worthy person, indeed!"

"You think he may be safely left in his present position?"

"Oh, certainly, certainly, your ladyship!"

The little doctor, whom Lady Wychcote had elected years ago to his present position as her medical adviser, chiefly because he was like wax in her firm hands, then made his escape. He left instructions and prescriptions galore. Sophy suffered this with perfect tranquillity, because she knew that Gaynor had already had other instructions and would follow only those of the physician in whose authority he believed.

When her mother-in-law also took her departure, Sophy turned to Gaynor, who had been summoned again to convey Lady Wychcote's parting messages to her son.

She smiled a very weary, kind smile at the little grey servitor, and said:

"I'm afraid we shall have to fight it out pretty much alone together, Gaynor."

Then Gaynor emerged from his shell of reserve for an instant, and startled himself.

"The Almighty is very powerful, madam," is what he said.

XVII

Sophy's chief object now was to have a clear, plain talk with her husband. She knew how painful and trying to them both this interview would be, and longed to have it over. Later in the day, when Chesney was again asleep, she sent for Gaynor and asked him for the explanation that she had mentioned that morning. He told her that the habit had really begun with an attack of jungle fever, or rather had been taken up as an alleviation of the nervousness, dull aching, and violent headaches that had followed the fever. On the voyage back to England, the ship's doctor had given Chesney a hypodermic of morphia to quiet one of these brain headaches that had lasted for twenty-four hours. He gave it with the usual warnings that such drugs were never to be tampered with, never taken unless at the express command of a physician. But somehow Gaynor had felt uneasy, even then—had had a presentiment, as he might say, in fact. Mr. Chesney had looked so quiet and mocking at the doctor. He had said afterwards to Gaynor:

"Those doctor chaps are a class of fools all to themselves, Gaynor. They prescribe a bit of heaven—then order you to stay snug in hell." Mrs. Chesney would please kindly pardon his (Gaynor's) plain speaking. Those were the exact words that Mr. Chesney had used. When they reached London, Mr. Chesney had at once bought a fitted hypodermic-syringe—that is, a little case containing a syringe, needles, and tiny bottles of morphia, apo-morphia, strychnine, and cocaine. The cocaine he had used only during the past few months. At first he had put this case in Gaynor's charge—only demanding it when one of those violent headaches came on. This stage had lasted for about a year (the year of her marriage with him Sophy calculated rapidly). Then he began to ask for it more frequently. Several times Gaynor had respectfully withheld the drug, and these refusals Mr. Chesney had taken in good part—just at first. Then—Mrs. Chesney would please kindly pardon him for such plain speaking, Mrs. Chesney had asked him to keep nothing back—then he found, by accident, that Mr. Chesney had bought another hypodermic-syringe—which he concealed. He would get doses from Gaynor, and in between take others, the valet could only guess how often. Then——Gaynor hesitated, glancing anxiously at Sophy.

"Don't be afraid to speak out," she said gently. "I must know everything if I am to be of help to him. Was it at that time that Mr. Chesney began to—to take so much wine and—spirits?"

"Yes, madam."

There was a dull, brownish red in the man's face. He suffered at having to put his unfortunate master's weakness into words—at hearing his master's wife

speak with such sad plainness.

"Why was that, Gaynor? Do all—all people who use such drugs—do that—too?"

"I do not know, madam. But there always comes a time of great weakness with Mr. Chesney after the morphine. It is then it happens. And afterwards there is great nervousness. Another dose of morphia is the only thing that will quiet it. So it goes, madam. First one—then the other. It is very terrible to watch. One feels helpless. I have tried hard to prevent it—with all my might, I should say, madam."

"I am sure you have, Gaynor," she said warmly. She sat for some moments thinking, her eyes on her wedding ring which she turned round and round. Then she asked what instructions Dr. Carfew had given.

"He ordered small doses, madam. I am to give them at longer intervals each time—lessening the dose each time also. Sometimes I must substitute strychnine. He also ordered malted milk, and a nourishing diet—things easy to digest and fattening. He said that Mr. Chesney weighed less than he should by at least two stone. And there must be no spirit of any land given."

He stopped abruptly, flushing again.

"And the other—Doctor Hopkins—what did he say?"

Something that was almost a smile quivered under Gaynor's light eyelashes. His voice was very demure.

"He gave me several prescriptions for different occasions, madam."

"Did he leave any instructions about the quantity of

—morphine?" She paled as she uttered the word, but she felt that she must use it. It would have to be used very often between this man and herself if they were to save Cecil. "About the amount that you were to give Mr. Chesney!"

Gaynor looked down as though ashamed for the little doctor.

"He said that nothing could be done just at present, madam. That I must keep the master comfortable. That he must be reasoned with when he was better, and spoken to very plain for his own good."

"I see," said Sophy wearily.

She thought again; then asked:

"When do you think that Mr. Chesney will be strong enough for me to talk with him? I mean to talk really with him—to—to let him know that—I know!"

"By this evening—about nine, I should say, madam."

Sophy gazed at him in astonishment.

"By this evening? But he is still so ill, Gaynor!"

"This isn't like other illnesses, madam. I have only to give him a large dose, and it will put him normal."

"But Doctor Carfew's orders?"

The man looked sadly and wisely at her.

"He would not object, I'm sure, madam, seeing the object that is in view."

"And it will not injure him?"

"Oh, no, madam! At the worst, it will only delay

things a bit."

Sophy leaned her head on her hand. She felt mortally tired—soul, mind, and body.

"Very well, then, Gaynor," she said, in a low voice, "at nine o'clock I will come to Mr. Chesney's room."

When she entered her husband's room that evening, she saw that he was expecting her. His face lighted up as she came in, and he held out one hand towards her. His eyes showed the dulled surface and contracted pupils that she now knew meant a recent dose of morphia. Otherwise, his appearance was normal. But when he began to speak she noted the dryness of the mouth which she felt must also be produced by the drug. He was propped upon several large pillows, as on that evening some two weeks ago, and there were books and writing materials around him. She was surprised to see a glass of champagne on the little table, remembering what Gaynor had said about Dr. Carfew's commands in that respect. Then she realised that the man was merely violating instructions on this occasion in order to put her husband in a fitting condition for their talk.

Chesney saw her look at the glass of wine, and said with good-humoured peevishness:

"I see you're wondering at my scant allowance. But that old screw Gaynor is a terrible bully at these times. He knows he has me in his power—confound him! So he keeps me on short rations of everything that's the least pleasant. Besides, the stuff's flat by

now, being poured out in a glass like that, instead of served properly in a bottle."

Then the fretful expression left his face, and a look of admiration replaced it.

"By Jove—you look like a lovely gold statue of Diana in that gown! There's something so ineradicably virginal about you—keeps a chap falling in love with you over and over."

Sophy hated the especial voice in which he spoke just then. It was the voice of an amiably inclined Pasha, congratulating himself on his taste in favourites. She had again put on the orange tea-gown that he liked, feeling that she must soften him in every way possible before telling him the painful truth, on his reception of which so much depended. From the full petal-like collar, her throat rose like a white stamen from a gold corolla. Chesney's eyes gloated over her—his chief possession.

"George, but you're a beauty!" he said, with his silent laugh. "And shy! You're wincing this very minute under my praise—my conjugal praise. You know you are—you incorrigible Artemis."

Sophy looked at him thoughtfully, marvelling. Was it possible that he had no clear memory of that dreadful dinner at the House of Commons? Yes. It must be so. With all his latent brutality, he could not have been cognisant of what he had done there, and yet speak and seem like this. And it was very hard to know how to begin. It seemed so terrible a thing to have to bring a look of confusion, of shame even, to that confident, almost condescendingly assured face. She could not divine the wild sense of triumph that filled him, because of the accustomed poison in his

veins after his twenty-four hours of enforced fast from it. He felt that his "strength was as the strength of ten," because he felt also the bite of the admirable and abominable drug at his midriff. The sting of the spot where the needle had thrust into his flesh was sweet as the sting left by a kiss to the normal lover. He knew that he risked the danger of an abscess every time that he thrust the needle into his arms or legs, already so thickly punctured. He did not care. Morphia gives this carelessness—this calm recklessness of all that may follow.

"Cecil ..." said Sophy suddenly. She leaned forward and took his hand in both hers. His lids contracted. He recognised the tone in her voice, and it made him uneasy. There was always something disturbing to follow, when Sophy spoke in that tone.

"Well?" he said; and his voice told her, on her side, that he was on the defensive.

"Cecil—your feeling is right. I mean I hear in your voice that you feel I am going to say something that will be painful. But it's ... it's my love for you that makes me say it. You'll believe that, won't you?"

He kept his eyes narrowed and fixed on her. The look was so like his mother's in certain moods that she felt her heart sink.

"Well," he said again, "get it over whatever it is."

She held his hand tight. It was as if she, not he, were drowning, and she clung to his hand for succour—not to give it. He felt that she held her breath for an instant. Then she said, very low, her eyes imploring him:

"My dear, when you were ill yesterday, I had to send

for a doctor."

He jerked his hand away so violently that he dragged her forward on to her knees beside the bed. She stayed herself against it, never taking her eyes from his face.

"You—did *what*?" he said in a fierce whisper.

"Oh, Cecil!... Don't look at me like that. Don't look at me with such cruel eyes. You seemed dying—you were unconscious for hours. What else could I do? Be just—tell me that. What else could I have done?"

He was thinking like lightning. Thoughts zigzagged against the black cloud of anger in his mind in fiery flashes—clear as they were swift. How much had this doctor guessed—or known? What had he said? How much did Sophy know? What rôle would it be best for him to play? He had long dreaded this contingency. He knew that sometimes he overdosed himself with the drug. There were blank spaces in his life—gaps which he could not fill in with any sequence of events, try as he might. What had happened? What had he himself said or done? Had he left the hypodermic syringe where she could see it? Had Gaynor turned disloyal? One bit of clear reason rose dominant above the chaos of surmise. He must appear calm, no matter how violent the tumult of his secret self. He must remain passive until some cue was given him, then act out consistently the part that seemed best suited to the occasion. He closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them their expression was no longer furious.

"You must excuse me, Sophy," he said rather formally. "I think you must be able to imagine the shock it was to me to hear that you had called in one

of those dirty fakirs, knowing as you do my opinion of the fraternity."

He heard the breath that she had again held in escape softly, little by little from her bosom which was pressed against the bedclothes. She was still kneeling where he had dragged her forward. It was an attitude of prayer. Her whole body seemed to beseech him. Yet, though he saw this, he was not moved by it, except to extra caution. She could not speak at once, so he spoke again himself. Each word that he uttered calmed him. The naturalness of his assumed tone reassured him as it fell upon his own ear. As he would have said of another, he was "doing it damned well."

"I hope, since you adopted such radical measures," he remarked coldly, "that you at least chose a decent specimen. Was it by any chance my mother's little medical poodle!"

"No—Cecil. Doctor Hopkins came afterwards, but ——"

"What? you had two of those vermin in my house yesterday?"

There was rage in his eyes again. Quickly he veiled them.

"This is a bit overwhelming, you must admit," he said in a tired voice. Then he asked: "Who was the other luminary of hypocrisy?"

"It was Doctor Carfew, Cecil—Algernon Carfew."

Chesney's worst fears were realised. If this man had seen him, he *knew*. A dark, smothering fear rushed over him—he was a brave man, but this vague,

shadowy yet poignant terror seemed to turn his very vitals to water. He was as afraid of the fancied image of this accursedly knowing physician as a condemned lout of the headsman. It seemed to him, lying there, a strong man, master of his own house, the free-born citizen of a great Empire, that he was yet but a little doll of pith in the clutches of this grim, devilishly well-informed scientist. The medical profession took suddenly a symbolic form in his mind—it bulked before him like a huge, black Octopus heaving up from that shadowy sea of dread in which he was sinking. One of the vast tentacles had gripped him—was dragging him down—down. It was with amazement that he heard his own voice demanding in icy composure:

"And the verdict of this learned gentleman?"

He had closed his eyes again as though bored and wearied by the subject. He felt one of Sophy's soft, bare arms go round his neck. Her hair brushed his lips as she laid her head upon his breast. Her face was hidden from him. He heard her impassioned whisper:

"Cecil—don't, don't shut me out! Let me share it, I know— I *know*!"

XVIII

The moods of a morphinomaniac are very inconsistent. There were times when Cecil Chesney agonised over this degrading vice which was slowly

sapping his manhood and self-respect, which was turning him into a bowelless egoist. Yes, at times, so great was his suffering over his own abasement that he had frequently thought of self-destruction as a means of escape from the dark coil. These were during the luridly lucid moments which come to fine natures in such thrall—the moments when they see themselves as they are—when they say, with appalled realisation: "I am a morphinomaniac. I would sacrifice the happiness of my nearest and dearest for a dose of the terrible stuff when the horror of lacking it is upon me." But these moods are varied by others, singularly callous, when all humanity seems to have ebbed from the nature, and the formula of the victim's faith might be a paraphrase of that of the Moslem: "There is no God but Morphia and I am its prophet." This was Chesney's mood to-night. So far from being touched by Sophy's sudden, almost childlike appeal, he felt intensely irritated by it. It was all that he could do not to push away her head roughly from his breast. The tender, pleading tone of her voice was insufferably annoying to him.

He controlled himself rigidly, however, merely saying in a hard voice, without touching her, "I could understand you better if you didn't bury your mouth in my chest. I shall be interested to hear what it is that you '*know*.'"

Sophy drew back without any anger. She knew his hard voice, his "metal voice" she was used to call it. She realised sadly that she had made a mistake in appealing to him. But she would not let him hurt her or make her angry now. She turned and sat quietly in the chair again—looking down at her wedding ring—it seemed to fascinate her eyes in those days. It was

so long before she spoke that he said impatiently:

"Well—am I not to share this evidently interesting knowledge of yours?"

She looked at him honestly, trying to keep anything like sentiment from her eyes and voice.

"You make it so hard—for us both, Cecil," she said.

"Pray what do I make hard?"

"The truth."

"'What is truth?' said doubting Pilate. Can it be that you have found out? You interest me."

Sophy hesitated. How was she to take him? Was he trying to make her put it into brutally plain words? Would he prefer that? Or was he only waiting to launch abuse at her in case she did? As she sat anxiously pondering, one of those sudden changes of mood took place in Chesney, that startle even the slaves of morphia themselves. In a flash—in the twinkling of an eye, he seemed to see a new course open before him—a course that would save him from the powers of darkness as represented in his distorted mind by the medical profession. Holding out his hand, he said in quite a different voice, a very gentle one indeed:

"Come here, Sophy."

A wondering look stole over her face. She went to him almost timidly, seated herself on the edge of the bed, and put her hand in his.

"See here, my child," said he, still in that kind, moderate voice. "Whatever else you have in mind, don't forget that I'm a rather ill man."

"I don't ... I don't ... not for a moment."

"And you must bear with me if I say things a bit lamely."

"Say anything...." she began eagerly, then restrained herself. "Say anything," she repeated more soberly.

"Very well, then. But please don't exclaim or get emotional, will you? My head's beastly tired. I've had rather a tight squeak of it, Gaynor tells me."

"Yes—you were very, very ill."

Her lip quivered. She pressed his hand nervously, then loosened her fingers as though afraid of irritating him. But he returned the pressure kindly. He was so absorbed in the part he had finally chosen that he almost deceived himself with his fine acting —as some actors shed real tears in moving roles— almost believed that he really felt kindly to her, and was going to treat her with a noble candour.

"Well, then, Daphne, dear, I can guess what you mean when you say you '*know*.' I guessed all the time, only one is not always rational when one is ill, and this doctor business enraged me. I confess it frankly. What you '*know*'—what you have found out, is that I take morphine, is it not?"

He was looking at her keenly. The blood seemed to beat hotly back on her heart, then fly in a jet to her startled face. Tears came into her eyes. She bit her lip fiercely in her effort not to show her emotion. It was so splendid of him—so deeply, pathetically moving, to hear him thus calmly and honestly name the dreadful thing. She could not help it. She lifted the great hand and pressed her lips to it. This soft touch almost broke Chesney's strong self-control.

Indirectly she was making him lie, and he hated her for it—he really hated her at that moment. He could have struck her with pleasure. "Sweet character I am," he thought savagely; "among other things I've got a bit of Bill Sykes in me, too, it seems." He closed his eyes again to veil this violent impulse. Sophy noticed for the first time that evening this trick of closing his eyes, which grew on him so rapidly from that time. It took him four or five minutes to regain the atmosphere of the part which he had chosen. When he spoke again, it was in that same mild, rather melancholy voice that had so touched her.

"My dear Daphne," he said, "I suppose there's a pinch of cowardice in us all—tucked away in some chink of our charming human nature. Morphine has brought out this in me. I——"

"Oh, no, Cecil! No—*no*!"

Her voice was beautifully fervent. He hurried on. She must not shatter his present mood again.

"Often I've thought: 'Shall I tell her? Shall I ask her help? She's a brave, loyal thing. She'll stand by me—even through this.'"

"Oh, I would have! I will!"

"But then again I thought: 'No—how can I risk her contempt—her misunderstanding? How can I deliberately strike such a blow to her ignorant happiness?' So I determined to struggle along as best I could. I've fought the damnable thing, Sophy—believe me or not as you will."

The cunning mixture of truth and falsehood in what he had been saying lent it somehow an impression of extraordinary sincerity. The bald, dark truth would

not have carried such conviction to Sophy's heart. She cried to him piteously, struggling to keep back the tears of anguished compassion and renewed affection:

"Oh, don't say such things to me! I do believe you! I do! with all my heart, with all my soul!"

Ferociously sarcastic, Chesney completed to himself her unconscious quotation: "With all my mind, and with all my body." Why did she not gush it *all* over him? he demanded angrily to himself. What fools women were after all! One had only to lie cleverly to them and forthwith they fell flat in fits of hero-worship. Had he honoured her with the truth, she would have turned on him in contempt. So little did he know her.

"Then, Daphne, perhaps Chance is a kindly god after all. This chance collapse of mine has broken down barriers that I might never have climbed by myself."

He had been sipping water off and on while he talked. It was nauseously bitter to him, but with that fine instinct for thoroughness in his acting, he had instinctively denied himself the flat champagne, which would have been far more palatable to his tongue so rough with morphia. It occurred to him also that gain might be made of this small sacrifice. He could ask later for a fresh glass of wine without seeming unduly eager. And it was impossible for him to talk at any length without some liquid to moisten the dry mucous membranes of his mouth.

"You see," he went on, "one needs strong assistance in shaking off a thing like this. I've come to that, Daphne. Gaynor has been a devilish good sort through it all, but one ally isn't enough. A Triple

Alliance"—he smiled at her—"is what is needed for this war."

Sophy felt dazed with gladness. Then shame seized her as she thought that she might have "deserted"—might have missed this wonderful moment, so far greater than mere happiness.

"Do you mean that you will let me help you, Cecil? That you will let me fight—it—with you?"

"What else could I mean?"

She was speechless. She hardly dared to breathe. She might wake up.

"And—and you will—follow out the—instructions?"

Chesney's eyebrows flicked together for an instant, then smoothed again.

"Whose instructions?" he asked calmly.

She just paused, then said timidly:

"Dr. Carfew's, Cecil."

He felt the subdued billow of his rage heave again. It calmed under his fierce resolve.

"What were they?" he asked.

She explained, almost whispering in her shyness and anxiety at having to name such things to him.

The wave rose again. He rode it with a short laugh.

"So I'm to be fattened like a holiday ox!" he said. "Incarcerated and made plump for Virtue's altar!"

He laughed again, closing his eyes. When he opened them he looked grave and very serious.

"Sophy," he said, "with the dilemma comes generally a way of escape for the imaginative." (How strange! he was paraphrasing the very quotation that Father Raphael had made to her that morning. She listened breathlessly.) "I confess frankly that I would not submit for a moment to this sanatorium idea. I know myself too well. I should enter it a temporary invalid and leave it a confirmed lunatic." (This phrase pleased him very much, especially when he saw by her expression that it had impressed her.) "I am not of the stuff from which 'good patients' are made. I should probably strangle my attendants and take French leave through a window. But"—he looked at her consideringly—"I am perfectly willing to put myself in your hands, and Gaynor's—you have talked with Gaynor, I suppose?"

He put this last question casually but with shrewd intent. Sophy's caution was at once alert. She had determined that he should have no least cause of anger against Gaynor.

"It was hard to get Gaynor to say anything, Cecil. He is so loyal. Only when the doctor had told me everything, did he so much as admit, even by a look, that there was—was anything of this kind. I had to press him hard, Cecil, for the barest facts. It was evidently real suffering for him to answer me. He had to answer me, you know. His very affection for you made him do that, when—when he saw how much I wanted to help you, too—that I was not—judging."

Chesney smiled rather drily, closing his eyes. "I see that your feeling towards Gaynor has suffered a 'sea change,'" he said. "There's something 'rare and strange' about it now."

"No, Cecil," she said warmly. "How could it be strange that I feel grateful and appreciative towards a man who has been so faithful to you?"

"'*Il y a des fagots et des fagots*,'" he murmured languidly. "There is one glory of the moon of faithfulness and another of the sun."

"How do you mean, Cecil?" She felt suddenly very anxious.

"Oh, nothing. Merely that you and Gaynor are the sun and moon in the heavens of loyalty."

"I'm glad that you're not vexed with the poor fellow because—because he didn't lie," she ventured gently.

"Oh, no ... no ..." he moved his hand, dismissing the subject. "'Faithful are the wounds of a friend.'"

Something in his tone still made her anxious, but his face was so placid that she took comfort from it. She waited a moment, then said:

"Do you mean, dear, that you will let us make a ... a régime for you, on the lines that ... that were suggested?"

"Why—what else?" said Chesney, with a sort of indulgent loftiness. "My admission could hardly have been worth while otherwise—could it?"

"No—that's true," she said joyfully. "Oh, Cecil!" She sat looking at him through tears of gratitude. She could not keep these tears from starting, but she managed to hold them within her eyelids.

"There, there!" he said nervously. "You're a dear thing—but don't make a fuss."

"Oh, no— I won't indeed. I feel so quiet—so happy."

She paused, gathering composure.

"And ... in case the ... the constant care will be more than Gaynor and I can do properly ... you'll let me engage a nurse—won't you!"

That dark wave rose again. Again he surmounted it, thinking in those lightning bright and quick flashes. If he objected it would look odd. Besides he had not accomplished all that he desired. He wished it firmly fixed that Carfew should not be put in charge. By concessions on his part he could demand concessions on hers.

"See here, Sophy," he said, in a reasonable, practical voice. "I am willing, as I said, to put myself in your and Gaynor's hands. Having agreed to this, I think I have a right to make certain conditions, have I not?"

"Yes, Cecil—of course." But her high mood sank.

"Then here are my conditions—very mild ones I think you will admit. I dislike the idea of this swaggering, Bully-boy of a medical Bashaw—this Carfew chap. I'll none of him. You may follow out his ideas if you like—but come in contact with him personally or indirectly I will not. From what I have heard of him I consider him more or less of a Charlatan—but whether he is or not—I flatly refuse to have him attend me. On the other hand, I will put up with a nurse, provided it's not a man-nurse. I should throttle him within two seconds of his arrival. Women nurses are rather soothing as a rule. Then, I'm perfectly willing to go to Dynehurst— I'd like to, in fact. I'm sick of this b—— town. Also I'm quite willing to endure the ministrations of the Mater's

trained poodles—the town poodle and the country poodle both. They're clever enough chaps, though a bit under hack to the old lady." A sudden inspiration came to him as he was speaking. "To prove that I am sincere," he concluded, "I will take you and Gaynor wholly into my confidence."

He pressed the button of the electric bell at his bedside. Gaynor appeared almost instantly. The man was very pale and his eyes had a strained, apprehensive look.

"Gaynor," said Cecil directly, "you've proved yourself an excellent servant. You have done quite right. Mrs. Chesney and I have talked my case over thoroughly. I realise that this drug has gained an undue hold on me—that it is an insidious enemy—and causes one to deceive oneself— I therefore place myself in Mrs. Chesney's charge. You will assist her in every way in your power. I now wish to give to Mrs. Chesney, in your presence, my own private hypodermic syringe. You will find it in my locked letter-case. Here is the key."

He took it from under the pillow, and held it out to Gaynor. The man's face was livid. He experienced acute pain, in thus being forced to listen to his master's calm confession of duplicity in the presence of another. He unlocked the letter-case obediently and took out the little aluminum case. His hands were shaking.

"Give it to Mrs. Chesney, please."

Sophy also was trembling and very pale.

Chesney lay back upon his pillows watching them with the sketch of a queer smile about his mouth. He

himself broke the strained silence.

"And now, Gaynor," said he, "be so kind as to take away this stuff and bring me a fresh glass of wine."

Gaynor moved to the bedside as in a daze. Then his face worked suddenly.

"Oh ... sir!" he said in a husky whisper.

"There, that will do! I'd like to be alone for a bit. I'm sure you'll excuse me, Sophy."

She went and kissed him in silence. Gaynor had left the room at once, his head hung low on his breast. Sophy followed quickly.

When the door was shut, a convulsed look broke the assumed calm on Chesney's face.

"Damn it!" he choked, clenching his fist at the wall before him. "Damnation! I've lied to a man—and he believes me!"

Somehow, what had been almost an amusing game when played for Sophy's benefit, turned to stark humiliation when practised on another man.

He slipped from the bed and, striding to the door in his bare feet, snapped the lock. Then reaching his bed again, thrust his arm far in between the mattresses. He drew out a brand-new syringe—opened it deftly, fitted on the needle—took a spoon from a little drawer in the table. Heated water in it over the lamp, dissolved in it a half-grain tablet of morphia (he was afraid to take a larger dose lest it should prove noticeable)—stripped up the sleeve from his powerful forearm all covered with purplish knots, and drove the little needle home in his flesh, holding the syringe firmly in place by its curved,

steel horns, so like the antennæ of some poisonous insect. Then he hid all away again—unlocked the door, and slipped quickly into bed.

When Gaynor arrived a moment later, his master seemed to be dozing.

The valet stood looking down on him with a shy expression of affection and relief.

"Thank God," the servant's heart was saying; "thank God—he's acted like a man!"

XIX

Lady Wychcote came again next morning about ten o'clock. She seemed much mollified by Sophy's account of the arrangement that had been entered into—showed a marked inclination to assume more amicable relations with her daughter-in-law.

"I *knew* that he would act reasonably when things were put clearly before him. He is erratic—but a most able creature. As soon as he realised the gravity of the situation I was convinced that he would act with me—with us—for his own benefit."

"Yes—you were right—you knew him better than I did," said Sophy with generous humility. She, too, felt softened towards her mother-in-law because her maternal intuition had been right, when she, Sophy, as a wife, had doubted.

"Very nice of you to admit it, I'm sure," said Lady

Wychcote affably. She was so highly pleased that all her ideas were by way of being carried out, that she actually asked to see Bobby. This was a wonderful condescension, for from the day of his birth she seemed scarcely to have been aware of his existence.

"I will go to the nursery if you like," she said, as it were a Queen saying with royal affectation of equality: "See, I am even prepared to descend from my dais and walk on a level with you."

"Thanks—but there's no need," said Sophy. "I will have him brought here."

Lady Wychcote had not seen the child, except at a distance, since he could walk and talk. As his nurse set him upon his feet, and his sturdy little figure came towards her, strutting mannishly, serious but unafraid, something stirred in her chilly breast—something not exactly warm but pungent. The child had the look of her own family. It had been a family noted for its statesmen. What possibilities might not lie hid in that small, firm breast under its ruffled collar! It came over her in a sudden tingling wave of resuscitated hope and fact abruptly realised, that in case of Gerald's dying childless—*this* child would be heir to the title. He was a Chesney after all. He had the name, and her own blood in his veins. The mother was only the "incalculable quantity" in the sum of this higher spiritual mathematics. Inconsistently, as with all tyrants, her mind whirled about, accepting as a pleasing possibility what had until then only occurred to her as an insufferable one—a weapon with which to goad Gerald, when his disinclination to marry put her beyond all patience. Now as she looked at Bobby, who had gone straight to his mother's knee, and stood biting his small fist,

and regarding her solemnly out of grey, noncommittal eyes, she thought, "Why not! He is my grandchild after all." She even spoke her thought aloud.

"Has it ever occurred to you that that child may be Lord Wychcote some day, in case Gerald dies unmarried!" she asked.

It had occurred to Sophy, for Cecil had spoken once or twice of such a possibility—but he had spoken of it grumblingly.

"If that duffer Gerald dies without begetting a proper little Conservative," he had said, "our little chap's chances may be knocked out, by a seat in the Lords. Nice country this—where a political career can be smashed to smithereens by having to wear a bally title whether you will or no."

It never seemed to cross his mind that Bobby might desire a career other than political—or granting that he should not, that by a sort of figurative reversion of species, he might become a Unionist instead of a Liberal.

But Sophy did not have political ambitions for her son. She would rather have seen him a great artist of some sort—the great poet of his day. In her marriage seemed to have quenched the spark of mental creation. It was a deep grief to her that she had felt no real desire to write since becoming Chesney's wife. Only that saddest of all emotions—the desire to desire. It was as if mocking, satyr-hoofs had trampled her mind's garden. The fine poetry of her imaginative mood had not been able to withstand the shocks of such a marriage as hers. Sometimes she had felt bitterly, as though there were the print of a goat's

hoof on her heart and that it had filled slowly with blood. It was this scar that burnt when she was unhappy.

"Oh, Gerald is sure to marry," she now said hastily. "He was so much better when I saw him in April."

"Pf! He goes up and down. There's no counting on him," said his mother bitterly. "Is your boy strong? He looks very healthy."

"He's splendidly strong," said Sophy proudly. "He's never had an ill day in his life."

She gathered the boy close to her jealously. There was such a greedy, appraising look in Lady Wychcote's eyes. She might have been a civilised ogress, estimating from long habit the tender flesh of a child.

"Is he clever? Quick?"

"Very," said Sophy briefly.

"I hope you won't let Cecil instil his wretched Radical principles into the boy's mind before he's able to think for himself."

"He thinks for himself already," said Sophy, with a slight smile.

"Well—who knows? We may yet give another famous man to the Conservative cause," said Lady Wychcote, still gazing at Bobby. Then she said to him:

"Come to your grandmother, child."

Sophy impelled him forward, and he went slowly but steadily, and stood before the young-old lady, his hands behind him, his little stomach thrust forward.

It was the true statesman's attitude. But Bobby was only wondering why the lady had black specks all over her face, and whether the bird on her brown velvet hat could cry "cuckoo" like the one in the nursery clock.

And to Sophy there came the words of Constance:

"Do, child, go to it, grandam, child:
Give grandam kingdom, and it' grandam will
Give it a plum, a cherry, and a fig."

For it galled her that Lady Wychcote should never have shown the least interest in the boy, until it had occurred to her that some day he might serve her ambition.

Chesney saw his mother for a few minutes before she went. He was languid but apparently quite normal. He exaggerated this languor, as later on he exaggerated a certain nervousness consequent on the fact that he dared not take as much morphia as he really wanted, fearing that Gaynor, at least, might suspect something, and well aware that a man under reduced doses of the drug shows symptoms of extreme weakness and restlessness. When she asked if he would see Craig Hopkins that afternoon, he replied good-humouredly:

"Bring in the performing poodles as soon as you like. Since I'm in for it, the show might as well begin promptly."

"Cecil is *most* reasonable—I did not hope as much as this," she told Sophy. Then she took her departure, adding:

"And now I must set the Town talking the way we wish."

It had been agreed between her and Sophy that she should spread reports to the effect that Cecil was suffering from an attack of inflammation of the brain. She had submitted this idea to Dr. Hopkins yesterday, and he had agreed that it was wise and permissible under the circumstances.

Lady Wychcote was a clever woman. She set this report going with such skill and so apt a measure of detail that even the sceptical Olive Arundel was quite taken in by it. The people who chiefly mattered, and those who had been present at the painful dinner, were only too glad to accept such a solution of the disgraceful scene. Only Oswald Tyne smiled behind Lady Wychcote's well-preserved and still girlish back, his mocking, unctuous smile, and said: "I would rather dream of the degrading spectacle of a British plum-pudding served in flames at an Athenian banquet than see again at a London feast the brain of an Englishman thus ignited. Both are too massive to burn gracefully. But the plum-pudding has a lightness—a delicacy—a wholesomeness—which the British cerebrum even in flames can never accomplish."

Olive, to whom Tyne made these remarks, exclaimed, much vexed:

"Oswald! You are *bwutal*. You are never funny when you are bwutal."

"On the contrary," he assured her gravely, "I am a Celt. I am always funny when I am brutal. Your Englishman, now, is always brutal when he is funny."

"Oh, don't try to be witty with every breath!" she cried crossly. "I think it heartless of you, and that poor man was in danger of his life at the very

moment he said that awful thing!"

"Indeed he was," said Tyne earnestly. "I know that I had clutched my knife with red slaughter hissing at my ear. Several men who were present have confessed the same thing to me. The vice of self-control was all that restrained us."

"At any rate," she said earnestly, seeing that it was hopeless to get at his serious side through sympathy for Cecil, "at any rate, you like poor dear Sophy, *don't* you?"

"Yes, I burn discreetly 'with a hard, gem-like flame' for her."

"You wouldn't want to hurt her?"

"Not even for my own pleasure."

"Then *don't* go about saying things about 'plum-puddings' and Grecian feasts and all that when her husband is mentioned, *will* you? Even if you don't believe he's ill—be a good sort for Sophy's sake, and pretend to."

"Pretence is always lovely," said Tyne dreamily. "Zeus pretended to be a swan, and lo!—Artemis and Apollo!"

"I'm sure *you* don't have to pretend to be a *goose*," said Olive, out of patience, and she walked away from him, proudly carrying off the last word.

But Tyne's native kindliness outweighed his love of drollery this time. The memory of Sophy's beautiful, frozen profile as he had last seen it, and which had reminded him of the drooping, white profile of the Neapolitan Antinous, held him from further expressing his doubts of the genuineness of Chesney's

attack. As for the others, they behaved with discreet and kindly sympathy, and carriages drew up often before the house in Regent's Park to leave cards and inquiries.

Thus the bitterness of humiliation was lifted from Sophy's heart, and thus, too, it came to pass that Amaldi could think of her again without that overwhelming surge of helpless pity, and fierce, thwarted indignation. He left cards on her and Chesney a few days later, and meeting Bobby as he turned from the door, had the rather bitter pleasure of holding him in his arms for a moment.

The child had not forgotten him. He gazed soberly into his eyes for a moment, then broke into the delicious chuckle that meant delighted affection with him, and pressing the firm little fruit of his fresh cheek to Amaldi's, said:

"Bobby man!... Bobby *nith* man—tome back!"

Amaldi's heart glowed and ached. He kissed the boy with passion, then set him gently down and went away. He had found that which was lost to him even as he found it, and the world seemed to him like a vast house full of vacant, echoing rooms.

It was decided that Chesney should be taken to Dynehurst during the next week. He affected a listless apathy, and seemed not to care whether he went or stayed. Dr. Hopkins expressed himself satisfied with his condition. He thought, however, that the sooner he could be moved to the country the better it would be for him in every way. He had

written fully to Dr. Bellamy, the Wychcotes' physician at Dynehurst. For Sophy these intervening days were peaceful but heavy. She could not recapture, somehow, her high mood of the evening of her talk with Cecil. Things went along evenly, monotonously. He was never either cheerful or depressed—talked little, sometimes locked his bedroom door for hours together. This made her curiously apprehensive. What was he doing behind that locked door? She felt that Gaynor also was vaguely uneasy over this new phase, but they did not mention it to each other. Apart from this one thing, Cecil was very reasonable—submitted to having all wine withdrawn from his diet; even put up with having his cigarettes cut down to eight a day. Neither Sophy nor Gaynor suspected for a moment that he had a third hypodermic syringe in his possession. With the startling and crafty acumen of the morphinomaniac, he had secreted it in the last place that they would have thought of—namely, in the same letter-case, of which now he left the key carelessly on his dressing-table or the little stand by his bed. Nor did they, in their inexperience of such things, realise that one who had for three years been addicted to the habit, and who, during two years of that time, had been accustomed to large and constant doses of the drug, could not possibly have supported its withdrawal, even gradually, with the composure shown by Chesney.

Dr. Hopkins always made his visits about ten in the morning; and, deeply cunning, determined that no mistake on his part should prevent his escape from the town where Algernon Carfew lived, an ever present menace, Chesney refrained from taking his usual dose until after the physician had seen him. These occasions of waiting for Hopkins to come and

go were very painful. Sometimes the little doctor would be half an hour late, and each minute of this half hour seemed endless to the man, fretting with crawling skin and muscles spasmodically twitching, for the calming poison. So when Hopkins felt his forehead and his pulse on these occasions, he would find the one moist and the other feeble. These symptoms were in accord with the therapeutics of the case, hence the inexperienced doctor's satisfaction.

But though Sophy felt saddened by the way that Cecil seemed to keep her civilly aloof, as though what he was enduring were impossible of comprehension to her, on the other hand she was very happy in her surprise that this dreadful and mysterious habit should prove so easy to cure. She recalled De Quincy's *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, and the agonies that he described as accompanying his efforts to abstain. Morphia, then, must differ in its effects from opium. She thanked God, in her ignorance, that Cecil's enemy was morphia and not opium.

XX

It was on a lovely afternoon that they left London for Durham. A Wednesday had been chosen, so that the usual week-end parties going to the country or returning from it might be avoided. A compartment had been reserved. Lady Wychcote went with them, and Gaynor travelled in the same carriage to be at

hand in case his master needed him. Chesney, pale as always now, but quite composed, settled down with a copy of *Le Mannequin d'Osier*. France's brilliant cynicism suited his present mood admirably. Now and then he glanced out toward London as the train drew swiftly away. There was that subtle, just sketched smile about his lips that rested there so often during these days. He seemed to be savouring a pleasant, ironical secret which he alone knew. Lady Wychcote was absorbed in a novel by Mrs. Humphry Ward. She liked the political atmosphere in these books, though she sniffed at the politicians described in them. "Clockworks" she called them. She was very intolerant of the achievements of other women.

Bobby was very good, playing in grave silence with his red and white bricks on the shawl that Miller had spread for ham. But presently he began to shove one up and down along the seat near his father, saying, "Choo! Choo!" Sophy lifted him upon her lap and began to tell him stories in a low voice. She was very glad to be thus mechanically occupied. Dynehurst always depressed her. She felt a vague, grey gloom rising about her at the thought of spending several months there, with Cecil in this strange, cold, forbidding mood. She looked out of the window as she told the oft-repeated story of "The Three Bears," her subconscious mind attending to the tale, her fancy selecting bits in flying hedge and fence that she would jump were she riding to hounds across that country. Purposely she put serious matters from her. The rough music of the train lulled her mind. She seemed caught up by the swift motion, whirled from the ordinary course of life. The fixed events in it seemed like the stations that they passed—existent only in a world already wheeling backward.

By the time that Darlington was reached, Bobby had begun to grow fretful from the journey. He demanded to be given the small engine on its stone pedestal in the station there. "Baby Puff-Puff!" he announced. "Bobby want—Bobby *want*!" Sophy sent Miller into the next carriage with him. She had seen Chesney's eyes contract and fix upon the boy. The change of train annoyed him. Besides, he was beginning to crave another dose of morphia. The time for the dose to be given by Gaynor had not yet come. When it did it would be so small that it would barely temper the fierce lust of his accustomed nerves. He closed his eyes, frowning, his lip between his teeth. There was a bluish shade about his mouth. His eyes looked sunken thus closed, in the sidelight from the carriage-window.

Sophy watched him anxiously. She saw that Gaynor also glanced towards him from time to time. Lady Wychcote had dozed off, with her little travelling-cushion of green morocco behind her head. She slept tightly, as one might say, her eyelids and lips shut fast. She looked old asleep. Her mouth settled and drew down at the corners. Old and hard and disappointed her face looked under its spotted veil, which from a hardy vanity she had not raised when reading.

Chesney crossed and uncrossed his legs several times. The hand on his knee clenched, until the great knuckles shone yellow with little reddish streaks outlining the bones. The eyes of Sophy and Gaynor met. In answer to her look the valet approached, treading softly.

"Do you not think—considering the long journey—we might give an—an extra dose, Gaynor?" she

whispered.

"Yes, madam. I was thinking that," he whispered back.

Chesney's lids flew open at these whisperings, which seemed to have reached him even through the dull roar of the great wheels underneath. His eyes looked hostile and mocking. There was a sort of cold hatred in them. Sophy shivered.

"Quick, Gaynor," she said; "prepare it quickly."

She went over to her husband.

"Are you suffering, Cecil?" she asked pityingly.

"Like hell," he said.

"I was afraid so. I'm so sorry, dear. Gaynor is going to give you some medicine at once."

Incredulity, then an almost foolish softness flowed over his face.

"By God, you're an angel!" he stammered. He seized her hand and covered it with kisses, regardless of the valet's presence. This struck Sophy as very painful. She flushed, drawing her hand away, and saying again:

"I'm so sorry— I should have thought of it before. Dr. Hopkins warned me that the journey might exhaust you."

"And— I say, Sophy—make it double this time, will you? It will be no good else. I'm suffering actual pain, as well as from the lack of the damned stuff. The usual thing won't help me—not the least."

Sophy hesitated. She glanced towards Gaynor. He

was holding a spoon filled with water from a little flask over the flame of a spirit lamp. He was absorbed in the delicate task and did not see her look. She glanced back, still doubtful, to her husband. The expression of hatred had again gathered in his eyes. He closed them, trying to smile. This smile was like a grimace of pain and anger. Sophy went quickly over to Gaynor.

"He seems very ill," she murmured. "Might not a little larger dose than usual be better?"

Gaynor glanced, also, at his master. Then he said:

"Yes, I think in this instance it will be better, madam."

He dissolved a half-grain of morphia, drew it up into the little glass syringe, and took it over to his master. Chesney had confessed to taking six grains a day. They had cut this down to half in the past fortnight. Every four hours now for three days Gaynor had been mixing a quarter of a grain at each dose. During the coming week this was to be reduced to an eighth.

Sophy turned aside her head as she saw the man approach Cecil with the little instrument. She could not shake off the horror with which it filled her.

She sat and gazed out, unseeing, at the reeling landscape as the train rushed north—blind to all but the picture that memory painted on the dim curtain of the present. The train rushed north with the ardour of a Titan to a tryst. The great engine panted as with passion. Through the deepening twilight the rolling pasture lands of Durham glowed with a green that was more a feeling than an actual tint. The guard lighted the little lamp in the roof of the

carriage. At once the twilight hollowed to a purple gulf through which they sped recklessly.

Now Sophy glanced again at her husband. His head was thrown back against the cushions, his hands relaxed. There was an expression of supreme peace on his quiet face. "The peace that passeth all understanding" flashed through Sophy's mind. She shivered. This peace of Cecil's and that other divine peace were so cruelly removed one from the other. Yet this, too, was "past understanding" for all outside the black magic of its influence. The lamp turned the window-pane near which he sat into a dusky mirror. In its surface she saw repeated the sinister quiet of his profile, and through this reflection of his face dimly she saw the further landscape. Yes, thus it was that she saw the whole world now—through the medium of her husband's image.

When they got out at Dynehurst Station they found the night chilly with a promise of rain in the air. Gaynor hastened forward with his master's overcoat — Bobby was bundled up in Miller's shawl over his little pea-jacket.

Sophy looked regretfully up at the sky, strewn thickly with little shells of cloud. She dreaded a long rainy spell at Dynehurst—the weeping trees, and flowers, and walls. It was like being enclosed in a vast, grey-glass globe streaming with water, to be immured in Dynehurst during a season of rain.

Gerald had sent a waggonette and a brougham to meet them.

"Come with me, Sophy," Cecil said, taking her hand and going toward the brougham.

Side by side they went rolling swiftly between the darkling hedges, across broad pasture lands that gave forth a dank, sweet country perfume of earth and grass. There was a smell of cattle and the breath of cattle in the moist air. These scents and the being so close beside him in the brougham made her feel as though she were repeating her first drive to Dynehurst, taken during her honeymoon. That also had been on a night in May. But then all had been a wonder and a dream. Now she was horribly wide awake. There was no wonder—only a sad surmise, half answered by her own reason already. A long, dim corridor of locked doors seemed stretching before her. She must force each lock, drag him through the opened door with her, and lock it fast again behind them. They might emerge into that "wide place" of which the Psalmist spoke—she could not know. She could only hope; but hope seemed to have dwindled during that painful journey.

They entered the Park. The trees rose dark and blurred about them, deeper shadows on the pale grey shadow of the night. They gave forth a soft, seething sound in the gentle wind. It was as if they sighed in their sleep. A scent of dead leaves blew from the coverts—fresh and bitter. A wholesome autumn smell, mingling oddly with the sound of summer leafage. They passed the chapel, in which service was held every Sunday for the family and servants of Dynehurst. There all the Chesneys were buried. There Cecil would lie some day, and die, and little Bobby—Bobby grown to be a man, an old man maybe, with children and grandchildren of his own to follow. She imagined the dank crypt, and the coffins ranged there. It seemed a horrid way to be buried. She pressed closer to Cecil. She remembered how she had once wished that he would die....

Now the severe, dark mass of the house came into sight, pierced by squares of dusky orange. Against the skyey beach of cloud-shells it reared like a grim cliff. The front door stood wide. Gerald was waiting for them. He came forward to assist Cecil.

"Sorry, old man," he said shyly, holding out his hand. "Have a shoulder?"

"Thanks," said his brother, "but I'm not a cripple, you know."

His tone was good-humoured. He got out first, being nearest the door, then turned to help Sophy.

"How d'ye do, Sophy?" said Gerald. His face lighted up as he saw her. "Glad Cecil seems so fit. Thought the journey might knock him up a bit."

They went into the huge, oppressive hall. The skylight that ran from end to end of its hundred feet looked curiously blind in the glow from lamps and candles. There was a fire burning in the big fireplace at one end.

"Thought you might get chilly driving up," explained Gerald. He was a slight, dark man, rather Celtic in appearance. He was like the great-grandfather, for whom he was named, and who also had been a scholar and a dreamer.

"Good old chap!" said Chesney, expanding in the bright blaze. "Deuced thoughtful of you!" He was as fond of artificial warmth as a cat.

"And I had tea served—though it's only an hour to dinner," continued Gerald. He was much pleased at finding his brother so amiable. He had thought that illness might make him quite unbearable. It was for

Sophy's sake that he was so glad. He himself merely kept out of the way when Cecil was outrageous.

The others arrived. Lady Wychcote joined them. Bobby, who was fast asleep, was taken straight to the nursery. Gaynor waited at the door for orders.

"Will you go to your room at once, Cecil, or stay with us a little while?" asked Sophy.

"Think I'll just have a nip of tea first," said Chesney. "Mind you make it strong—no slops, please."

He turned to Gerald.

"They simply brim me with slops now, old boy."

Why he felt so amicably towards Gerald he could not have said. His elder brother usually "got on his nerves." He had never been fond of him, even when they were lads. To-night, though, somehow "good old Gerald" seemed to appeal to him. He found his lank, dark face and shy eyes rather touching. Noticing this, Gerald, on his part, had a nervous feeling that his brother might be going to die, in spite of his apparent strength at the moment. It was so highly unnatural, this excessive cordiality of tone and manner.

Sophy, too, was unpleasantly struck by Cecil's manner to Gerald. She felt sure now that the morphine was accountable for it—that she and Gaynor had given him too much. She felt scared—and very tired. The stillness of the country after London and the train was like a louder roar of occult menace. When she handed him his cup, Chesney gulped the hot, black tea eagerly. He was at the exact point in the effect of that half-grain dose when he craved stimulant. He drank this cup, then another.

The heat was grateful to that *fade* feeling of his stomach, but what he really thirsted for was the more biting burn of raw spirit. Suddenly the floor beneath his feet seemed to become transparent and he could see as though they were actually visible to him the well-stocked wine-cellars of Dynehurst. There was a special brand of cognac stored there—an 1820 vintage, smooth, mellow, powerful—a liquid that was like flame tempered in magic vats. He could taste it, as though a round mouthful actually stung his palate with its smooth, fiery globule. He determined to have a draught of it. How? The morphia cunning pointed out the way. All at once he slipped sideways in his chair, letting the cup drop from his hand. His head fell back. His lip lifted, showing the dry teeth. He looked unspeakably ghastly in the huge limpness of his slackened figure. Sophy and Gaynor ran to him. Gerald also started forward, but his mother caught his arm.

"Wait!" she said sharply. "They know what to do for him."

"Poor old Cecil! It's awful!" muttered his brother, very pale.

Gaynor put his arms about Cecil, as though trying to lift him. When Gerald saw this he broke from his mother and ran to help. Between them they laid Cecil on the floor. He half opened his eyes and moaned. Again his acting was so good that it deceived himself. He felt as he lay there that he was really on the verge of swooning—that only brandy would save him.

"Brandy!" he muttered.

Sophy looked wildly at Gaynor. She was shaking

from head to foot.

"I'll get a dose of strychnine ready, madam," he said, turning towards the tea-table. Chesney's lids fell again.

"Brandy!" It was just a whisper.

"Whatever you're going to do, for God's sake do it quickly!" cried Gerald to Gaynor. He spoke in a high, shrill voice. He was terribly excited and alarmed.

"Brandy!" came the faint whisper, almost inaudible.

Gerald sprang up, rushed from the room. As Gaynor was heating water in a teaspoon to prepare the strychnine, he rushed back again, a bottle of brandy and a liqueur glass in his hand.

"Here!" he cried. "At least try this while the other's being got ready."

Gaynor's hand shook so that he slopped the water he had already prepared, and had to begin all over.

"Oh, hurry, Gaynor—hurry!" cried Sophy, in despair. Cecil seemed to have fainted again.

"Let's try this—do let's try this," urged Gerald, kneeling down by her.

"I'm afraid," she murmured. She was white to the lips. "They say it's so bad for him."

Gaynor came forward with the hypodermic needle. Sophy held it, shivering with repulsion, while the valet unfastened his master's sleeve-links and pushed back his sleeve.

"Good God! What's the matter with his arm?" whispered Gerald hoarsely. Sophy felt sick to death.

Life seemed to her like a sickness—a disease. She, too, had caught a glimpse of the disfigured flesh.

"Result of the fever, your lordship," said Gaynor in a low voice. He thrust the needle skilfully home between two less recent punctures. Gerald drew back as though it had entered his own arm.

"He'll revive now, your lordship," said the valet in the same even voice. They waited. Cecil lay there motionless, his lip still curled back over his teeth. After a few moments:

"Brandy!" he breathed again.

"For God's sake, give it to him ... give it to him, Sophy!" Gerald urged.

Gaynor had his master's wrist in his fingers. "His pulse is slow, madam, but not bad," he said. Yet there was something of alarm, too, in his quiet face. They waited a few seconds. Then Chesney's lips again just formed the word that he seemed no longer able to utter.

"Oh, *try* the brandy—just try it!" Gerald said again.

Sophy looked at Gaynor. His eyes were on his master's face.

"Gaynor—do you think? Might we?"

"I hardly know what to say, madam."

"Here! I'll give it him— I'll risk it," said Gerald. He thrust his arm under his brother's neck, and held the little glass of spirit to his lips. Chesney drank feebly. Some of the brandy ran from the corner of his mouth.

"Here! fill it again!" said Gerald imperiously to Gaynor. Like all superficially timid people, he was overbold once his timidity was conquered.

The valet looked at Sophy before obeying. She did not see this look. She was staring at Cecil's face. The thought had come to her: "Is it all *real*? Is he *really* as ill as he seems?"

Gaynor had no course but to obey Lord Wychcote. He merely said very low as he poured out the brandy:

"The doctor says it's very bad for him, your lordship."

But Gerald was past heeding such warnings. His usually rough, almost brutal, brother had spoken to him with peculiar kindness only a few moments ago. Now he lay there looking as though death had seized him. Gerald had felt that presentiment of his death. He could not stand inertly by, while others trifled with the red-tape of doctors' orders. He gave Cecil the second glass of brandy. Every drop was swallowed this time. The delicious fire burned its pleasant path to the very pit of the craving stomach. Cecil felt that he really loved his brother. He lifted his languid lids and gave him a look of grateful affection.

Lady Wychcote still stood by the tea-table, her handkerchief against her lips. She had not moved a muscle during this scene.

Of all those present, she was the only one who, from first to last, had felt sure that the attack was simulated. She was torn between humiliation that a son of hers should condescend to such mummery, and an odd, unwilling admiration for the skill with

which it was done.

"He always had the will of demons," she told herself now. "I must put Bellamy on his guard." It was perhaps natural that, with her ignorance in regard to the habit of morphia, she should find this deadly determination to procure spirits far more alarming. Her youngest brother, a brilliant man, had drunk himself to death at forty-one.

Yes, she must speak to Bellamy. They must have a professional nurse for Cecil.

She went to bed, feeling full her age that night.

XXI

The next day the rain was coming down in swirls. A strong wind drove it. It beat against the window-pane like little fingers drumming with sharp nails. Down the chimneys it beat, spattering into the fires which were kindled everywhere. The Park was a grey-green clustered shadow. The lawns looked soggy like moss. The huge house was gloomy as a decorated cave. The furniture and stair-rail sweated with moisture.

Chesney kept his bed, as always in the morning. He had waked with a dull headache from the unaccustomed dose of brandy on an empty stomach. Waking too early, in the iron-grey, streaming dawn, he had lain there between the sheets that felt so clammy to his nervous skin which again craved morphia—unable to get it until Gaynor should have

left the room—racked mentally, also, by a nauseating shame for the part that he had played last evening. In this interval between dose and dose, worse than the physical *malaise* which amounted to torment, was the sense of his own vileness. Now he hated Gerald for running to fetch the brandy. For the same thing which he had loved him for last night, he hated him this morning. Fool! If he hadn't been so damnably officious, perhaps they might not have given him the brandy. Yes, he wished heartily now that his will had been denied him by force. Besides, he would have to see Bellamy sometime this morning, and he was all to bits—he could *feel* that his face looked unnatural, deathly. And at the same time the craving for stimulant came over him again. He asked for a cup of black coffee. "Make it yourself," he said to Gaynor. "In that French machine of mine. I don't want the filth an English cook calls coffee."

While Gaynor was thus engaged he managed to crawl from bed and take a quarter grain of morphia in addition to the other quarter that Gaynor had just given him. He found a place for the needle on his thigh far up near the hip-bone. It was too near the head of the sciatic nerve, and hurt him unusually. He almost broke the needle in his flesh, from irritation and the awkwardness of using the syringe so high up on his leg. He had no time to put the wire through the needle or to clean it properly before the man came back with the coffee.

"Damned nuisance," he thought. "Some day I shall be giving myself an abscess." But the extra dose and the coffee together braced and calmed him. He looked tolerably normal after he had had a tub and Gaynor had shaved him.

"I'll put on a dressing-gown and sit in that armchair with a rug over me," he said. One felt such a helpless carcass in bed when those brutes of quacks came peering and asking their impudent questions.

Sophy felt encouraged when she saw him thus established in the big chair. She had passed a wretched night. Her doubt of him—of the genuineness of his attack—had seemed so shameful to her—yet she could not help doubting. And if her doubt were justified—what abysms opened before her—before them both! What salvation could there be for one so deliberately, cunningly false?

"You look so much better," she said. "Perhaps this is the best thing for you, really—the country—the perfect quiet of it."

"The brandy is what did this bit of improvement," he replied calmly. He must brave it out. Besides, there was that only half-stilled craving deep underneath the caution of his present mood. He added reasonably: "You can't cut a chap off from a thing that he's as used to as I am to spirit of some sort without making him suffer rather severely."

"It's only that the doctor said it was so bad for you, Cecil."

"Pf! That ass Hopkins! Now Bellamy has to bray his little bray. We'll see what *he* says."

Giles Bellamy came at ten o'clock He was a good-looking man of about forty, with short-sighted, intelligent brown eyes that were rather too large for a man, and a pale, clever face set in a Vandyke beard. This beard and his large eyes, that looked almost womanishly soft at times, had gained him the

nickname of O. P. from Cecil (the initials of the term "Old Portrait"). Sometimes he called him thus; sometimes, when in an especially ironical mood, by the full title. He had known the physician from boyhood.

"*Wie gehts*, Old Portrait?" he greeted him this morning from the vantage of the easy chair. "The tender passion still unroused? When are we to have some little new portraits for your family picture gallery?"

Bellamy took these pleasantries urbanely, though he was aware of a certain savagery underneath them. He understood Chesney's character fairly well, and felt rather sorry for him in his present predicament. It was rather like seeing a trapped lion. Even though the lion had been indulging in man-eating, he still felt compassion for the great, baffled brute-force. His confirmed bachelorhood had always been the subject of more or less caustic jesting on Chesney's part. In an evil mood, he seemed to enjoy nothing better than baiting his brother and Bellamy, turn and turn about.

Bellamy was a Baliol man and so was Gerald. Cecil used to say that Baliol bred what Byron called "excellent persons of the third-sex." He used to harangue the two celibates rather brilliantly on the subject of sex in mind—quoting Mommson and other authorities to prove that "genius is in proportion to passion."

But Bellamy was an able man in his way. He had studied medicine in Edinburgh and Vienna. He was far better posted than his London confrère, Hopkins, on the vagaries of the morphia habit. Besides, Lady Wychcote had had a talk with him in her private

sitting-room before sending him upstairs. Now as he sat, parrying Cecil's rather ill-tempered thrusts with imperturbable good-humour, he was watching him narrowly out of his large, vague looking eyes, though he seemed casual enough. He saw clearly that Cecil was getting more morphia than Gaynor's record showed. He had decided, before talking to him for twenty minutes, that a trained nurse was indispensable—one, moreover, who had been on such cases before, and had nerve and character. Hopkins had not engaged a nurse because the only one of whom he knew, perfectly suited for the purpose, had still ten days on a similar case before she would be free. In his pocket Bellamy had the address of this nurse—Anne Harding—Hopkins had sent it to him the day before. She would be free to accept another engagement on the twelfth—that was to-morrow.

He determined, with Mrs. Chesney's and Lady Wychcote's approval, to wire her that afternoon.

However, Bellamy made a serious mistake in not speaking openly to Chesney about his intention of sending for the nurse. Sophy had to break this news to him, and he received it with a burst of appalling fury against the doctor.

"Damned little sneak!" he cried, his face convulsed. "Why the devil didn't he say so to *me*?" His language became so outrageous that Sophy rose, saying:

"I must leave you, if you talk like this."

Something in her white face—a sort of smothered loathing—checked him.

"See here," he said, mastering himself by a violent

effort—a vein in the middle of his forehead stood out dark and purplish; "now just try to take this in, all of you—my well-wishers. To do anything with me whatever, you've got to be straight with me, by God! I'll not have sneaking, and confabulations in dark corners. And make that little eunuch Bellamy understand it, or I'll pitch him out of window, neck and crop, the next time he sets foot in this house!"

Sophy felt that he was to a certain extent justified in his anger. She promised for Bellamy that he would say things directly to Cecil himself in future.

Then she went away to the nursery for solace, sick at heart, sick at brain, sick in spirit.

To her amazement she found Lady Wychcote there, seated in a chair before the fire with Bobby on her knee. He was babbling excitedly, and his grandmother was smiling at him with that appraising look in her eyes which Sophy so resented. The boy tried to snap his soft, curled fingers at his mother as soon as he caught sight of her, in his eagerness to have her come near.

"Muvvah!" he cried. "Oh, *Muvvah*! Ganny div Bobby gee-gee!"

"Yes. I'm going to give him a Shelty," said Lady Wychcote. "It's high time the boy learned how to ride."

"It's very good of you," said Sophy, pleased for the child's delight. "But he's only two, you know."

"Quite old enough," Lady Wychcote said firmly. "I wonder you never thought of it yourself."

"We couldn't have afforded it in town," Sophy said

with some stiffness. Her mother-in-law's tone was supercilious.

"Pf!" said Lady Wychcote. "You know Gerald has a *faible* for you. You'd only to hint it."

Sophy reddened.

"I don't hint for things," she said still more stiffly.

"Well, well! Don't let's tiff over it," Lady Wychcote retorted loftily. "We're not congenial, but I've taken a fancy to my grandson. Let that mollify you."

Sophy gazed out at the bleared landscape, that looked wavy like a bad print thus seen through the streaming window-pane. She realised in that moment that unhappiness filled her to the least crevice of her being. She needed kindness so bitterly, and here as her only companion was this frigid, acrid woman who disliked her for having married Cecil, and grudged her Gerald's friendship. Then she glanced back at the familiar group before the fire. Bobby was leaning forward against the beautifully corseted figure of his grandparent, eagerly demanding to know more about his "gee-gee."

A terror seized Sophy—a sort of blind fear. Was this the beginning of a new misery? Would Lady Wychcote try to get her son from her? Was she laying plans behind that smooth, narrow brow? Insidiously, little by little, as the dreary years crept by, would she try to wean Bobby from her, influence him against her? Did she lust for him to make of him what she had failed to make of Cecil and Gerald? She felt as if she must snatch Bobby from that well-preserved breast, and run to hide with him in the nethermost parts of the earth. It was a feeling

stronger than reason, one of those presentiments which seized her sometimes—which so often came true. A powerful, eerie feeling of *knowing* without being able to say why—like the knowledge that had come to her when she told Olive Arundel that she would meet Amaldi in a room with three windows. Then she shook the feeling off. The very instance that she had recalled calmed her. There had been three windows, true. But evidently Amaldi was to play no important part in her life. She might not see him for years, if ever. Olive had told her that he was returning to Italy in July.

Miller came to give Bobby his luncheon and the two ladies left the nursery together. As they passed through the baize door that shut the corridor leading to the nursery from the rest of the house, Lady Wychcote said, "Come to my room a moment, please. I've something to show you that may interest you."

She unlocked a little ivory box on her dressing-table and took out a miniature, framed as a locket. "My father, when he was a child," she said briefly. "Do you see the likeness?"

Sophy gazed down at the miniature, and the dark fear stole over her again. It was certainly strangely like her Bobby. The same dark-red curls, and imperious little cleft chin. The eyes in the miniature were brown, Bobby's were grey—that was the most noticeable difference.

"Yes—it's very like Bobby," she said with an effort.

"My father was Chancellor of the Exchequer at seven-and-thirty," said Lady Wychcote. "You see now the chief reason of my interest in my grandson."

Sophy saw indeed. Then she gathered up her courage.

"But it's a pity, I think, to count on the tendencies of such a mite," she said. "He may not show the least inclination for politics."

"That," said Lady Wychcote rather grimly, "is a matter of education."

Sophy looked into the hard eyes.

"I think not," she said, but her tone was gentle.

"Allow me—as one having more experience—to disagree with you," replied her mother-in-law.

Sophy still looked at her.

"You forget one thing," she said finally, "the fact that he probably inherits something of my nature. I have to a hopeless degree what is called the artistic temperament."

Locking away the miniature again, Lady Wychcote permitted herself a *sourire fin*. "It would not have annoyed you had you been *my* daughter," was what she said.

It was useless to bicker with her. Sophy merely changed the subject by giving her an account of Cecil's indignation over Bellamy's lack of directness with him. Lady Wychcote, who could be reasonable enough when she wished, agreed to speak with Bellamy herself on the subject.

The next day, by the first morning train, Anne

Harding arrived at Dynehurst. She was a small, slight but wiry woman of about thirty-five, and her curly black hair was still short, having been cropped some months previous during an attack of typhoid. This short, curling hair and a smile of singular ingenuousness, gave her an almost childlike air at times. Sophy, as she took in the nurse's appearance, wondered where in that small body lurked the courage and determination necessary for such a profession. She wondered how Nurse Harding would strike Cecil. Would he take one of his rough-and-ready fancies to her, or detest her from the first. She talked plainly and quietly to her. When she had finished, she said:

"How do you think it will be best for you to meet Mr. Chesney, Nurse? Shall I tell him that you are here first? Shall I go in with you?"

Anne Harding consulted the little watch in its leather bracelet on her thin, sinewy dark wrist. She had black eyes full of fire and subdued laughter. Sophy realised suddenly that she looked something like the pictures of Hall Caine as a young man—and incidentally that she also resembled a very alert, large-eyed insect of some sort. This made her smile. Anne Harding, catching the glimmer of this smile as she looked up from her watch, thought:

"What a perfectly lovely woman! Of course a woman like this had to go and marry a morphinomaniac."

Then she asked practically, before herself answering Sophy's question:

"How does Mr. Chesney take his nourishment? Every two hours?"

"Oh, no," said Sophy, astonished. "He has meals when we do—all except breakfast. Why? Should he eat every two hours?"

"It depends, of course, on the doctor's orders," said Anne cautiously. "But has he an appetite? The drug kills the appetite as a rule."

"Well—I don't think he does eat much."

"You see," explained the nurse, "I was thinking that I might take his tray in—as soon as I'd changed to my uniform and cap. A simple way like that would be the best."

Sophy rose.

"Oh, I forgot——" she said.

"It won't take me fifteen minutes," said Anne cheerfully. "That's my box now, I fancy."

The small black box was brought in, and Sophy left her to change her dress.

Bellamy was due in half an hour now. She went to report her impression of the nurse to Lady Wychcote, who had asked her to do so. She was still in her bedroom being made up for the day by her French maid. Louise was dismissed and Sophy sketched a little picture of the nurse for her mother-in-law. Lady Wychcote was dissatisfied that Anne Harding was so small.

"However," she said on second thoughts, "those eft-like creatures have the sharpest brains sometimes. Perhaps it's just as well."

Sophy, looking at her "morning face," realised that she was using less rouge than usual, though she

always used it with discretion. To-day she was almost pale. This harmonising of her complexion with the circumstance struck Sophy as drearily droll.

A servant knocked at the door to say that Dr. Bellamy had come. They sent word to Nurse Harding, and went down together.

It was still raining.

XXII

After Anne Harding had been twenty-four hours on the case, she came to Sophy, who was writing letters in the library. Just to address the envelope to Charlotte, which she did beforehand, comforted her. How real and home-like looked the familiar names! There was her house of refuge when—if ever—she could escape. But she told nothing of her husband's condition to Charlotte.

"Can we go where it's quite private, Mrs. Chesney?" said Anne Harding. "I've some things I must talk to you about."

Sophy took the nurse up to her bedroom and locked the door.

"What is it?" she asked, fixing her dilated eyes on the shrewd black ones.

"Please don't look so frightened," said Anne kindly. "It's just the usual worries in a case like this. I've talked with Dr. Bellamy already; but I must have

your help."

"Go on, please," said Sophy.

Anne took up the poker, and began breaking the big lump of coal in the grate as she said this. Little spirals of greenish-yellow smoke escaped from the cracks made by the poker, then jetted into flame. She was so sorry for this beautiful, scared woman, that she looked doggedly at the lump of coal all the time that she was speaking.

"It's just that Mr. Chesney is getting extra morphia—I mean taking it himself—lots of it——" she began bluntly.

"Oh!" cried Sophy. It was a sort of gasp. Then she said hurriedly: "But it's impossible, nurse. How can he get it? Gaynor, his valet, and I had all there is. Now we've turned it over to you—with both the syringes."

"He's getting it, ma'am," said Anne firmly. "And he's taking it hypodermically, too."

"Oh, don't you think you are mistaken?"

"No, Mrs. Chesney. I couldn't be."

"But—but—— Have you——"

She could not bring it out. She could not ask this little stranger woman whether she had searched Cecil's things for the stuff—for another syringe.

"Yes, I've hunted—thoroughly—through everything," Anne said quite as a matter of course, guessing what she had meant to ask. "He sleeps so heavily, when he does sleep—from the accumulated effects, you know—that I've even been able to feel between the

mattresses. I've searched the edges for a rip where he might have stuffed it inside. I've looked through everything—but his letter-box."

She shattered the lump of coal quite as she said this.

"That's why I've come to you. He's in one of those heavy sleeps. I've got the letter-box and the key in my room. I want you to open it and look for me. I didn't quite like to do that."

Sophy gulped shame. Its tang was bitterer than wormwood. Then she felt a sudden anger against this cool, white-capped little creature who summoned her suddenly to violate her husband's private property.

"No. I can't do that, Nurse," she said coldly. "Not on an uncertainty."

"But it's quite certain," said Anne Harding patiently. "Wait— I'll prove it to you."

She turned at last and looked at Sophy.

"In order to be quite sure," she said—"you know, ma'am, Dr. Bellamy had told me *he* felt pretty sure that Mr. Chesney was getting more than the chart showed. Well, to be *quite* sure, I substituted salt and water for *four* out of the six doses I've given in twenty-four hours. Now you see, ma'am, to cut a patient down suddenly in the doses like that would make him suffer something awful if he was really not getting more himself."

Sophy sat gazing at her.

"How would it make him suffer?" she said at last. Her voice was almost a whisper.

"Oh, nerves—terrible—we've no way of imagining

what they go through when the drug's taken away sudden. I nursed a case once where the doctor had that method. But I'd never do it again, ma'am. The patient twisted the bars at the foot of the bed in his agony like they had been paper. It was a brass bed. No, ma'am. I'd never be party to a thing like that again."

Sophy felt as if she were ill herself.

"Don't!" she said. She put up her hand over her face, as she leaned sick and weak in her chair. "Don't tell me things like that—please."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Chesney," said the nurse in her kind, blunt way. "But you see I had to prove my point to you. It's a most important one. That box *must* be searched, ma'am. And you see I don't like to go into Mr. Chesney's private papers. Now you, as his wife, can do it without its being any harm. Wait a minute, though—are you sure of this man, Gaynor?"

"Absolutely."

"It's very hard to be sure of people in a morphia case, Mrs. Chesney. Sometimes just pity makes 'em give the drug to the patient."

"I am quite sure of Gaynor. I'll tell you why," Sophy added, feeling that it was due the nurse to do so. And she told her of the part that Gaynor had played in the tragic story.

"Well, I should say *he's* safe then," admitted Anne, when Sophy had finished. "And now that I feel sure of that, won't you let me bring you that box, Mrs. Chesney? You want to save Mr. Chesney, and that's the only way to do it—to help me and the doctor," she added shrewdly.

Sophy could scarcely have grown paler than she was.

"Go ... bring it...." she said in a faint voice.

Anne brought the red morocco box, with C. G. C. stamped on it in worn gold letters, and handed it with the key to Sophy.

As the nurse set the box upon her knees, Sophy looked so ghastly that Anne exclaimed:

"Oh, pray, *pray*, Mrs. Chesney, don't take it so hard! It's for his good we're doing it—to save him."

"Yes," said Sophy.

With a firm gesture she thrust the key suddenly into the small spring-lock and turned it. As she felt the lid rise beneath her hand, it seemed to her as though she had by this act shared his degradation—drawn part of it into her own blood. With her slender, nobly shaped hands she began to search among the letters and documents.—Nothing. The colour began to rise again into her white face. Eagerly she turned the contents out upon her lap. Nothing. Nothing.

"You see!" she cried, her tone was almost joyous. "There's nothing of the kind—you were mistaken! There's nothing—nothing!"

Anne frowned. Then she said soberly:

"Well, I've *got* to find it—somehow. It's wonderful their cleverness at hiding the stuff."

"But, Nurse Harding," said Sophy reproachfully, that vivid colour still in her face, "a hypodermic syringe-case isn't a thing that can be hidden away easily. You've told me that you've looked everywhere. Isn't it rather cruel to be suspicious to this extent?"

"Mrs. Chesney," said Anne Harding, her black eyes like little gems with hard, cruelly-kind astuteness. "If the angel Gabriel was given me for a morphia patient, *I'd pluck his wings*—for fear he'd hide the nasty stuff among the feathers!"

She was a character, was Anne Harding, so utterly unlike any English nurse that Sophy had ever seen before, that she wondered whether indeed she could really be English. Anne was very quick at following the probabilities of thought-sequence, for she smiled suddenly her childish smile, that contrasted so oddly with the almost elf-like shrewdness of her eyes, and said:

"Pray forgive my speaking that way. I come from the Bush, you know. I'm an Australian. We've a blunt sort of way of speaking out there."

Chesney was quite amiable with the little nurse. He knew of course that she suspected him, but the very fact that he had so entirely outwitted her made him feel a sort of grim pleasure in her presence.

"She's a good little rat," he said to Sophy. "Not over-burdened with brains, though."

And he smiled his secretive smile.

"Give me just one week longer, Doctor Bellamy, and I'll find it— I'll find it or give up nursing!" Anne Harding pleaded. But Bellamy determined to speak with frankness to Chesney himself. He went to his room that day and said without preliminary ado:

"Chesney, for your own sake I'm going to take the liberty of being brutally frank. What I think you're doing is only a regular symptom of your ailment. Here goes, then: Haven't you another hypodermic

and morphia in your possession?"

Chesney eyed him cruelly.

"It's a queer profession—yours," he said. "It gives a little chap like you courage to insult a big man—just because he happens to be ill and therefore weak, for the moment."

Bellamy looked at him without changing countenance.

"I was afraid you'd take it this way— I wish you wouldn't. The very way you're acting now is a symptom."

"You don't seem able to remove these symptoms," said Chesney, with his slight, mocking grin.

"I can't—unless you help me. It's in your own hands, you know. You've always reminded me of a lion, Chesney. Now you make me think of a lion that gnaws off its own paw to get out of a trap."

"On the contrary," said Cecil, laughing that silent laugh of his, "I'm in fine fighting trim, I assure you. Wait—here's a bit of verse on the subject:

"'The lion and the eunuch were fighting for a prize,
The lion beat the eunuch, for all he was so wise.'"

Bellamy looked at him with undiminished composure.

"Ah, Chesney—you're in a bad way," he said regretfully.

"What the hell do you mean by that?" demanded Cecil, flaring up.

"You try to insult the man who's trying to help you,"

replied Bellamy. "But an ill man can't insult a physician. Good-morning."

And he went away.

Three days passed. Chesney was very reasonable for him. Drank the "slops" that were served him without demur—went for drives when the weather permitted. The days were murky with ravelled cloud held up in a network of pale sunshine. Nearly every afternoon and in the night fine showers came hissing on the leaves and over the roof of Dynehurst. He read a great deal. He had given up his heavy political reading, and begun a course of Wilkie Collins.

"It's odd how illness makes a chap take to trash in literature," he said to Sophy, whose eyes he saw wondering over the title of the book he had put down when she came in. "It's as if the mind got weak, too, and needed slops like the body."

But this odd deterioration in taste was due to the morphia, which at times gave such a deliciously false sense of interest in the most trivial things. Deep, serious thinking was impossible under its disintegrating glamour. It gave rather gay, fleeting fantasies—a sense of delicate mental power as though thought were a sort of glittering toy, to amuse oneself with. After Wilkie Collins he took up the French detective novels—then shifted to "Ouida." These works filled him with glee. "Crewel-work Ruskin," he called them. "But damned amusing for all that. She dips her coat-of-many-colours in her brother's blood every now and then. She might have been great," he declared, "if she hadn't had hæmorrhages of the imagination. That made her mind anæmic—but she could spin darned good yarns, by Jove!"

He was much amused by his mother's sudden interest in Bobby.

"The Mater's vaulting ambition has gone clean over my head and landed on Bobkins," he told Sophy, chuckling. "I bet she'll live to ninety-and-nine, just for the pleasure of speaking of 'my grandson, the Prime Minister.'"

He took to calling Bobby "Little William Pitt."

"Come here, little William Pitt; you're going to be It, as they say in the States," he would say when the child was brought in to see him. "I hope you'll approve of me for a father when you're in office."

This strange name by which his father called him confused the child and displeased him. He felt that he was being made fun of. Children and dogs dislike the people who laugh at them. He hated to go into his father's room, and resisted so strenuously that Sophy took him there less and less.

As the days went by, and still Anne Harding had not found any morphia or hypodermic syringe in Cecil's possession, Sophy began to grow more hopeful. Cecil was certainly far quieter than he had been for some time. She began again to think that Bellamy and the nurse must surely be mistaken.

On the afternoon of the fourth day she called Anne into her room, and spoke to her about it.

"Don't you think you must be mistaken, this time, Nurse?" she asked eagerly.

Anne Harding shook her stubborn, wise little head.

"No, Mrs. Chesney," she said.

"But where *could* it be? Mr. Chesney is never long enough anywhere but in his own room to have it hidden about the house."

"It isn't hidden about the house," said Anne. "It's hidden in his own room. *I know it*—as if I'd seen it through the wall, or floor, or wherever it is," she added firmly, seeing Sophy's look of doubt. But this doubt could not withstand such authoritative conviction. Sophy sighed wearily.

"I suppose you must be right," she said; "but it seems impossible."

She sat looking out of window at the waving mantle of rain which was again blown grey and wild over the swelling breasts of pasture land. Then she turned vehemently.

"Think of it!" she exclaimed. "The beauty of a field of poppies! The passionate loveliness of all those scarlet cups full of sunlight. And all the while their hearts are bitter with this evil—this horrible poison! Oh, why don't men wipe them from the earth!"

Anne looked at her with that wise kindliness. "You forget all the good that opium does," she said brusquely tender, after her fashion. "It's like so many other things—this fire on your hearth for instance. A good servant but a bad master."

Just after this conversation Sophy went to read aloud to Cecil at his request. This also was a new phase. He could never endure reading aloud in former days. Now he would lie, dozing off now and then, evidently soothed agreeably by the sound of her low, rich voice.

The weather had turned raw and chilly again with

the renewed rain. Sophy shivered suddenly as she sat reading. Anne Harding, who was tidying a little medicine chest on a table near by, noticed this.

"Can't I fetch you a shawl, Mrs. Chesney?" she asked, looking up with her alert black eyes.

"Thanks; but wouldn't you like a fire lit, Cecil?" Sophy asked. "You're so fond of a fire in your bedroom. I can't think why Gaynor hasn't seen to it."

"I don't care for a fire," said Chesney curtly. "Being in bed is stuffy work as it is."

He lay nearly always in bed now.

"But, Cecil, you're so used to it. I'm afraid being in a damp room like this may give you cold. It isn't as if you were accustomed to doing without fire. Please let Nurse——"

"Don't nag!" he said, quite roughly this time. "I can look after my own wants. I'm not quite incompetent yet."

Sophy glanced at the nurse, still anxious. She thought Anne Harding's eyes had a rather queer expression—startled.

"Don't you agree with me, Nurse?" she asked.

Anne lowered her eyes and busied herself again with the little chest.

"I don't think it matters," she said, "if Mr. Chesney really prefers it this way."

"Do get on with your reading, Sophy," broke in Cecil impatiently.

Sophy took up the book again, and Anne Harding

went to Tilda for a scarf, which she returned with and put over Sophy's shoulders.

As she left the room, finally this time, she glanced keenly at the empty fireplace. She thought she had a clue.

XXIII

That night, about one o'clock, as Chesney lay heavily asleep under the influence of two grains of morphia (he only dared to take these large doses when night was coming on), the little nurse, Brownie-like and cat-foot in her grey flannel wrapper and felt shoes, stole into the room. Gaynor slept in his master's dressing-room on a cot. Anne had been given a room just opposite. The night-light burned behind a screen as in London, and over the ceiling spread huge, grotesque shadows from chairs and tables—shadows that were a horror to Chesney, in the gruesome intervals between dose and dose. They seemed solid then, those shadows—informed with a weird life. They hung bat-like from his ceiling, waiting to drop down on him. Morphia gives the sick, unreasoning fear that comes only in dreams—the kind of fear that will seize one in such dreams—at the sight of a grey, spotted leaf shaken by a wind—or the slow opening of a door upon a void.

The little figure stood motionless a moment, listening towards the bed. Then it stole over, bending close to the sleeping man. With skilful light fingers Anne lifted one of the sleeper's heavy hands, then let it

drop again upon the bedclothes. Chesney did not stir —his breathing did not change.

With a brisk movement of satisfaction, the nurse now drew a black, oblong object from the pocket of her dressing-gown, and going swiftly over to the fireplace, put the fender noiselessly aside, and knelt down on the hearth. She was sure, quite sure now, as sure as one could be of anything theoretically divined, that the hypodermic syringe and morphia were concealed somewhere in that chimney-place. She had looked there before, but not in the exhaustive way that she meant to look now. She had even felt along the shelf of the chimney-throat with her hands, but there had been nothing. Now, inch by inch, like a little Miss Sherlock Holmes, she meant to examine that cold, sooty cavity. The black tube in her hand was a small electric pocket-light, such as had just come in about that time. When she had looked before, she had used her bedroom candle. Now she meant to turn that bright, electric gleam on every inch of the brickwork and metal. Slowly she drew the pencil of light from side to side, lying flat, and beginning her search under the bars of the grate; then, crouching, she directed the ray higher, towards the bend of the chimney-throat, feeling, tapping, with her free hand as she did so. A fire had evidently been made there recently, probably on the day of Chesney's arrival; for, though the grate had been freshly polished only that morning and the housemaid's broom had swept the back of the chimney, yet a slight fluff of soot clung to it higher up. Anne touched this soot, pressing down her fingers firmly, delicately, feeling for some crevice, some loose bit of brick or iron. All was firm and cold. She sat back on her heels, disappointed. She looked —crouching there in her grey wrapper, with the

short, black curls framing her thin, baffled little face —like some determined child who had decided to watch and surprise Santa Claus in his descent from the roof—and who had watched in vain. Then suddenly she knelt up again. Something had caught her clever eyes. She noticed—and at this, the well-regulated little timepiece of her heart began to tick hurriedly—yes, she had noticed that in one corner of the chimney-throat there was a broad, smooth place where the soot was quite worn away. The dark-red fire-brick showed plainly through. Anne passed the bright glow of light across this smooth patch very slowly. No; the bricks were not loose here. She held the light closer, gazing with eyes narrowed to the utmost intensity of vision. There was a little spot, or excrescence, on the brick near the seam of the corner. She had felt it with her finger-tips as she drew them lightly back and forth. She had thought this roughness merely a defect in one of the bricks. Now she touched it again—scraped it with her nail. Her nail made no sound against it. Then she pressed upon it. The nail sank in. It was perhaps a bit of putty left by the work-men. But then putty isn't used for building fireplaces; besides, the fire would have melted it long ago——

She began to feel all around it. Suddenly something in the angle, in the seam where the chimney-throat squared, caught her eye. It looked like a bit of black wire. She picked at it with her nail, and it yielded—like the string of a tightly strung guitar. All at once it flashed over the little detective. That rough lump was wax; it fixed the end of this black string in place. The string was taut, because it was held so—held by a weight at the other end probably. Anne did not know anything about the construction of chimney-throats—had she done so, the solution would have

come to her sooner. But she guessed now that there must be a hollow behind the brickwork that faced her. She slid her hand up and forward. Yes, there was an empty space behind—the usual air-chamber in all well-built chimneys of which she had not known. Ah, now she had it! Carefully, very daintily, little by little, she began to pull up the fine black silk cord which, as she had guessed, passed from where its end was fixed in place by that lump of wax or putty down the back of the chimney-throat. It answered readily. She felt the weight on its other end scraping against the wall as she drew it up. In another moment she had it in her hand—a little parcel, wrapped in oiled paper. As she broke open the paper and looked down at the object in her hand, her face was a study of elfish triumph and unwilling admiration.

"What couldn't they do to the world, if they were as hideously clever at everything else as they are at hiding this stuff!" thought Anne Harding, referring to the tribe of morphinomaniacs as known to her experience.

She set the fender back, and getting stiffly to her feet, cramped by nearly an hour's crouching, returned to her own room and locked the just-found hypodermic case safely away in the bottom of her travelling-box.

By five o'clock next morning Anne was fully dressed, capped, and aproned. She made herself a cup of strong black tea over her little spirit lamp, nibbled two biscuits, and, glancing at her bracelet-watch, went out with her light, quick step. She passed

Chesney's door and entered the dressing-room. Gaynor, who slept as lightly as a cat, started wide awake when the nurse entered. He drew the bedclothes to his chin, feeling with his other hand for his dressing-gown which lay on a chair near by. He could never get used to the unceremonious entrances of this little stranger woman into his bedroom. She came to him, her finger against her lips, bent down, and whispered:

"I've found the morphia and the syringe Mr. Chesney has been hiding, Gaynor. I'm going to tell him of it myself. He'll be rousing about now. No matter what you hear, don't get frightened. I'm going to lock his door inside and put the key in my pocket. Don't try to interfere—will you? Don't come to the door or answer, even if he calls you?"

Gaynor had flushed deeply on hearing of his master's detected falsehood. Now he turned pale. "Ain't you afraid, Miss?" he asked. He was always punctiliously civil to the nurse. He felt that it would not be respectful for one in his position to call her "Nurse"—the little woman who was trying to save his master. He had a sense of gratitude and of fitness rare, not only in a servant.

"No!" Anne whispered vigorously. "No; I'm not a bit afraid. I've had much worse cases than this. I'll manage him."

"He's a gentleman with a very high spirit, Miss."

"I'm not afraid of his high spirit. Maybe it won't be so high when I'm through with him. I'm an Australian, you know, Gaynor. I don't think Australians are as afraid of their menfolk as Englishwomen. You must keep quiet till I'm through. That's all."

She turned and went out, passing through the connecting door into Chesney's bedroom. She locked the door as she had said, pocketing the key. Shrewdly she glanced at the still sleeping man. He had been asleep for ten hours now. She knew that at the stage of morphinomania that he had reached the effect of a dose lasted only about four hours when the victim of the habit was awake, though the heavy, drugged sleep resulting from it might drag on for some hours after. The least sound or touch was sufficient to rouse him now. After lighting the coffee machine, she decided to open the shutters. The cold, raw daylight would have a wholesomely chilling effect, should he show a tendency to become violent. Braver than many soldiers, the little nurse went from one window to the other of the large bedroom, throwing wide the shutters and fastening them back. A gale was whipping the great boughs of the trees, the rain blew in upon her, spotting the bosom of her dress and her fresh apron-bib and cap. It was like a bleak September day, and it seemed strange to see green leaves instead of yellow ones flying through the air.

"And this is June. What a beastly climate!" thought the little Australian.

Then she turned, drying her face and hands with her handkerchief. As she expected, Chesney was watching her from his pillow. His face, grey with morphia and glistening like wet clay with the odious sweat that follows on an exhausted dose, looked more deathly than a corpse's clear, waxen mask.

"What o'clock is it?" he asked, speaking thickly with his pasty tongue and dried lips.

"Ten after five," said Anne Harding briskly. "You'll be

wanting a cup of coffee, I fancy, sir."

"Isn't it time for ... for the ... er ... usual ... thing, yet?" He could never bring himself, in these moments of weakness and horrible, faint desire, to name the drug plainly.

"Your allowance of morphia?"

Anne did not mean to spare him. She glanced down at her bracelet. How Chesney hated that tyrannical watch on the nurse's thin wrist! It seemed like some horrible wen, or tumour, to him. Until she had fussed over him and gone he could not get the stuff out of the chimney-place—the stuff which was now simply and literally life to him.

"Not due for twenty minutes yet, sir," she said cheerfully, glancing up again. "But I'll just bathe your face and hands and bring you the coffee. It'll be ready by then. I'll tidy you a bit, sir, then fetch it."

There was nothing for it but submission. Sometimes, on these occasions, Chesney ran over in his mind horrid ways in which he would "pay back" this little woman for the misery she made him endure in such moments, should he ever get her wholly in his power.

She "tidied" him deftly, plumped up his pillows as he liked them, and fetched the coffee. When he had drunk it (black and strong Anne made it, and let him have it without insisting on cream or sugar—she had her compassions for these poor, mad-willed beings), she lifted the tray from the bed, and, glancing at her watch again, drew up a chair and sat down facing him.

"Ten minutes yet, sir, to wait," she said. "And I've

something I want to say to you."

"Well, say it, then," said Chesney drily. He was too weak just then to feel fury, but what he felt resembled it as furious action in a nightmare sometimes resembles real action—as when, for instance, one tries to swim after an enemy and finds that one is cleaving one's way through thick, clogging waves of treacle.

Anne looked straight at him.

"It's this," she said: "I want to tell you myself that I've found your extra hypodermic and supply of morphia."

She rose as she said this and stood on her guard. Chesney stared blankly for a second; then he gave a sort of animal outcry, and half sprang from the bed.

"Steady, Mr. Chesney!" called the nurse, sharp and clear. "*I'm not afraid of you!*"

Chesney sat, with half-suffocated, soblike sounds breaking from his great, naked, hairy chest. His hands clenched and unclenched. The bedclothes half torn from the bed by his sliding bound were tangled about his feet.

He gasped out the words—spat them at her:

"You little civet-cat. You damned little skunk! You ——"

He could not articulate. His teeth ground together. He half rose, as though to leap on her.

"Keep *still*!" said she, in a fierce, low little voice. "You're not ready for murder—yet—I hope. Nor you've not sunk low enough to strike a woman——"

"Strike you! You little b——h, I could break you in bits with my bare hands!"

They stayed glaring at each other. It was the glare that a huge dog and a dauntless little cat exchange when death is in the air. Then Anne spoke:

"Be a man ... for Gawd's sake ... *pretend* to be a man!" she said.

Chesney blinked and gasped with fury and weakness, as though she had spat in his face.

Anne followed it up.

"Look here," said she; "I'm trying with all my might to save you from hell ... yes, *hell*, sir!" She pounded her little brown fist against her other palm. "And you want to kill me for it. But I'm stronger than you are. Yes, I am! For why? For why my nerves ain't rotten with that filthy poison you love like mother's milk. And I'm going to save you whether you will or no! God or the devil helping me—I don't much care which—I'm going to save you! You hear that?"

She went closer to him—a little, furious figure, quivering with righteous rage.

"D'you think I'm afraid of you? Not much I ain't! Just look at me and tell me what you think about it."

Chesney sat hypnotised. Here was the Mongoose to his Serpent with a vengeance. Something began to rise slowly up in him—something clear and clean rising from the dregs of his stupefied better nature. It was that unwilling meed of admiration that the conquered pay to a courageous foe. Suddenly he laughed. It was a shocking sight and sound, this hoarse, weak laughter issuing from that grey,

sweating face.

"By God! You little Bush-Ranger, you've got guts!" he gasped.

Anne was changed, as St. Paul says the redeemed will be changed, in the twinkling of an eye. It was the psychological moment. It came differently to different patients, and she arrived at it by varying methods, but it always came when Nurse Harding was on a case.

Her rigid figure relaxed, her little face softened with her childlike smile.

"See here. I'm your *friend*," she said. "Your *friend*, man; not your enemy. Now you just 'fess up, as the children say. Tell me *really* how much of the stuff you're in the habit of taking, and I'll make you comfy with a dose in proportion, right away—this very minute. I won't wait for doctor's orders or anything. Will you tell me? Eh?"

Her voice was too pretty for words, thus wheedling and coaxing the huge man. So might Jenny Wren chuck and chirp to some big Cuckoo-bastard, to venture from the nest that her kind step-motherhood had provided.

Chesney was at that point in the fight when even a great lad will sob sometimes from sheer rage and exhaustion. He sank back, pulling up the sheet about his face so as to hide it from her.

Anne slipped the hypodermic case from her pocket, opened it, and went over beside him.

"Now, then ... now, then," she coaxed, like some one gentling a fractious horse. "See—here's the blessed,

devilish old stuff. *I* know how you're craving it—damn it for a nasty half-breed of saint and fiend! It's here—right here in my hand. Only tell me—*the truth*—about how much you've been giving yourself, and I swear to you as I'm an honest human, I'll give you enough to ease you."

There was a silence. Then from under the lifted sheet came the words:

"Twelve grains a day."

"In the twenty-four hours?"

"Yes."

"That's really all?... I'm asking for your own sake, mind you. The dose will be in proportion, you know."

"As near as I can tell—it's all. Maybe now and then it's more——"

Suddenly he started up, flinging off the sheet.

"Damn you! You little hell-cat! Damn you!" he cried. "You're worming it out of me for your own ends. You're lying!"

"*You're* lying, and you know it!" said Anne Harding sternly. "Here—keep still while I prepare this. You'll soon know whether I'm lying or not when I've given it to you. *It* doesn't lie."

He closed his eyes, feeling that he lay in the very bilge-water of existence. A woman—a scrawny little hireling—had him, Cecil Chesney, in her power. Had made him confess. Was about to deal mercy out to him with a drug. He could have howled with the Chaldean: "Cursed be the day that I was born and the

hour wherein I was conceived!"

Then into his loathed flesh slipped suddenly the little sting of steel—sweeter than the kiss of first love to the innocent.

XXIV

Sophy was amazed when she learned what had happened. So was Bellamy, though he had more knowledge than she of the singular powers exerted by the highest type of trained nurse. They both agreed that there was something weird, almost legendary, about the conquest of the huge, domineering, self-willed man by the wee nurse—a feminine echo, as it were, of the fable of Jack the Giant Killer. But this little Jill had climbed the bean-stalk of her wits with no axe to help her—only that keen blade of her sane, fearless will and knowledge.

Things went on smoothly for two weeks after that. Chesney, hating the nurse with a bitter, feverish hatred, yet submitting to her control, clung to her with that distorted passion of the man who knows that his well-being depends on what he hates. Temporarily he was in their power—the power of those whom he called his "well-wishers" with that ferocious sneer of helpless anger. He was too weak from the lack of the accustomed doses which he had been taking surreptitiously to "fight a good fight!" for his freedom just then. But let them wait! Just let them wait till he got back his strength. He was afraid now that if he rebelled against Anne Harding they would get another nurse for him, one less independent and intelligent, who would not take things in her hands as Anne did, who would follow the directions of that soft fool Bellamy blindly, and keep him agonising on doses too rapidly diminished. Anne had promised that she would not let him suffer

overmuch.

"I'm not a doctor-run machine," she had said, in her brisk, blunt way. "I'll give you *what* I think best, *when* I think best. If Doctor Bellamy don't like it, he can chuck me. But he won't. He knows I've had experience and he hasn't. 'Tisn't likely *he'll* fuss with me, when men like Doctor Carfew and Doctor Playfair have trusted me and been satisfied with my work. Just you be a good sport, and keep straight with me. And I'll not let you reach the hell point. Just a peep of purgatory, maybe—for the salvation of your soul. But you're plucky. You'll stand a bit of purgatory to get to paradise—health is really paradise, you know. Eh?" She had wound up, with that engaging, little-girl smile of hers.

Chesney grinned rather feebly, and said:

"All right, Bush-Ranger. '*En voiture, pour le purgatoire, messieurs, mesdames.*'"

"That's good!" Anne said heartily. "I always know they're mending when they crack jokes."

"You've a hard nut to crack in *me*, colonial snippet!" retorted Chesney, with another grin.

Anne grinned a cheerful little grin back at him.

"No, *you're* soft enough, old sport," said she; "it's your husk of morphia that's hard."

They exchanged this rough, free speech when alone. In the presence of others, Anne was most respectful, almost demure.

"What a hypocritical little demi-semi-savage you are, Bush-lass," he said to her one day. "You give me the rough of your tongue like a slangy lad when we're

'*enfin seul*'—and before the Chief Eunuch and the rest, butter would congeal upon it, by Gad!"

"There's a time for everything," replied Anne Harding sedately. "If you *prefer* it, sir, I'll be buttery with *you* from this moment."

Chesney laughed outright. He was feeling quite happy just then, under the effects of a sixth of morphia.

"Just you try it on," he said, with feigned grimness. When she had just given him the drug he really liked her. Her funny, brisk little ways and speech amused him. He longed sometimes to romp with her, as if she had been the child that she looked when her elfish smile stirred her face. Once when she had bent over him as she withdrew the needle from his arm, he had tweaked one of the black curls that hung near. He had not believed that her little lean hand could give such a stinging smack as she bestowed upon his.

"You little spitfire!" he had exclaimed angrily. "Don't dare to take liberties with me because I'm ill."

"Don't *you* dare to take liberties with *me*, ill or well," Anne Harding had replied, red with anger. "You treat me with proper respect, or I'll go back to London by the next train. Suit yourself."

She wouldn't talk or jest with him for the rest of that day, but by the next morning she seemed to have regained her usual cool poise, and remarked, as she served his early cup of cocoa:

"I surmise from your pretty behaviour that you've decided to keep me and your self-respect."

"Thou hast said, O Bush-Bully," replied he gravely. "I'll even address your Bullyship in the third person if it be required."

"Oh, no! There's no need of *that* much distance between us, my pretty-spoken gentleman!" came the tart rejoinder. "'Hands off!' is my motto. Just so you remember that I live up to it, and your part is to live up to it, too, while I'm with you—I'm hunky-dory."

"Does that mean 'cheeky' in your native lingo?" grinned Chesney. She was giving him his morning dose (one-seventh to-day) as he spoke; so for the time being he liked her again.

"No, Mr. Smart," said Anne. "It's United States for 'all right.'"

Thus they chaffed amicably when she had just given him his allowance of morphia, or during the first hour after; but as the effects gradually wore off—which they did rapidly, the doses being so reduced by now—his mood changed. As he felt that stark, indescribable *malaise* stealing over him—that horrid unearthly suffering which is not nausea, or acute pain, or the hot ache of fever, or the shivered ice of chills, but something more subtle, more deathly, as it were an illness drifted down from another darker, crueller, more demoniacal planet than the earth—as there crept through him this nameless, terrible, hideously fatiguing feeling that seemed to rack the finer substance of a body within his body—to strain and fray these more delicate fibres of being, until the torture was far more horrible than if it had been the brutal work-a-day anguish of a fractured bone, or the frank throes of cholera—when these hours were upon him, then he hated the little nurse. He hated her quiet, practical composure as she sat crocheting

near the window, or reading aloud to him words that had no meaning—hated her for sitting there calm and healthy—while the discomfort arising from the lack of the usual poison surged into billows of physical distress that flowed over him, one upon another, as he lay sweating, tossing on what seemed the oozy bed of an ocean of *malaise*. He hated her so that he imagined breaking her to bits with his bare hands, as he had once threatened her. He could feel her little hard, pointed chin denting the hollow of his gripped hand, as he held her thin body between his knees, and pressed her head backwards till the spine snapped. He imagined her naked in his grasp—a little dark, lean, pitifully ugly body—and he was beating her with a stout wand of ash; whipping the flesh in ribbons from her writhing bones. He startled even himself with these savageries—felt afraid sometimes. Was his brain going? Had the stuff attacked his brain?

Once, meeting his smouldering eyes fixed avidly upon her during one of these silent rages, Anne had put down the book and come over to him.

"I know how you're hating me," she said, crisp and practical as usual. "But don't get scared over it. It's natural. This drug breeds murder. Just you remember it's not *you*, but the morphine that hates me. Keep that well in mind. *I* do. Don't you worry about going crazy, and suchlike. It takes years and years for morphine really to injure the brain. It's your nerves that are yapping and yowling 'murder!'—your brain's all right."

"I do hate you!" Chesney had said, with weak but dreadful intensity. "I could give Cain points on murder. But there's a part of me that says you're a

damned good sort, all the same."

"Hate away," Anne replied serenely. "You're getting on first-rate—that's all *I* care about."

So it went, and Chesney slowly improved; now weaker, now stronger, as the capricious drug sheathed its claws or gripped him tight again.

"Damnation! I'm like the frog in the well!" he would groan. "I crawl up one foot and slip back two."

"No, you don't—not really," Anne assured him. "Up you're coming; slow, maybe, but sure. A nice nurse I'd be to let you slip back two feet for one!"

And she sniffed with her little blunt nose that reminded him of an intelligent pug's.

The worst of it, the thing that aggravated him almost to frenzy at these times, was that he still had morphia in his possession—a large supply of that and cocaine, utterly unsuspected by Anne, for all her shrewdness. He almost chuckled aloud sometimes as he lay watching her during one of his black fits. His spirit did chuckle, as he thought how he had outwitted even her, the little "Bush-Sleuth," in this matter. But he did not dare to take an extra dose, even by mouth. She would have seen instantly—and nosed out the precious stuff that was his dearest earthly possession. He was quite sure of that. It cowed him from taking the morphia that he had secreted, even during those times of anguish, when sometimes she stepped into the next room for a moment to fetch something and he could have swallowed a tablet easily—it was within reach

always. No; he did not dare for the sake of one moment's self-indulgence, to run the risk of still greater sufferings. So he lay there, enduring, cursing silently, waiting, ever waiting, for the time to come when he should be his own man again. Then hey! for some distant country—a long journey *en garçon*—with a glittering, brand-new needle, and package on package of the little flat, white, innocent-looking tablets that dissolved so easily in a teaspoonful of warm water.

There were no more drives now: he was too weak. Anne said that in about six weeks he would begin to feel more normal, though he would still be weak. He would feel depressed and weak for a long time after his system was rid of the poison, she warned him with her admirable frankness. Six weeks more of it! Good God! He wondered that he could keep his hands from her when she said such things to him in that matter-of-fact, casual way. But he waited. Chance was a good deity for such as he to pray to. One never knew what might happen. So he lay there and said curt, impious prayers to Chance that the God of Whimsy would help him to his own undoing.

Chance himself serves sometimes one Overlord, sometimes another. Sometimes he plays henchman to Ormuzd, sometimes to Ahriman. This time he elected to do the bidding of Ahriman.

On the fifteenth day after Chesney's enforced confession to the little nurse, there came a wire from London for Anne Harding. It said:

"*Your mother ill—pneumonia. Come at once.*"

There was nothing else for it. She had to go, and by the next train. She loved her mother, whom she

supported by her cleverness, very dearly; yet there was almost an equal grief in her strongly professional little heart at leaving a case so difficult, which she had managed with such skill.

She tried to get Chesney to promise her on his word of honour to "act straight" with the nurse who would supplant her, promising that if he did so she would return as soon as her mother was well enough, and take up his case again. But he would only smile at her that faintly jeering smile, which she felt in the marrow of her small bones meant mischief.

"Your word of honour—your word of honour as a gentleman that you'll play fair," she urged vehemently, "or I swear I'll not come back!"

"You forget, my little Bush-Queen," Chesney said, still smiling, "there's no such thing as honour among morphinomaniacs. You've told me that yourself, often enough, my Poppet, have you not?"

"Shame! Shame!" she cried, with passion. "Here you are, through the worst—and you won't even promise that you'll keep on! My word! I don't believe I'll come back, no matter *how* you act!"

"'Suit yourself,' Bush-lass," Chesney returned coolly, quoting one of her favourite expressions.

Anne went to Sophy before leaving—went to her bedroom and under the unusual excitement of her double anxiety over parent and patient, seized the slender white hands in her little skinny brown ones, wringing them eagerly to accentuate her passionate words of warning.

"Watch him yourself—*yourself*!" she begged. "Don't trust him a moment—not though he swore on the head of his own son. He means mischief. I know him by now. I know him as only a nurse who's tussled through the worst of the morphia craze with a man *can* know him. Don't leave him to Gaynor, or his mother, or even Doctor Bellamy. I don't know what sort of nurse they'll send you. She may be good, or she may be a chump. But"—the little spurt of very human vanity became her eager, cocky face—"but there's not many Anne Hardings," she wound up. "I give you that for what it's worth, Mrs. Chesney. Forgive my tooting my own trumpet."

Sophy promised, feeling scared and forlorn again, now that this strong little being was going. She had come to depend on her as the one means of Cecil's salvation. Now she was going. Menace, dark and formless, seemed to waver like an evil shadow on the dreary walls of Dynehurst. How could one grapple with a shadow? Only Anne Harding knew the magic tune to which evil shadows danced obedience.

The little nurse left within an hour after receiving the telegram, and Sophy went to her husband as soon as the carriage drove from the door. Anne had turned over her charts to her, with the hypodermic syringes and morphia. As the nurse had instructed, she locked everything away before leaving her room. Between every dose they must be locked away again. No slightest risk must be run, in the interval between Anne's departure and the arrival of the new nurse.

When Sophy had faltered that she did not know how to give a hypodermic injection, Anne had exclaimed almost impatiently: "Oh, he can do that, himself—only too well! All you've got to do is to clean it

thoroughly the way I've showed you, each time afterwards. I don't want Gaynor to begin it, because one at a time is enough in such things, and *you* are the one to leave in charge. You've got character—grit." She looked at Sophy impartially out of her shrewd, black eyes. "I don't believe you know, yourself, *how* much character you *have* got," she said. "You're too young and beautiful to have had much chance yet—but this is forming you. Forgive my Bush-girl bluntness—but there's no better character-maker than a husband one's trying to save from morphia. You'll come out of it a sort of soldier-saint. Mark my words: *Happiness* is *mush*," said the little nurse, running her words together in her excitement. "One can't get strong on mush. Now life's feeding you meat—a bit raw and bloody, maybe—but it'll build up brawn—soul-brawn. I'm mixing things; but you understand, I know. And, my word! Just think, Mrs. Chesney: if a woman forgets her travail for joy that a man is born into the world, what must she feel when a man—*her* man—is reborn through her pangs! Forgive me—I'm being too free. But you're so rare—oh, I've watched you, same as I've watched him! And I want you to win out—I *lust* for it—for you to win out with him. You'll feel you've got the world in a sling then—I give you my word you will, Mrs. Chesney. Only keep a stiff upper lip. Don't give in to him. Don't let him fool you. The watchword is 'Suspicion.' Don't trust him—not if he seems dying. *Let* him die before you trust him for one second! Bless you, dear lady! I do *hate* to leave you all alone with it.... Good-bye."

And she was gone before Sophy could even utter some kind wishes about Mrs. Harding's recovery.

XXV

When Sophy went to Cecil's room, he was lying back quietly reading. He put down his book as she entered, and smiled at her. It was his own, good smile—the smile that she remembered far back in their lover-days. Tears rushed to her eyes. She was not a woman who wept easily; but now, to see his face so purified of poison, to meet the smile that also shone in the eyes—that glimpse of a resurrected soul in the face that had so long been but a blurred mask of exotic passions—this brought her tears.

She went over, kneeled down beside him, and laid her face to his.

"I've got you back!" she whispered. "You've come back to me!"

He lay still, stroking her hair, kissing it, looking out over her head at the flicker of leaves beyond his window, at the dim green of air-veiled pastures, and the far-away blur of brownish haze that hung over the mining town, chief source of the Wychcote riches. A bird streaked like a black arrow against the faint blue sky. The weather had cleared within the last few days. There was sunshine, pale but plenteous—filtering through a veil of moony clouds. A sort of eclipse-light, it seemed to Sophy; but she welcomed it for Bobby's sake—the child had been fretting at the prolonged rain. He had lost his sturdy, lady-apple cheeks. Now he could be out all day pottering at the out-of-door things that children love.

She knelt there with her cheek against her husband's, just resting, soul and body. She was too tired with

the long strain to vibrate to a keener joy. Her thankfulness was deep rather than exultant. And Chesney, gazing out at the summer landscape, thought:

"After all—what if I go on with it? I'm lower than brutes if I deceive her."

Weariness and a distaste of life crept over him at the mere thought of keeping up the dreadful, nerve-wearing effort.

"I must. There's no way out of it—with decency," said part of him. "Fate's against me," said another part. "Why was the little Bush-Ranger whipped away like that, if there are gods that care? It's too much to ask a man to keep up alone. I'm sickening for the stuff this moment. Between the lips of this woman—beautiful as she is—and one grain of morphia—would I hesitate?" "No," answered the first self, grimly honest. "You wouldn't. Try to tell her you have the stuff at hand. Give it up to her. You won't. You can't."

"I *will*!" he thought, setting his teeth.

She felt the swell of his cheek-muscles as he did so, and looked up.

"Sophy...." he said; then stopped short.

"What is it, dear?" she asked. "Can I do something for you?"

He continued looking at her an instant, then closed his eyes.

"No," he said.

She thought his expression had been strange. It hurt

her. It was as if he *had* wanted something, but did not dare ask her for it. She flushed suddenly—it was for him she flushed. She thought that he had been about to coax her for the morphia before the time for giving it. Was he going to "try it on with her," as little Anne had feared? Her limbs seemed to turn to water at the mere thought of that possible struggle.

But he said quietly the next moment:

"Sophy, the little Harding says that she'll come back here, when her mother is well enough. That being so, I want to ask you a favour."

"Yes—do!" she said eagerly.

"I want to ask you to take me in hand yourself. You have all the—the stuff." The lie choked him somehow. He hastened to correct its literalness though not its import. "I mean nurse said that she was going to turn it over to you."

"Yes—I have it," said Sophy. Why should her heart beat so? He was only asking her to do what Anne had asked her.

"Well, then, there *is* something you can do for me—you can spare me the humiliation of having some strange wench pottering about, and bulldozing me with her dirty little professional airs and graces. If you'll take me in hand yourself, and spare me that, you'll find me amenable. Will you? Wait a moment," he added, before she could answer. "It's only fair to give you warning that I will *not* submit in any case to having another of these hussies round me. The Harding was bad enough, but I've got used to her—I rather like her—tough little specimen! She amuses me. But another—I'll wring her neck before I'll

submit to it! That's my last word on the subject."

Bellamy was much perturbed at this fiat of Chesney. Yet, when he had thought over it a while, realising the stubborn fixedness of the man's will and fearing to irritate him unnecessarily, he came to the conclusion that it was not so dangerous a situation as he had at first thought. He could trust Sophy, he felt sure, not to be moved by any pleading on the part of her husband. All the morphia was now in her possession. There was no other possible means by which Chesney could obtain the drug. All parcels were opened by Mrs. Chesney or his mother. Besides, Chesney wrote no letters. He seemed perfectly indifferent about the post. Such letters as did come for him only bored him. They were all answered by his wife and Gaynor. Then, too, it was a great concession on Chesney's part to be willing for Anne Harding's return.

When after two days she wrote that her mother had passed the crisis and was rapidly improving, that she (Anne) hoped to be able to return to Dynehurst within three weeks, he felt quite reconciled to the present arrangement. Sophy reported that Chesney never asked for a dose before the regular hours, or for an increase of the amount. She, too, was cheered and hopeful.

For a week this happy state of things lasted. Then one morning, after his daily visit to Chesney's room, Bellamy came to her with an harassed face.

"Mrs. Chesney," he said, "don't take it too hard—but your husband has got hold of morphia in some way.

The symptoms are marked this morning. It's inconceivable, I know; but there's the fact."

Sophy's air-castle broke in upon her in smothering vapours. She sank down on the nearest chair, and gazed out before her with blank eyes.

"Are you sure?" she asked mechanically, after a moment.

"Quite sure."

"Since when?"

"Only recently—during the night, probably. But the eyes show it unmistakably—and the dryness of the mucous membrane."

"I know," said Sophy. So well she knew that she felt as if her own mouth were like an ash, merely from her vivid realisation of the doctor's words.

"Have you taxed him with it?" she then asked.

"Yes. He only jeers. Asks me how he could have got it —says that he's not a wizard. It's terrible, Mrs. Chesney, terrible! If Nurse Harding were only here!"

"Yes. It seems as if Fate were against him."

"Fate!" cried Bellamy. "Himself, you mean! How he could descend to this when——"

He broke off abruptly, shocked by the white hopelessness of the young face.

"Forgive me," he said. "Besides, one should never judge too harshly in these cases. I've heard of men, anxious to be cured, getting well over the cursed thing, getting quite free of it for as much as a year, then, in some sudden moment of weakness, returning

to it."

Suddenly a vigorous, alert look replaced Sophy's passive expression. She stood up, facing the perturbed physician.

"What must we do?" she asked. "I am ready to do anything to save him. Anything that I may do with self-respect—anything that will not put my boy in danger. Explain to me. Whatever it is, I will do it—if it is in my power."

She shone white and vivid against the grey, rain-strung frame of the hall window. She dazzled there in the dark, grim hall, flashing something free and Amazonian into the staid discreetness of the sober, conventional house. Bellamy watched her, without being quite able to translate into clear thought the impression that she produced on him at that moment.

She put it into words for him herself: "I mean that I will fight for him like a comrade—not like a submissive wife—a slave," she said.

She stood for a moment looking down at her shoe-tip which she moved slightly to and fro. Then she said abruptly:

"How is my boy? Does his paleness mean that he is not well really—or is it only a passing thing?"

"No, no," he hastened to reassure her. "The boy feels the confinement of the house, of course, but a week of sunny weather would have him right as a trivet."

"And if it keeps on raining?"

"I hardly think it will. We are nearly in July now. Rainy Junes are frequent in England, you know; but

July is apt to show some fine weather."

"But in case it does not?" she persisted.

"Then I think a little outing to the Isle of Wight or the south of France might be the thing."

She pondered this.

"I see," she said at last. "And will you promise to tell me, the moment that you think Bobby needs such a change?"

"I do, indeed," he replied earnestly.

"Thank you. Now I feel free to give all my attention to my husband—for the present. I shall go to him myself now. It seems to me the last hope that we have."

"You mean that you will try to persuade him to—to—er—be frank with you?"

"Yes."

Bellamy looked at her in genuine distress.

"I'm afraid you must prepare yourself for disappointment, Mrs. Chesney."

"I am prepared for it," she said. Her voice was grave, but under the gravity there was depth on depth of bitterness.

"Well—God be with you!" said Bellamy, with much feeling.

"Thank you," she said gently.

She passed out of his sight, going upstairs towards her husband's room.

XXVI

To do Chesney justice, he had not taken that first dose of the extra morphia in his possession with any calm determination of deceit. The craving for it, the constant temptation so close at hand, had led him into that subtle, false reasoning so common to all people in like case. He had deceived himself as well as others. It happened in this way: Sophy, burning with all the over-ardour of a novice, with all the exaggerated zeal of the amateur nurse, put on her mettle, as it were, by the warnings and conjurations of Anne Harding, acted with the precision of clockwork. Showed, in fact, to its nth power the very quality which Anne prided herself on lacking—the precision of a "doctor-run machine." It could not have been otherwise. She had neither the knowledge nor the experience which allowed Anne to vary the regularity of the hours of assuagement, those hours when the fractional doses of the drug were to be given him, and to which he looked forward as to bits of life in the slow, grey deathliness that enfolded him. At times his nervousness, the anguish of morbid desire, was far more acute than at others. On these occasions Anne had been used, after observing him narrowly, to give him the prescribed amount, sometimes even an hour before the due time. Again, she would say with rough kindliness:

"Well, will you brace up and go without for, say two extra hours next time, if I give you a crumb more than you really ought to have?"

These concessions of his little tyrant so wrought on both the gratitude and the pride of the man, whom morphia had reduced to a certain childlike weakness,

that he, on his part, would sometimes stretch the interval of abstinence even longer than she had required. When, therefore, he found himself, all at once, in the unyielding straitjacket of Sophy's conscientious care, rebellion began to glow in him like a fever. Once he had tried to explain to her Anne's more elastic methods; but though Sophy met him very sweetly, he saw the little shock that had flitted through her eyes. She suspected him of trying to coax her with plausible lies. Had not Anne warned her not to trust him? The little nurse had chiefly meant that she must not trust him by leaving the drug in the remotest way accessible to him; but then Anne could not have instructed Sophy to practise her own leniency. It was one of those situations to which the word "fatal" can be well applied.

A second time, when suffering from one of his severe headaches, in addition to the horrid, chill, damp nervousness, Chesney had again ventured (sullenly angry at the enforced humility of his attitude) to suggest that she give him a slightly larger dose, skipping the next dose entirely, if she wished.

Sophy's look had been full of frank reproach and grief this time. "Ah, Cecil! How can you ask me such a thing?" she had exclaimed. She had come and knelt beside him, taking his clammy hand, which resisted the clasp of the smooth, warm fingers so full of health and love. "Don't you know it's because I love you that I must refuse? Why do you look at me so angrily? You asked me to do this for you, dear. I'm only doing what you *asked* me to...."

But he had jerked his hand roughly away. He hated her at that moment. "She'll drive me to it, with her smug self-righteousness ... ignorant, sentimental

fool!" He feigned to drop asleep after a few minutes, watching her all the time from under his lowered lids —detesting her—wondering why he had ever married her. How damned prim her mouth had looked when she refused him! Fancy kissing a mouth like that with passion! What an ass he had been! And he had thought her such a marvel of intelligence and sympathy! The little Bush-Ranger had more real brains in her skinny finger-tip—her rough slang held more human sympathy than all that other's gush of frilled, silky words! Very well. He'd take things in his own hands. He'd "'fess up" to the little Harding when she returned; but in the meantime he was going to do for himself what she had so often done for him—take a slightly larger dose to ease this damned pain that was prizing his skull asunder. Yes, by God! He was a bally simpleton not to have done it before!

It amused him to reach stealthily for the little tablet (he had it to his hand) and take it "under Sophy's nose," as it were—watching her all the time from between his lashes. She was sitting near a window, chin on hand, gazing out at the sky which seemed to her so like a vast ground-glass cover set above the green bowl of the earth. He grew impatient, waiting for the slow effect of the morphia, thus taken into his stomach. He missed that pringle of the stuff when hypodermically administered, quick through his veins. Then it occurred to him that these were hypodermic tablets—they would naturally be weaker than those to be taken by mouth. He took another quarter-grain tablet. Its vile bitterness seemed delicious to him. All at once he felt that grip at his midriff, as of a tiny claw clutching and teasing. Triumph seized him. He looked at her mockingly, his eyes wide open now. He did not hate her any longer. She amused him now. It was even very pleasant to

watch her sitting there in her dejected attitude of unwilling Tyrant. She was not the stuff of which real tyrants are made. It took gritty little devils like the Bush-Bully to tyrannise with *éclat*....

So it had begun.

But unfortunately the self-administration of morphia is not a thing that can be moderately done. Soon Chesney began to confuse the number of doses; could not remember exactly when he had last taken the stuff; would swallow a tablet at the least symptom of physical *malaise*. He seemed stronger; wished to get up. Then came the morning when the larger dose revealed its presence clearly to Bellamy.

Sophy went to Cecil, all her soul in arms for him, not against him; but he met her with easy mockery. Would not admit it. Played with her. She had tried to tyrannise—well, let her tyrannise, then.

"If you're so damned sure I've got the stuff, why don't you find it?" he jeered. "Why didn't the little Bush-Sleuth unearth it? She's got the nose of a Pytchley bitch—the baggage!"

The poison was at its ugly work again. In its deadening clasp, kindliness and fellow-feeling lay numb; the sheer brute ramped free—the strong, coarse, primal animal which morphia rouses, at first merely to a savage irritation but later informs with more than ape-like cunning, with a callous cruelty lower than the brute's because moved by more than the brute's intelligence.

And within a week from his first lapse the change in

Chesney had become alarming. Something was here that Bellamy could not understand. Dilated pupils and violent rages, as in London. A sort of false vigour that sent him roaming about the house at times—haranguing in his brilliant, bitter way—insolent, vituperative, insupportable. Sick with humiliation, Sophy told the physician of what Dr. Carfew had said: that Chesney alternated the morphia with cocaine.

So strange and wild were his brother's moods that Gerald had to be taken into confidence. Even Lady Wychcote agreed that Bellamy should wire to London for a man-nurse; but she held out implacably against all idea of committing Cecil against his will to a sanatorium.

"It's a phase," she kept saying. "It's a phase. When Nurse Harding comes back, she will know what to do."

And all the while it rained, ever rained—now lightly, now whelmingly. The climate was like a vast Melancholia wrapping England as in sickness.

Search was made everywhere for the concealed drugs. Sophy lay awake at night, racking her brain for possible solutions, until it haunted her dreams like a dark rebus, cluttering her only half-unconscious brain with the refuse of rejected theories.

The man-nurse came. When he entered Chesney's room, he was flung out so violently by the enraged giant (Chesney stood six-foot-four in his socks) that he barely missed having his arm broken against the opposite wall.

The man, white with wrath and pain, went straight to the library where the family had gathered about Bellamy, apprehensive and anxious as to the nurse's reception. He had chosen himself to go alone. He told them that for no consideration would he attempt the case, unless he were given "a free hand." When coldly required by Lady Wychcote to state what he meant precisely by "a free hand," he had replied sullenly that he must be given permission to use violence in return—that is, to defend himself by a blow, if attacked, and to resort to binding the patient, if necessary.

"In other words, you wish to introduce the methods of a lunatic asylum into my house," said Lady Wychcote haughtily. "That will do. We shall not need your services."

The man turned away, muttering that "madhouse methods were made for madmen."

Bellamy tried to persuade Lady Wychcote to send for Dr. Carfew and have Cecil placed in a sanatorium by force.

"Never shall that be done—never while I live," she said resolutely. "I will not have such a stigma put upon a son of mine. Let him die, if he must. Better dead than with the shame of madness put upon him."

In vain Bellamy argued with her, pointing out the difference between a sanatorium and a madhouse. She was adamant.

"Never! Never!" she kept repeating.

In despair, Sophy herself telegraphed to Anne Harding. The answer somewhat consoled her:

"*Mother doing well. Will come Thursday.*"

This was Sunday. In three days, then, the little nurse would be in charge again.

When Chesney heard this, that awful, blind rage shook him from within. He felt the horror of "possession." It seemed to him that to kill was the only thing that would relieve him. His rash excess of the last week had ended by confining him to his bed again. He lay there after Sophy had left him, dozing fitfully, waking with dreadful starts from the unspeakable dreams that had begun to visit him of late, by night and day. He, too, had read De Quincey. He remembered how the wandering Malay had haunted "The Opium-Eater's" sweating dreams. Did the dark drug always send such visions? For now he, Cecil, was hunted down through the dark alleys of sleep by horrible deformed Chinamen, who squatted on their hams, mocking him, bedizened in cruel, violent colours that filled him with unreasoning fear; mopping and mowing at him with chattered words that iced his blood. And one dream that came again and again racked him with the extremity of loathing: a violin would begin playing somewhere—harsh, Chinese music; behind a stiff, embroidered curtain it would begin to play. Then, from under the curtain would peep a foot, the deformed "lily foot" of a Chinese woman; then there would crawl out from under the curtain the violin itself, like the brown carapace of some misshapen turtle, and its head was a woman's—a little Chinese harlot's, with gilded underlip—and in place of the turtle's flippers, the "lily-feet" and long-nailed, tiny hands would come scratching towards him. Then, like a luxurious cat, the little turtle-violin would begin rubbing itself against his feet, that were glued fast with terror, till

the strings underneath its belly would give forth again that sinister Chinese music.

Or, in another dream even worse—conscious that he was dreaming—he would begin to sink with his bed, slowly, very slowly, through the floor of his room; down through the library which was underneath; down, down, into the dark cellars where were stored the liquors that he craved; down, ever down, into the wormy earth, among dead men's bones and all uncleanness he would sink slowly, so slowly. And his hair oozy with terror, his flesh glazed as with a coating of thin ice, he would think: "This is what is called 'sinking to the lowest depth'—I am sinking to hell ... to the sewers of hell...."

Then began a reckless orgy of self-indulgence. These horrors must come because he was not getting enough of the drug—could not take it hypodermically. He must alter this. He must take larger, ever larger doses. And he must have stimulant. Damn them! They locked his own father's wine-cellar against him, did they? Well, he would outwit them. Where there was a will there was a way. Good old adage! Made for morphinomaniacs!

He came to these conclusions on the Sunday that Sophy received Anne Harding's telegram.

XXVII

On Wednesday evening, about eleven o'clock, Gaynor knocked at the door of Sophy's bedroom. She was

sitting before the fire, her dressing-gown over her night-gown, ready for any emergency. She sent Tilda to bed early these terrible days—living, as she did, in constant terror lest the servants should witness some odious scandal.

She opened the door herself, not knowing who it might be. The little man was very pale, he had the appearance attributed to those who have "just seen a ghost." In his hand he held a white glass quart bottle. He looked at Sophy without speaking.

"What is it? What *is* it?" she urged. Her eyes were fixed on that big, empty bottle. Why should Gaynor bring an empty bottle to her room at eleven o'clock at night? Why was he so frightened?

"Mrs. Chesney ..." said the valet. "Pardon me, but you must know. I've thought different. Now it's plain. This bottle was more than half full at five this afternoon. Now, you see, madam; you see for yourself...."

Sophy stared bewildered.

"I don't understand," she said, full of vague terror herself now. "What was in the bottle? Why is it empty?"

"Spirit, madam; ninety-five-proof spirit—for the little spirit lamp I use for Mr. Chesney, madam. It was two-thirds full six hours ago. Oh, don't you see, madam? And now the master's door is locked. He won't answer—I've knocked and knocked. He laughed once—so he's not unconscious, madam."

Sophy stood staring.

"Do you mean...?" she whispered finally. "You don't

mean that he ... he...?"

"Oh, madam! What else can I think? It began yesterday. I thought one of the maids had upset it and didn't like to say—they never do, madam. Full a pint went yesterday. But as there was enough left in the bottle for the making of his morning coffee, I didn't trouble to fill it till this afternoon. But now.... And he was so strange an hour ago. So wild-like ... different...."

"I didn't know...." murmured Sophy, her eyes fixed in horror on the empty bottle. "I didn't know that ... that.... I thought it was poisonous...."

"Oh, no, madam! It's methylated spirits you're thinking of. This is ninety-five-proof—pure alcohol. It's done, madam. I've heard of it's being done. But I never thought...."

He too stopped, overcome.

Sophy looked at the little servant helplessly.

"I don't know what to do, Gaynor," she said, in the voice of a child. "What can I do?"

"Would you come speak to him, madam, through the door? He might answer you."

"Yes, I'll come," she said. She looked at him out of appalled eyes. "But don't leave me, Gaynor, will you? Come, too."

"No, no, madam. I'll not leave you. Never fear."

Together the little grey figure and the tall white one stole down the corridor to Chesney's door.

Sophy put her mouth close to the crevice of the door.

Her heart was beating so that it shook her lips against the wood.

"Cecil—Cecil!" she called softly. "It's I—Sophy. I'm so afraid you're ill. Won't you speak to me, Cecil?"

There was no answer. She tried again and again. Presently she heard that low, ominous laugh.

"It's no use," she whispered, drawing away in terror. "Have you told Doctor Bellamy?"

"No, madam. No one but you. I didn't like to."

"I know, Gaynor," she said, still whispering. "It's hard to have to tell—but I'm afraid we ought."

"Mightn't we wait? Just a bit longer, madam? I'll keep watch...."

Sophy hesitated.

"Well, then," she said reluctantly, "I shall not sleep, either."

She thought a moment; then she said:

"Bring me a few of Mr. Chesney's cigarettes, Gaynor. Mine have given out. Bring me some of his cigarette-papers, too. I'll roll them smaller, as he's been doing lately."

"Very well, madam. But there's very few in the last-opened box. Mr. Chesney won't have me open a new box, madam. He's very particular. He don't like me to meddle with his cigarettes. If you'll just be so kind, madam, as to tell him it was your orders. I fear to anger him as he is now."

"Certainly I will, Gaynor. Gladly. Bring a fresh box here—I will open it myself and tell him to-morrow

that it was I who did it."

But when the valet brought her the box of cigarettes, and she had taken out a handful, all desire to smoke left her. She had not the habit—only did so now and then, when she felt very nervous and restless, as to-night. Now as she looked at these huge cigarettes so intimately associated with her husband, she felt averse from touching them. She shut them away in a drawer of her writing-table, and began to walk to and fro, her arms pressed tightly against her heart which was so full of fear and apprehension, which beat so heavily as though tired with its ceaseless task of life.

She went to a window and, drawing the curtains aside, looked out. The night was soft and black, with hurrying clouds. Two greenish stars gleamed at her from a rent in the ragged drapery of vapour. They looked like the phosphorescent eyes of some wild creature glaring from the jungle of the night. She shrank, letting the curtain fall into place again.

Again some one knocked. She went quickly, her heart pounding. It was only Gaynor. His face wore a relieved look.

"Mr. Chesney has opened his door. He's reading. He seems quiet. I hope that you'll try to sleep now, madam."

"But you will call me if you need me, Gaynor."

"Yes, madam—surely."

"Very well. I will lie down, then. I am very tired. But I doubt if I can sleep. Don't hesitate to call me."

"No. I will not, madam."

Sophy got into bed, and turned out her lamp. But she thought that she would never go to sleep. She thought of herself as a girl. How confident of life—her life—she had been then! The world was very surely her oyster. Within lay that pearl of great price—her happiness. How simple it had seemed! Where was that confident girl now—the girl who had been so sweetly "spoiled" by father and mother and sister, and adoring friends? That girl had gone the way of all the other Sophies. The baby-Sophy, and Sophy the four-year-old imp, and the grave, independently religious Sophy of nine. Was she religious now? Why couldn't she pray, then—really pray? Was that constant, dull cry of her heart, "God help ... help ... help!"—was that a prayer? Yes, that must be prayer.

A dulness came over her. Her mind refused to reason.

"At least I am really living," she thought. "This pain is living—— Oh, mould me!" her heart called suddenly into the Void. "Mould me into something higher!"

She seemed aware, in the pause of thought that followed, of an immense Presence. Personal, yet Impersonal—one with her—with some part of her. She seemed cherished and approved. A little after, she fell asleep.

She knew that she had been asleep, for she waked to that sense of interval, of break in one's continuous life that follows on profound sleep. At the same time there crept over her a chill sense of uneasiness—the sense of a presence. It was not like that vast, lulling sense that had come to her just before she fell asleep. No—this was different, sinister. Something—some one—was in that dark room—with her—near her—very near her. She held her breath. A wild leap of

fear, like a pang of bodily anguish, blazed suddenly through her. She was sure—oh, horribly, dissolvingly sure!—that in the thick darkness a face—a face that could not see her—was looking down on her. For a second she lost consciousness. Then again came the blaze of fear, like a bolt through her paralysed body. She must move—she must *know*—or die of terror. She put up her hand. It touched a face—the dry teeth in an open mouth—a grinning mouth. She felt sure afterwards that, had she screamed then, she would have lost her reason with her self-control. She fought with herself as with giants. One part of her said: "Shriek and die." The other part said: "Don't give way—don't give way!"

"Cecil...?" she managed to utter.

"Ha!" said a voice that laughed low. "Plucky lass! Just thought I'd give you a taste of what it is to be spied on. So-long. Sweet dreams."

She heard him fumbling his way out. The door clicked. For another minute the terror held her. Then she struck a match—two, three—she could not hold them steady enough to aid the flame. The floor was strewn with matches. At last—her candle shone out. She leaped from bed. Her knees gave way. She fell to them where she stood. A second—then up again. She reached the door—ran, ran—ran....

She was clinging to Gaynor—holding him fast in both arms—sobbing—biting off laughter between her teeth—sobbing again.

"Oh, Gaynor, hold me! Don't let him get me! Run to Master Bobby! Run! Take me with you—I can't move of myself—— Then leave me! Go alone! Go to Master Bobby!"

But when, blindly obedient, he turned and ran towards the nursery, she was after him, fleet and strong as Atalanta. The golden apple was her son—her son!...

XXVIII

But all was quiet in the nursery. The night-light burned near Miller's bed. The embers made a soft jewelry of the iron grate. Under the pink blanket could be seen the little mound of Bobby's curled body, and the glow of his red locks on the pillow. Sophy went and sank down beside his crib, stretching out her arms above him, her face hidden against the blanket.

"What's a-matter? What's a-matter?" asked the nurse, a blue-eyed Nottinghamshire woman, struggling to her elbow and staring, frightened, at the valet. "What be *you* doin' here?"

Fright had startled her into her childhood's tongue. She was as correct in her ordinary speech as Gaynor himself.

"Keep quiet," he whispered. "The mistress thought she heard the child scream. It gave her a turn. Be quiet. I'll fetch some brandy."

"I s'll be quiet enow. You need na' fret for that," said the woman huffily. She resented being hectored in the middle of the night by that "wizzening little stick of a man." She got up grumpily and shuffled on her brown woolen wrapper. Looking like a sulky but

dutiful she-bear in the clumsy garment, she went over beside her mistress. She had recovered her power of "proper" speech.

"I'm sorry you got a fright, madam. Won't you sit in a chair?"

Sophy did not move or answer. She could not. She felt as though some violent natural force had flung her against the little crib. She clung to it dizzily. A great void seemed waiting for her, should she loose her hold on it an instant.

Gaynor came back with the brandy. She turned her head when he urged her, respectfully insistent, and supped the liquor from the glass that Miller held to her lips, like a child. It revived her. She gave a long sigh, putting up her hand before her eyes, her elbow on the bed. She found strength to rise in a few moments. There were things that she and Gaynor must see to at once. She looked about the room. Thank God, the nursery windows were barred! She had a dread feeling that Cecil might be able to crawl over the sheer face of a building, like "Dracula." She turned to Miller, whose little blue eyes still stared inquisitively. There was something "beyond" in all this, the nurse was telling herself shrewdly.

"I wish you to lock the nursery doors on the inside to-night, Miller," Sophy said, looking frankly at her. "Mr. Chesney is delirious. I'm afraid he might startle you. He is very restless."

Miller paled. Privately, she had decided, long ago, that the master was "a bit off his head"; but she had orders never to lock the nursery doors, for fear of fire.

"I will do, madam," she said with energy.

Sophy went to her own room again, bidding Gaynor come with her. She shut the door and told him what had happened.

"Go and see if he is in his room now, Gaynor. I will wait here."

Gaynor returned saying that his master had again locked his door.

"Is he in the room, Gaynor?"

The man looked startled.

"I suppose so, madam. He would not answer when I knocked; but why else would he lock the door?"

"I don't know," said Sophy. "But I feel very uneasy. Is there any way that he could get out except by the door?"

"There's a ledge of the East Wing roof that passes under one of his windows, madam. But why should he want to get out on the roof?"

"I don't know," said Sophy again. "Perhaps it is only that I'm nervous. But we must tell Doctor Bellamy, Gaynor. You must go to his room and wake him."

Bellamy hurried on his clothes when the valet had explained to him. He went to Sophy's room, where Gaynor said that she was awaiting him. She, too, had dressed herself fully, in serge skirt and jacket. Somehow she felt that she must be dressed to meet emergencies—to go out into the night, if necessary. She looked oddly girlish in the plain, dark-blue costume. She had wound her long braid round and round her head to avoid its weight at the nape of her

neck. This added to the girlish, scared look of her pale face.

"This is terrible, Mrs. Chesney," said Bellamy. "I feel that your life has been in danger. He must be a madman for the time being, with that crude spirit in him—nearly a quart within six hours, Gaynor tells me. I think Lady Wychcote and his brother should be put on their guard."

"Yes. I wanted to ask you about that."

And Sophy told him about the access from Chesney's window to the roof.

"Come—they had better be roused at once!" said Bellamy, turning pale. Pale faces were the custom at Dynehurst in those days.

Sophy went with the doctor along the corridor leading to Lady Wychcote's room. Gerald slept on the other side of the house. They went cautiously, being careful not to speak or make any sound that might rouse the servants on the floor above. Gaynor was left on guard by his master's door.

But as they trod, noiseless and silent, with cautious apprehension, the sleeping house was roused by a long-drawn, fearful shriek—then another. The silence that followed seemed to echo with it like the air with a clap of thunder.

Transfixed for an instant, the next both Sophy and Bellamy were running wildly towards Lady Wychcote's room. The scream had come from it.

They tore open the door without ceremony. Lady Wychcote was sitting up in bed, staring at the open window as though Death had appeared to her in its

embrasure. Her eyes seemed to have set in her head.

Bellamy applied restoratives. She gasped, came to herself. She grew rigid with self-control under his hands, as though made of fine steel. Her thin lips snapped to—then parted.

"A nightmare," she said curtly. "I thought I saw Cecil's face." Shudders took her in spite of her grim will. She put her hand over her eyes. "Horrible!" she muttered. ""Twas horrible! I saw him as I see you—at the window ... his face, yet not his face ... a murderer's ... swollen...." Then she added, curt again: "You can leave me now. I have these disgusting dreams occasionally. I am quite over it."

Then Bellamy explained matters to her. There was no doubt that she had really seen Cecil's face at her window. She always slept with curtains drawn back, and shutters wide. The light from the shaded lamp which she kept burning all night on her writing-table would have just caught his face, had he stood on the stone ledge beneath her window and looked in. This is what he must have done.

When she had taken in the import of Bellamy's words, Lady Wychcote said that she, too, would rise and dress. They left her and went out to find the stairs and upper corridors rustling with frightened servants. Jepson, the butler, was talking in low tones with Gaynor. He came forward as he saw Sophy and the doctor.

"I tried to make them keep their rooms, madam," he said to Sophy. "But there's no doing with them when they're frightened."

Bellamy explained that Lady Wychcote had screamed

from nightmare, but, as Mr. Chesney had been taken seriously ill and was delirious, she had thought it better to get up.

"Just send the maids to bed, and come back, Jepson —we may need you," he concluded.

He was nonplussed as to the next move to make. Should he have the door of Chesney's bedroom forced, the man, frenzied with alcohol and drugs, might commit some hideous act of folly—either against himself or against others. He might just be climbing in again at his window as the door was burst open, and throw himself backwards in his rage onto the flagged court below.

Lady Wychcote and Gerald finally joined them as they stood perplexed, looking at that locked door, listening for some sound from behind it that would tell them that Cecil had come back safe from his perilous clambering over the dark roof. It was agreed that all should await events, together, in Sophy's bedroom. It was the nearest room to Cecil's, and by leaving the door open they could still see his door, and Gaynor sitting before it.

The night dragged on interminably—one of those grisly nights, when not only illness but peril and fear and madness squat on the hearthstone.

About five o'clock, they saw Gaynor start and rise, listening. They all rose. Bellamy went towards the door. Gaynor turned and came to meet him.

"He's back, sir," the man whispered. "He's moving round heavy-like. Do you think it may have worn off, sir?"

"I don't know," said Bellamy.

He, too, went and listened. Suddenly harsh, snoring breaths—slow, regular—fell on his ear. He straightened, giving a long sigh of relief.

"What is it, sir?" whispered the valet eagerly.

"He's asleep, Gaynor. He'll sleep for hours now. You'd better get some rest."

He went back to the others.

"It's over for the present," he explained. "You need have no more anxiety for the next seven or eight hours—maybe more. By what train do you expect Nurse Harding, Mrs. Chesney?"

"I had a letter. She will come early to-morrow morning—I mean this morning," Sophy corrected herself, looking at the bone-white dawn that showed in streaks through the heavy somnolence of the wrapt trees. Gerald had opened the shutters fully an hour ago, looking for the daybreak.

"Good!" said Bellamy. He glanced at the worn faces about him. "Now I am going to take a doctor's privilege and prescribe," he added, trying to assume a lighter tone. "I advise your ladyship, and every one, to come down to the dining-room and have coffee and something more solid. A night like this is terribly exhausting. We shall need all our strength to meet the next twenty-four hours."

XXIX

Anne Harding arrived at ten o'clock. Bellamy asked Sophy to explain the situation to the nurse while she changed into her uniform. There was no time to lose. He would see her himself as soon as she had dressed.

Bellamy had wanted a locksmith sent for to pick the lock of Chesney's door while he slept, but Lady Wychcote would not have this. She was determined that things should wait as they were for Nurse Harding's arrival.

"She may want to make him open the door himself—for the moral effect of it," she said, with real acumen.

"Awfully keen old lady she is, my word!" Anne had exclaimed, when Sophy told her this. "Just what I do want!"

"But, Nurse, do you think he will open that door for any one?" Sophy had asked, wondering.

"I know how to make him—never you fear," Anne had replied crisply. "We'll have to wait a bit—for him to sober up, you know," she added, with her usual bluntness.

She then went for her interview with Bellamy. It astounded and chagrined her to find that Chesney had procured morphine and cocaine, for she was convinced that he had been in possession of it all the while. She felt humiliated, in her capacity of little Know-All, that she had been ignorant of this fact. For the present, however, she contented herself with seeing that all the alcohol in the house was locked safely away. Her little brown mouth looked very grim as she sat near the bedroom door, waiting for Chesney to wake from his stupefied slumber.

He did not rouse till nearly four o'clock. Then she

heard short, impatient moans, given under his breath, as it were. The bed creaked now and again with his feverish tossings. Anne lifted an alert head. She half smiled, queerly; then turned to Gaynor. The two had sat side by side for hours now—Anne crocheting, the valet looking down at his hands or straight at the wall opposite.

"Go get a small glass of brandy, please," she said, putting her crochet-work into her pocket.

The valet looked so startled that she nodded to him reassuringly.

"That's all right," she said. "Doctor Bellamy knows. You trust to me."

"I do, miss," he said meekly, and went to fetch the brandy.

When he brought it, Anne took the glass in her hand, and, rising, rapped sharply on Chesney's door.

"It's me, sir—Nurse Harding," she said, in her most matter-of-fact voice. "You'll let *me* in, won't you?"

Perfect silence. Even the restless tossing stopped. Gaynor looked at her in deep discouragement. She only smiled again, bobbing her black curls at him with the energy of her consoling nod. "That's all right, my good man," the nod said. "I'm just taking my own time about it."

His puckered face smoothed out somewhat.

"See here, sir," called Anne, rapping on the door again. "You know I've always played fair and square with you. I just want to tell you that I know you'll be needing brandy to-day, and I have it here for you—a glass of it—in my hand. If you'll only open the door

for me, I'll give it you right away."

She heard the bed creak. She called again:

"It's the physic that you need, Mr. Chesney, and you know it as well as I do. You won't get it any other way. Come—be a good sport and let me in!"

There was another silence; then she heard his slow, heavy, dragging tread along the floor. The door shook suddenly. He had evidently half fallen against it for support. Then the key turned. Anne pushed the door open and went in, closing it behind her in Gaynor's dumfounded face. The valet felt a faint revival of his childhood's belief in witches as the little black-maned figure disappeared behind that dread door and closed and locked it. Lion-tamers were but feeble folk compared with her. He sat down on the hall-chair nearest, and wiped his forehead.

Anne told Dr. Bellamy afterwards that Chesney that day was the "grisliest sight she had ever looked on in twelve years of mighty varied nursing."

When she entered he was returning laboriously to his bed. He swayed as he went, and the little nurse gave him her thin arm and shoulder for support. The two went reeling slowly across the room, Anne with the glass of brandy held at arm's length to keep from slopping it.

The great hulk fell helplessly upon the bed, and she dragged the bedclothes over him with her free hand. As she looked at him, she thought that this might be the end of him—his unshaven face was so congested with alcohol and morphia. There was a yellow-white ring around his nostrils and the edge of his moustache.

She supported his head and fed him the raw spirit as a woman feeds milk to a baby out of a feeding-mug. He drank languidly at first; then greedily.

She left him lying, and set about to tidy the room. Thrusting her curly head from the door, she sent Gaynor for warm water, fresh bed-linen, and pyjamas. When she dressed him and made up the bed, she sat down beside him with businesslike fingers on his pulse, and her eyes on the bracelet-watch.

She then fed him half a glass of hot milk as she had fed him the brandy, and waited patiently. In ten minutes he was asleep again.

When Lady Wychcote heard that her son had admitted Nurse Harding to his room and was sleeping again after taking some nourishment, she felt immensely encouraged and relieved. Anne left her this happy illusion, but with Sophy she was perfectly frank.

"He's got what we nurses sometimes call a 'wet brain,' Mrs. Chesney. That means *delirium tremens* to a greater or less degree. He must have been sopping up that spirit like a sponge, long before Gaynor suspected him. I fancy we'll have lively times for the next week or so."

This diagnosis proved correct. For three nights and days Nurse Harding scarcely slept, though another nurse was wired for, to be under her orders.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, when Chesney was sleeping under the influence of a moderate dose of morphia, Anne left Nurse Hawkins in charge, and went to Sophy's room. Her little face looked bleached

rather than pale. Her skin was so swarthy that it could never reach actual pallor. It looked to-day like an autumn leaf that has been bleached by the following season's rains and suns. In answer to Sophy's exclamation of sympathy, she sank down upon a chair, saying:

"Yes, I *am* rather done, Mrs. Chesney—just for the moment, you know. I'm going to turn in for a four hours' sleep now. That will set me up again. But somehow I can't rest well, for thinking of where that extra morphia can be hidden. I feel such a fool about it, Mrs. Chesney. It's my *duty* to find it. I feel a regular amateur—a duffer——"

"Oh, dear Nurse Harding! How can you feel so?" asked Sophy warmly. "It would baffle any one—any one!"

Anne took her peaked little face between her brown fists, resting her elbows on her knees, and shaking her head disconsolately.

"I've been called 'Miss Sherlock Holmes' in my day," she admitted ruefully. "But I rather think my day's gone by. May I sit with you and puzzle over it a bit, before going for my sleep?"

Sophy made her warmly welcome. She even urged the little thing to lie down on her sofa and rest, at least while she cogitated. But Anne refused with resolution.

"No," she said. "No; thank you so much, Mrs. Chesney. Just let me sit here in this armchair. I can think better sitting."

She sat for a minute or two, frowning down at the carpet; then suddenly she turned to Sophy, with the

oddest little guilty smile, half embarrassed, half determined.

"I'll tell you what you can do for me, Mrs. Chesney," she said. "I've got a little vice of my own, though I make it a rule never to indulge it when I'm on a case. But now—I do so need to think hard—it's so important for my patient that I should. Could you, would you be so kind as to give me a cigarette and let me smoke it here? You see, I haven't any with me—and I daren't smoke in my room, for fear of the housemaids. Do you think me *very* impertinent and cheeky for asking you this favour, Mrs. Chesney?"

"Oh, my dear girl!" cried Sophy. "Of course you shall have a cigarette. I have some very nice ones of my own...." She turned to get them; then remembered.

"What a pity!" she said. "Mine are all out. They gave out some days ago, and I forgot to order more."

Then she brightened.

"But I remember, now— I have some of my husband's here. They are very good, only rather too large, I think. But I have cigarette-papers. You can pull one to pieces, and roll it smaller—as he does, you know."

Anne laughed when Sophy opened the table drawer and handed her one of the huge cigarettes.

"It *is* a corker, isn't it?" she said, but her black eyes gleamed. She added whimsically: "I don't think I'll thin it down, though. Since I'm to have a smoke (and it's awfully unprofessional of me to do it while I'm on a case) I might as well have a good one while I'm about it."

She put the big white roll of thin paper and gold-

hued tobacco between her lips, and held a match to it, drawing her thin cheeks in with luxurious anticipation of the first whiff. But the cigarette drew badly; wouldn't draw at all, in fact. She took it from her mouth, looking at it disappointedly.

"Here—take another," urged Sophy, holding it to her. "That must have got damp in some way. Try this one."

But the second cigarette refused to draw also. Sophy forced a third on her. That, too, was a failure.

"I see now why he's taken to rolling them over," said Anne: "This lot must be badly rolled. It's a pity to have wasted so many; but if I may have a cigarette-paper I'll just unroll one of these and do it over."

Sophy handed her the little packet of rice-paper, and gave her a lacquer pen-tray in which to put the loose tobacco. Anne's deft fingers made quick work of one of the big rolls. She whipped off its white sheath, and began shredding the packed tobacco neatly. All at once she gave a cry. She sat staring down at the tray as though it had turned into a Gorgon's head.

"What is it?" asked Sophy, startled.

The girl made a clutch at her, dragging her nearer, without taking her eyes from the loose tobacco in the tray.

"Look, Mrs. Chesney! *Look!*" she cried, her voice a low tremolo of excitement. She touched something in the tray with the tip of her finger-nail. It was a little white object, round, flat ... indeed, there were several of them—some tangled among the tobacco, some having dropped clear on the dark surface of the lacquer.

Sophy stared. The truth didn't dawn on her.

"Were they in the *cigarette*?" she asked. "*What* are they?"

Then Anne, overwrought with sleeplessness and excitement, so far forgot herself that, setting the tray on the table, she seized the tall lady in her arms and hugged her wildly.

"What are they? Morphia!... Morphia!... Morphia!" she chanted, as she hugged Sophy to her in little jerks that accompanied each cry of "Morphia!"

"Morphia ... and cocaine, probably, Mrs. Chesney! Oh, the clever devil! The clever, clever devil!"

This secreting of tablets of morphia and cocaine in the big cigarettes had been the employment of Chesney during those hours behind locked doors before leaving London. With a pair of very long, slender forceps, he had pulled out part of the tobacco, dropped the tablets into the hollow thus made, and repacked the tobacco cunningly upon them. Hours and hours he had spent thus, making tiny marks on the cigarettes which contained the different drugs, that he might know them apart. Certain cigarettes he left intact. He mixed these and the doctored ones in the boxes, large tin cases made for importation, which he sealed up again cleverly, with a tiny strip of paper on the same tone as the wrapper.

The morphinomaniac's imagination works in spurts. First come jets of cerebral luminosity; then gaps of a grey vagueness. Cecil's constructive fancy had not

worked beyond the point of laying in a large supply of the drug. He had not considered how he would procure more when it should have given out. He had provided for several months ahead. After that he trusted to chance and cunning.

When Sophy understood—and understanding had come in a flash, even as she questioned, even before Anne Harding's triumphant cry—she felt that this was the last straw. Something seemed to go *click!* within her, as though the fine mechanism of her reasoning mind had set itself to another gauge—would not, forever any more, work to the old standard. She must forgive—but she could never forget. And what is forgiveness without forgetfulness? The cold body of duty, mummied by conscientiousness, void of soul or life. She was done. He had seen her misery, her anguish of anxiety, her heart-racking efforts to help him, and day after day he had said to her, with that faint, mocking smile that her blood burned in remembering:

"Just hand me a cigarette, will you, Sophy?"

And she had handed them to him, had fetched and carried the poison for him like a well-trained retriever. And he had found pleasure—amusement—in thus making her the unconscious instrument of her own frustration—the innocent minister of his vile vice!

That was the most tragic moment of all to her—the moment when she gazed down at those little dots of white on the lacquer tray, and realised what they were.

XXX

That evening Anne Harding had what she called "a downright talk" with Lady Wychcote. The two "hit it off" very well, considering all things. There was a certain hardness in the little trained nurse, as in the haughty old aristocrat, which commanded their mutual respect; though Anne's hardness was always kind, and Lady Wychcote's nearly always unkind. Still the two able creatures set a certain value on each other, and this wrought for understanding.

Anne told her ladyship outright that she would give up the case unless Dr. Carfew or Sir Lionel Playfair were put in charge. Dr. Bellamy had told her that he would not assume further responsibility. Sophy had ranged herself firmly on the side of Bellamy and Anne. Gerald was with her in this decision.

Lady Wychcote looked rather grimly at the Lilliputian envoy.

"Very well," she said. "But I will not countenance an enforced removal to one of their asylums."

"Could not your ladyship leave that to Doctor Carfew?"

"No," was her ladyship's reply.

"Perhaps I can bring *him* to reason," Anne had said to Sophy after this interview. "At any rate, I want him to hear plainly, from a *man*, what his fate will be if he goes on with his poisons."

Sophy said nothing.

"Poor soul! She's given up!" thought Anne. "Well, *I* must tussle to the bitter end—that's what nurses are here for."

As soon as Chesney was rational, she "had it out" with him.

"Well, for God's sake, bring on your damned quack and let him have his quack-quackery out!" was his surly response. "I suppose I'm of too tough a fibre to be slain by an ass's jawbone. But I warn you—no sanatorium hocus-pocus!"

"Oh, you needn't worry!" Anne had said crossly. "Your mother's on your side. She'll help you destroy yourself. Mothers have a sort of gift that way, you know. But if you were *my* man—I'd clap you in a safe place, no matter *what* you said or did!"

Chesney gave her one of his ugliest looks.

"Leave me in peace!" he growled. "I've said I'd see your precious Carfew. Now you're working me up just because of your own nasty little temper. A fine nurse, *you* are!"

"Well, I can't beat you for a patient," retorted Anne, with her puggy sniff.

That same night Bobby had a bad attack of croup. Sophy and Bellamy and Anne—who had left Chesney unceremoniously to the strange nurse's care—fought until daybreak for his life.

After it was all over, and Bobby safe, Bellamy told Sophy that the time to keep his promise had come. She gazed at him, startled—not recollecting.

"My promise to tell you frankly when I thought the boy needed a change of climate," he reminded her.

"He needs it now, Mrs. Chesney. You both need it."

Sophy whitened.

"You don't mean...?"

"No, no! Nothing in the least serious. But, though we've had some fine days lately, the boy needs a drier climate—hotter sunshine. The Italian Lakes are not at all bad in summer, Mrs. Chesney, though people stare at the idea of going to Italy in the summer. I spent a delightful July and August once at Cadenabbia. Why not try Como? Or, if you want to be perfectly quiet, the other lake—Maggiore. There's a capital hotel at Baveno. I've been there, too. Nice gardens for the boy to play in. Pleasant jaunts to the Barromean Islands—if you care for that sort of thing."

Sophy seemed to be only half listening to him. She had a far-away look in her eyes. He thought that she was brooding over the sad plight in which she would have to leave her husband if she took her boy to Italy. But Sophy was only thinking how strange it was that an English physician was ordering to go to the place where Amaldi had been born. She had thought she might never see him again. Now she might see him very soon. It gave her a frank pleasure to think of seeing Amaldi again. She liked him warmly.

Bellamy was speaking to her with great earnestness:

"Mrs. Chesney, pray don't worry over having to leave your husband. Carfew comes to-morrow, you know, and he will tell you what I tell you now, I feel convinced—that it will be the best thing possible for Chesney to have the brace of feeling that he must do

without you, for a time."

Sophy looked at him with her candid eyes.

"I wasn't worrying," she said. "I've thought that out for myself. I know"—she spoke with quiet emphasis —"whether Doctor Carfew says so or not, that it will be best for me to leave Cecil now. Not only for him.... I'm thinking of myself, too, Doctor Bellamy. I've come to the end ... for the present. I haven't anything more to give him." Her voice became suddenly bitter. "Not hope, or patience, or belief ... or ... anything that could really help him," she ended, flushing a little, feeling that she had said too much.

"You are simply worn out, dear lady," he replied gently. "Your own natural feeling has worn you out as much as anything. What Chesney needs now is the cruel kindness of skilled professionals. I hope that we can succeed in getting his consent to go to Carfew's sanatorium."

Sophy looked at him rather inscrutably.

"I shall speak to him about that myself—I made up my mind to do so last night."

Bellamy had never noticed how determined her beautiful mouth could look. He thought how sad it was that character needed to be hammered out on such rough anvils. It was strange to see it being thus shaped under one's eyes, as it were.

From this talk with Bellamy Sophy went straight to Lady Wychcote.

"Doctor Bellamy says that Bobby must have a complete change of climate. I am going to take him to Italy, as soon as I can get packed," she said,

without preliminaries.

Lady Wychcote's brow lowered.

"What! You will leave your husband to hirelings?" she asked, in her coldest, most metallic tones.

"'Hirelings' are the best people to leave Cecil with at present. You must see that yourself," Sophy answered, unmoved, and quite as coldly.

"You actually mean it?"

"Yes."

Lady Wychcote's mouth thinned to a hair. The width of this hair-line indicated an ironic smile.

"You have heard the saying, I presume, that a wife should forsake all lesser ties in order to cleave to her husband?"

"I have," replied Sophy. "And that other saying, too: 'Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands as unto the Lord.' I haven't the least intention of submitting myself to Cecil as 'unto the Lord.' And I don't mean to sacrifice my son to him, either."

Lady Wychcote said nothing at once, only sat and looked at her daughter-in-law. As she saw the hardness to which Sophy's face was congealing under this look, she broke her silence by observing:

"I was trying to realise that you actually propose to leave the man, whom you promised to cherish in sickness and in health—to leave him in the clutch of a hideous illness—merely because your son, *his* son, has had an attack of croup."

Sophy said quietly:

"Why do you call it an 'illness,' Lady Wychcote?"

Her mother-in-law reddened; but replied doggedly:

"Because it is an illness. He came near dying the other night."

"People who persistently take poison must come near dying sometimes," said Sophy.

Lady Wychcote rose.

"I pity my son!" she exclaimed. "I pity him from the depths of my soul!"

"Yes.... I pity him, too," said Sophy.

"But not for the same reason. I pity him because he has married a heartless woman!"

Sophy shook her head gently. She had not risen. She sat looking up at her irate mother-in-law out of tired grey eyes.

"You don't think that," she said. "You don't like me—and you are very angry with me because I won't play 'patient Griselda' any longer—but you don't think me heartless."

"Upon my word!" exclaimed her ladyship, with a sort of gasp. "Upon my word!" she repeated. Words failed her.

Now Sophy rose too. She looked earnestly into the angry, pinched face. She was sorry for the mother whose ambition had outweighed her love—and was now but a grey ash of disappointment on her burnt-out, irascible heart.

"Lady Wychcote," she said, "I must tell you, whether you believe me or not, I must tell you that even now,

after I had seen Bobby safe and well in proper hands, I would come back to Cecil—if it would do him any real good. No—please let me finish. I shan't speak like this again. I would come back—horrible, hideous as it all is—I would stay near him. But I cannot help him. I am sure that it only does him harm to have me—us—always overlooking—forgiving—weakly, miserably forgiving. I do *not* forgive any longer—I will never forgive again—unless he will submit himself to those who can cure him. I won't risk my life and Bobby's—for his selfishness—his brutal self-indulgence. I wanted you to understand why I go—just how I feel. It is only fair. I am going to Italy with Bobby. Nothing can change me—nothing that you, or any one else, can say. Nothing—nothing!"

Lady Wychcote received this with bitter silence; then she said in a low voice of the most concentrated resentment:

"So you propose to leave the burden of your wifely duty on *my* shoulders?"

"No!" cried Sophy passionately. "As things are now, I have no wifely duty! The only duty left me is my duty to my son and to myself! I have no husband! And while this vile habit lasts, you have no son! He loves only morphia. Morphia is wife and mother and child and God to him. Oh, Lady Wychcote, do you, too, leave him! Leave him to those who can save him. Forsake him so that, from sheer loneliness, he will be forced to find himself again. It is the only way—the only, only way!"

One cannot speak out of the fulness of the heart with genuine, human passion, and not move something—even if it be only the outmost, thinnest veil of the atmosphere of another spirit. Lady Wychcote was

stirred unwillingly by this ardent appeal, but she would not yield her pride.

"Pardon me," she said frigidly, "but your desertion of your post only gives me double reason for remaining at mine."

She turned and went regally away towards her own apartments. But in truth her inward spirit was not nearly as determined as her well-corseted back. That Sophy should actually have resolved to leave her alone with Cecil filled her with dismay. She had not realised, until about to lose it, the admirable "buffer" between her and the full consequences of Cecil's "illness," that Sophy's presence had provided. Lady Wychcote had, to a marked degree, your healthy egoist's detestation of sick-rooms. Not only did the mere word "morphinomaniac" fill her with dread, but it roused in her the born Conservative's resentment against anything in the least *outré* or eccentric. It was Sophy who had watched, pleaded, interviewed doctors, read aloud, endured abuse, lain awake at night. The body of Sophy's vigorous young health had stood between her and that great, drug-poisoned body of her son.

What if...? Yes, to this point had Lady Wychcote been brought by the realisation of her daughter-in-law's imminent departure. What if, after all, the doctors were right? If, for his own sake, it would be better to have Cecil sent to a sanatorium?

XXXI

Sophy gave Tilda and Miller orders to pack, then she sent and asked to speak with Nurse Harding for a moment. She wished to know whether her husband could see her, if he were in a sufficiently rational state for her to talk with him. Anne replied that he had just had his fraction of morphia, and that it was his best hour in the day.

"Well, Daphne?" he said, rather guiltily, when she entered. She marvelled that he could call her "Daphne." It was like throwing the flowers from a sacred grave into the mire. She sat down near him, and said:

"I've come to tell you that I'm going with Bobby to Italy to-morrow."

He looked blank, not taking it in at first; then he scowled.

"I see. Shuffling off this marital coil with a vengeance, ain't you?"

"I'm going with Bobby because he needs me. But even if he didn't need me, I should go. I will not sit by and see you destroy yourself."

"Yes. I can imagine that to hear of the process from a distance would be more agreeable."

"I've tried with all my might to help you. You've only laughed at me. It amused you to deceive me. I was no help to you. If I did help you in any way, it was to ruin yourself."

"Strong words, my love. So you consider me a ruin?"

"Almost."

Her lips quivered. She closed them firmly. For his

own good she was not going to let that haggard face move her unduly.

"Mh. I see. Well, though I do not seem to appeal to your compassion, I trust that I do to your sense of the picturesque. Ruins are supposed to be romantic. However, a human ruin hasn't the same value in the landscape as an architectural one. Human ruins are generally put under ground, not on top of it. I dare say the Cecil Chesney ruin will be thus disposed of. Shall you return for the ceremony, or have you decided to live permanently in Italy?"

Sophy looked at him with a sort of impassioned hardness.

"I will come back when you are cured—when you have gone of your own accord to a place where they can cure you. Until then—I will never come back."

He looked at her, hiding his real shock under a harsh sarcasm.

"'These be news!'" he exclaimed dryly. "Unlike the leopard, you seem to have been changing your spots—the spots on the sun of my happiness—the little freckles on the fair lily of your character."

"I have changed," she said. "You have changed me."

"That's very interesting. Our strongest influence seems really to be our unconscious influence. Fancy my having changed the dear partner of my joys and sorrows to this semblance, and all the while being myself in total ignorance of the change! Well, well! The world wags and we wag with it. So you're determined to put off the old Adam—in other words, Cecil Chesney?"

Sophy looked at him for a moment without answering, then she said simply:

"Why should I want to be with you when you treat me like this? Why should I risk my life for a man who doesn't love me?"

"So I don't love you, eh?"

"No."

"You really think that?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you put a poisonous drug before me."

He flushed, biting his lip hard. Then he said in a cold, rough voice:

"Look here—am I to take this announcement seriously?"

"Yes."

"You mean you're really going to cut off to Italy and leave me in the lurch—like a sick dog in a ditch?"

"I'm going to Italy to-morrow."

"God! you're a fine helpmate!" he cried savagely. "'Eyes take your fill ... lips take your last embrace.' Come here!" he barked suddenly, tapping the side of the bed with his gaunt hand. "Come to your husband, wifie, dear!"

Sophy stood up. "No," she said.

"What! You refuse me a chaste embrace?—even at parting? You're really a sublime wife, ain't you?"

"I'm not a wife. I am myself. You are not my husband. You are not even yourself. Until you are yourself I will not come near you. I will not pretend to be your wife."

His face was livid—dreadful. He reared himself in the bed. All his huge frame, so noticeably thinner, trembled. He flung out an arm towards the door.

"Damn you! go, then!" he said behind his teeth. "If you're going, go!"

She was gone while he was yet speaking.

Dr. Carfew arrived at Dynehurst the next morning. Sophy was to leave for the Continent that afternoon. He had a long conference with Lady Wychcote, Gerald, Bellamy and Nurse Harding. Sophy was present but said very little. When Lady Wychcote so far put aside her usual attitude of haughty reserve as to urge the great specialist to take charge of her son's case, he met her courteously but bluntly.

"Unless Mr. Chesney is put in one of the places that I provide for such patients, I cannot do so, your ladyship," he said. "It would be quite useless."

Then the question of committing Cecil to such a place, even without his consent, was discussed. Lady Wychcote listened to the arguments for this course with a moderation which she had not hitherto shown. When Carfew had ended, by explaining at some length, for him, the sound reasons for adopting such a measure in the present case, she sat very thoughtful. All looked at her intently. At last she said:

"You really think that his mind may go, unless he is controlled in time?"

"I do."

"And he is dangerous—to others—to himself?"

"Surely your ladyship has had proof of that."

"Do you mean that he might go to the length of—of self-destruction?"

"Neither his own life nor the lives of others can be safe with an uncontrolled madman—whether his madness is temporary or permanent."

Lady Wychcote turned her lips inward. She was very pale. She had on no rouge whatever to-day. At last she said in a thin voice:

"My own wishes can hardly stand against such a statement from such an authority, Dr. Carfew. But there is my daughter-in-law to consult. Let us hear her opinion."

Sophy turned quietly. She had been looking out of the window at the great, yew-walled garden that swept back from the library windows. She had been thinking how like graves the flower-beds looked. It was a beautiful but sad garden. But she had also been listening attentively to every word. The sudden yielding of her mother-in-law stirred a dark pool of humour lying at the roots of her tragedy. She realised that Lady Wychcote had decided to shift the self-assumed burden of her (Sophy's) "wifely duty" on to the burly shoulders of the specialist.

"I am sure you will agree with us, Mrs. Chesney," Bellamy said eagerly.

"Yes—in one way," she answered. "I am sure that to be in a sanatorium under Dr. Carfew's care is the only thing that can cure Cecil. But——" She hesitated. They all continued to look at her intently. She flushed, then said in a low, firm voice, "But I think it would be useless to put him there by force. He would never forgive it. He would be cured—yes—for the time being. But I know him. The moment that he was free he would begin all over again—unless he went of his own will."

Even Carfew became rather excited.

"But my dear lady! Allow me——" And he began to overwhelm her with scientific refutations of her theory. Bellamy looked aghast and chagrined. Gerald began to fidget with the fixtures on the library table, pressing his moustache between his lips and biting it as was his habit when distressed. Anne Harding gazed at Sophy in blank amazement. Then her brown little mouth pressed together. She was thinking hard.

"Do you mean to say," Lady Wychcote put in when Carfew had finished and Sophy still sat silent, "that, after urging me to send for Dr. Carfew, you will refuse to follow his advice? Refuse to join with me in this—this—evidently necessary course?"

"I can't advise using force on Cecil, Lady Wychcote. It would only make him hate us. It would do no lasting good. Only if he goes of his own accord will it do good."

Lady Wychcote looked expressively at Carfew, whom she had suddenly accepted as an ally. "You see what I have to contend with!" said this look.

They argued with her quite uselessly. She left the

room presently, still resolved not to become a party to the removal of Cecil by force from Dynehurst.

The great man shrugged his shoulders, as who should say, "The ways of God and woman are past finding out." Then he looked at his watch. He had still to see the "patient" who had so unexpectedly consented to an interview. In accordance with Bellamy's urgent appeal he had consented to put certain facts before Chesney with unvarnished plainness.

Chesney received him with his sketchy smile.

"Salaam," said he. "It is a relief to receive the Caliph himself, after having had to put up for so long with the Chief Eunuch. At least you're a proper male," he concluded, looking with approval at the lean, massive form of the physician.

Carfew met this imperturbably. He put a few questions, which Chesney fended with his usual half-droll, half-savage ironies, then he said:

"Has it ever occurred to you to think what the *end* of your 'pleasant vice' will be, Mr. Chesney?"

Cecil frowned. But the next instant he resumed his callous, mocking expression.

"The 'ends' of things, O Guardian of the Faithful," said he, "are with Allah. *He* ties them into what bow-knots seemeth best to him."

"Shaitan can tie knots as well as Allah," replied Carfew, who was one of the best read men in England, as well as one of her foremost scientists. "He dips them in blood sometimes to warp them tighter," he added grimly.

"Speak more plainly to thy slave, O Chosen of Allah."

"I will," said Carfew. "From what you have said, so far—your allusion to my confrère Bellamy in particular—I gather that you look upon lack of virility as a thing to be scoffed at."

"Naturally. Does not Mahomet report Houris in paradise? There will be no guardians of the Harem there I fancy, O great Caliph!"

"The Paradise of Morphia may begin with houris," said Carfew dryly, "but it ends with horrors—sexless horrors. I would not jeer at sexlessness, if I were you. A fellow-feeling should make you kind."

Fury made Cecil natural if not kind.

"What the hell are you after, you damned charlatan?" he demanded savagely.

"I? I am after making myself clear, as an Irishman would say. I only mean to warn you that the little instrument you prize so much—the hypodermic syringe when used in connection with morphia—produces, in the end, the unfortunate condition which you so deride. Manhood, in every sense of the word, goes down before morphia, Mr. Chesney. I have promised your mother and Dr. Bellamy to put things plainly to you. Perhaps a natural curiosity as to the scientific aspect of your habit may induce you to listen."

This was in fact the case. Carfew's words, while enraging Cecil, had given him pause. He thrust out a sullen lip, glowering at the great man, like Minotaur at one who has just given the yearly boat-load of virgins a shove seaward.

"Well, damn it— I admit a 'low curiosity.' Get on, can't you?"

Carfew "got on." Coolly and methodically, as though unrolling a neatly illustrated script before the other's eyes, he presented to him a clear, detailed picture of the morphinomaniac's descent of Avernus.

"Little by little, all will go but that one, ever-increasing desire," he concluded; "honour first, then sex, then all human sympathy—then, a small matter perhaps, after these others, but to a well-bred man sufficiently unpleasant to contemplate—personal cleanliness. You will become filthy—you will not care. One thing alone of heaven and earth will be left you—the lust for morphia and its parasite—alcohol. So these two were available, you might stink in the nostrils of God and man—you would be quite indifferent. I remember," he broke off on another tone, seeming not to see the dull, unwilling look of arrestment, as it were, on Chesney's face, "I remember, years ago, reading a clever book by Knatchbull-Hugessen, a little volume of fairy-tales. Among these tales was one called 'Skitzland.' I rather suspect that he was having a fling at us specialists in that sketch; but then there are those who specialise on other things than science—morphia, for instance. To Skitzland were supposed to go those who had sacrificed all senses to one. A man in Skitzland would find himself only a huge ear, or an eye, or a stomach, and so on. Well, Mr. Chesney"—he turned sideways in his chair and fixed his cold, super-intelligent eyes on the sick man's—"your fate in the Skitzland of morphia will be to exist only as one huge, avid, diseased nerve-cell rank with the lust of morphia. Just that. Nothing more. And this diseased nerve-cell which will be you would slay Christ if He appeared again, and you thought the last dose of morphia were secreted in the Seamless Garment. Good-morning."

And he was gone before Cecil could moisten his dry lips to reply.

Anne found him sullenly resentful of the doctor's visit.

"I hope you've packed that old prime faker back to the courts of science," he grumbled, as she busied herself tidying his bed which he had rumpled with his ill-humoured tossings. "I'll none of him nor his damned mountebanking, that's flat."

"He'll none of *you*, unless you do as he wishes, and that's flatter," rejoined Anne tartly.

Chesney gave a whiff of utter contempt.

"Stick myself in one of his man-traps, I suppose you mean. I'll sign to Mephisto with my blood first!—Just let 'em try it on!" he added ominously.

"Oh you make me tired!—tired and sick," flashed Anne Harding. "You talk and act as if we were all trying to lure you to destruction, instead of wearing ourselves to the bone to save you from worse than death! Look here——" She drew up a chair and sat down squarely on it, her little black eyes like coals in which a red spark lingers. "*I'm* not going to stay on with you as things are, so I might just as well have my say out— I don't give a hang whether it's 'unprofessional' or not. So I'll just tell you this: Your mother went back on you this morning. I mean she went over to our side—we, who'd put you in a sanatorium ay or no. 'Twas your wife held out against it. And the more I think of it, the more I believe she's right. Says she, 'No, I won't lend myself to using force on him. Unless he goes of his own will it won't do any good.' I didn't think so then. But I do

now. If your own will is bent on perdition, not all the other wills in the world are going to save you. That's why I'm going to give you up. I'm too useful, thank God! to waste my time on a man who's hell-bent on his own destruction."

She pushed the chair sharply back, and got up.

"Hold on!" cried Chesney as she turned away. He had listened to her without interruption, a most peculiar expression on his face. "Did I understand you to say that Sophy—that Mrs. Chesney, held out against the lot of 'em?"

"You did. I was one of the 'lot of 'em,' so I ought to know," replied Anne.

"She stood by me—in the face of all that pressure?"

"She stood up for what she believed in— I don't think that's *you*, just at present," said Anne viciously.

"Hold your tongue, spitfire, and let me think," returned Chesney, but without anger. He lay brooding deeply for some moments. Then he said: "Just go and ask Mrs. Chesney to come here a moment, will you?"

Anne consulted the bracelet watch.

"It's almost time for her to leave. Don't make her miss her train if I fetch her."

"I'll thank you to do what I ask!" said Chesney, looking dangerous. "It's not for you to make conditions when I wish to see my wife."

Anne glanced at him, then went meekly on the errand. She knew exactly when to insert bandelleros and when to apply balm.

Sophy came at once. She looked pale but quiet in her dark brown travelling gown and hat.

"You sent for me, but I was coming anyway to say good-by, Cecil," she said, in her low voice.

He looked at her very strangely, she thought. She never remembered having seen quite this expression on his face.

"It was not exactly to say good-by that I sent for you," he said after a pause. His voice, too, was low. There was some restrained emotion in it, whether anger or regret she could not tell. He continued:

"I sent for you in fact—to—to thank you, among other things."

"To thank me?"

She flushed cruelly. She thought he wished to bait her with his bitter mockery for this last time. He saw her slight figure brace itself, and her hands close nervously. He flushed himself.

"You needn't fear any brutishness on my part, not just now," he said, still in that low voice. "I'm not sneering. I want to thank you for holding out against the others this morning. Nurse Harding told me of it."

"Ah," said Sophy. She drew a deep breath. "I told them it would be no use," she added sadly.

"You were right. Thank you again."

His eyes ran over her travelling costume.

"So you're really going?" he said.

"Yes."

He was silent again. Then he said slowly:

"Well— I'm going, too."

"What!" said Sophy. She did not understand. She looked frightened. Did he mean that he would try to come with her—follow her?

"You misunderstand me—naturally," he said, with some bitterness. "I do not mean that I am going with you—agreeable as that might be." He could not suppress this mild sneer: his heart was very sore and angry under his cooler mood. "I mean that your confounded magnanimousness has got under my armour— I'm going to man-handle myself just because you wouldn't let me be man-handled by others."

Sophy held her breath. He knew that trick of hers. It meant that she was moved to the quick and afraid to believe her own senses. His set look broke a little.

"Yes, I mean it," he said rather gruffly. He sneered again, at himself this time. "I don't blame you for looking sceptical— I believe there's a good authority that says, 'A liar shall not be believed though he speak the truth.'"

White and red flame seemed to flicker over Sophy's face. She put up both hands against her breast.

"*Cecil*...?" she said.

"Yes, my girl," he answered flippantly; "this wary old rat is going to nip into the trap after the excellent bit of cheese you baited it with this morning. Now don't —don't—for God's sake, don't make a fuss!" he ended irritably.

But Sophy had flung herself on her knees beside the

bed, hiding her face—regardless of veil and hat. Her voice, smothered in the bedclothes, reached him faintly:

"I'm not going to—don't be afraid— I'm not going to — I only wanted to thank—to thank——"

"Me?" asked Chesney sardonically, yet with a hungrily tender look back of his eyes that were bent on the crushed brown-velvet hat.

"No— God!" said Sophy softly.

Then she rose to her feet again.

"I won't try to say anything," she murmured. "I think you know what I am feeling——"

"Mh— I couldn't go that far. Women are sealed volumes to an average chap like me. Or, if they aren't sealed, they're written in some hierophantic script that's beyond the poor layman."

He took suddenly a more natural tone.

"But if I've given you a whit of the satisfaction that your plucky stand gave me—why, then, we're quits," he ended.

Sophy held out her hand.

"I shall be thinking of you all the time, Cecil."

"Thanks. You'll send a line now and then?"

"Indeed I will. Every day, if you like."

"No. That's too much to expect. I don't believe in setting kindness tasks. Tell the little chap good-by for me. Hope Italy will make him quite fit."

"I will. Good-by. Some day I'll— I can't say things now."

"Don't try. I don't want it."

He hesitated, still holding her hand. Then flushed again darkly.

"Would it—er—go too much against the grain for you to give the—er—condemned—a kiss?"

She stooped and kissed him warmly, lifting her veil, and pressing her cheek to his. The great arms held her tight an instant, then pushed her somewhat roughly away.

"Go—there's a good girl—please go——" he said.

This going of Sophy was very different from the last time that he had bidden her from him.

She went; and ten minutes later Nurse Harding came in again.

Her patient had turned his face to the wall and flung an arm over it. She glanced at him curiously from time to time, busying herself here and there about the room in her mouse-like way. Then she drew up the prescribed dose of poison into the little glass and metal instrument, and went over to the bed.

"I say, sir," she began, almost shyly for Nurse Harding. "I wouldn't bother you, but it's time for your hypo——"

He did not stir. Anne blinked.

"Want to play 'good boy' and lengthen the time, sir?"

No answer and no movement. Anne went softly and laid the syringe on the table. Then she came back.

She stood for a moment, biting her sharp little knuckles and staring down at the broad back. Then she burst out:

"Mrs. Chesney's told me, sir."

Again she broke off, and again burst forth.

"I—I always said you were an Old Sport.... Now I'll—I'll be hanged—if you ain't the sportiest Old Sport as ever was!"

She spun on her heel, and went out, clacking the door most unprofessionally. She went to have two minutes of what she called a "good blub." It was Sophy's joy, together with Chesney's sudden capitulation, that had upset Nurse Harding. She had become excessively attached to Sophy, and, in spite of all his fundamental brutality, she had a "soft spot" for her patient.

XXXII

The most extraordinary exhilaration came over Sophy from the moment that the little Channel steamer cast off, and she heard the surge of the sea about her and felt the keen tang of its breath upon her face: a sort of light-hearted sense of adventure, of the romance of a lonely setting forth for strange countries. Oddly enough she had never been either to France or to Italy. Now she was going to both those famous lands, and alone—her own courier—her own mistress. She felt what she had once heard an excited child call "journey-proud." And the sense

that Cecil was in safe hands, was going of his own accord to a place where cure was certain, left her conscience-free to revel in this sense of delicious detachment. It was as if she had been reborn into some lighter, more tenuous body. She felt as one does in those dreams when, by only holding one's breath and springing upward, one floats delicately free of the law of gravitation—casting off all heaviness of mind and body.

She stayed on deck. Bobby and the two maids were below in a cabin. It was very calm. The sea spread flat and silken under a high moon. She did not feel lonely. This solitude of the sufficient self was ecstasy, after the long, feverish contact with others.

When they landed at Calais, the gay *pizzicato* of the French tongue gave her such pleasure that she wanted to laugh out like a child suddenly tickled by light fingers. It was so fitting—so deliciously appropriate. Here was she reborn to a new heaven and a new earth. Of course there must be also a new language. How glad she was that her old governess had been French! It seemed that a kindly Fate had been long ago preparing her for this gay moment, as well as this moment for her. She spoke pretty, clear French—had spoken it since babyhood. It was a fresh magic to find herself so well understood. That the day was overcast, as they went rushing on to Paris, through the wide, fenceless, hedgeless fields, did not damp her joyous mood. This greyness was so different from that of England—as different as moonstones from onyx—— She looked at the frail pallor of the sky, and thought of the moonstones of Ceylon, in whose watery silver there is a gleam of blue. She did not care if the sun of France veiled itself; so that Italy burst on her in floods of golden

light she was content. She could not bear the thought of seeing Italy, for the first time, demure and grey. On the bright horizon of her fancy it floated like a magic island wrought of golden glass and lapis-lazuli —colonnaded with pale marble—hung round about with gardens like ancient Babylon—crowned with lilies like its own Florence—and with violets like Athens. The "blunt-nosed" bees of Theocritus hummed about it. Song-birds like living jewels flew above it. Alas! She did not know that the inhabitants of her fairyland devour their song-birds.

But though she dreamed of the Italy of poets and painters, she had to go direct to practical Milan. Bellamy thought it important that a certain Dr. Johnson who lived there should see Bobby before she took him to Lago Maggiore for the remainder of the summer.

She found the town so hot and dusty that she decided not to go out until evening. The doctor was to see Bobby next day. She had a light dinner in her own room, then went downstairs to order an open cab. The night was lovely after the scorching day. She thought a drive about the streets would be amusing. Her gay, care-free mood was still upon her. This was Italy—Italy—and day after to-morrow she would be on one of its beautiful lakes. With this thought came the thought of Amaldi. She ought really to let him know that she was in Italy, was going to his own beloved lake. How pleasant it would be to see him again. How surprised he would be. Then, too, to meet his mother—that would be a new pleasure.

She stepped from the marble stairway into the hall of the hotel, remembering all at once that she did not

have Amaldi's address. But then "Marchese Amaldi, Lago Maggiore" ought to be enough. Still, yes, it would be better to ask at the office of the hotel. They would doubtless be able to give it to her.

The head-clerk smiled affably as she asked, and made a sweeping gesture with his left arm.

"But, Madame, there is the Marchese himself," said he.

Sophy turned quickly.

Amaldi, who had just entered, was lighting a cigarette, his back turned towards her. Then he turned suddenly just as she had done, and saw her. The next moment she had given him her hand and was explaining how she happened to be in Milan in the dead of summer. Her explanations were a vague murmur to Amaldi. He was thinking that nothing less than Fate had ordered it. It was "meant" that she should come to Italy and that he should be holding her hand in his—after so many bitter dreams. Fate had brought her back into his life—the one woman he had ever desired with his whole being.

He had only a few moments with her, however, before the friend for whom he had called came downstairs. His mother was waiting outside in her carriage. Might she call on Mrs. Chesney next day? Sophy said that she had just been thinking what a pleasure it would be to meet the Marchesa. She smiled at him as she said this and gave him her hand again. Amaldi, who was rather pale, bent and kissed it. Then he joined his mother's guest and they went out together.

Sophy wished that he could have driven with her

that evening. He was even nicer than she remembered him.

"I wonder if he is like his mother?" she thought as she got into the little *carozza* for her lonely outing. "I'm sure to like her if she is anything like him." And all during the drive she kept wishing that Amaldi could have come with her.

Next afternoon the Marchesa called. She was a tall, finely made woman of the Juno type, with beautiful, light brown, sparkling eyes under jet black eyebrows, and a fluff of silken, fox-grey hair that must have been gold-red when she was young. But then, as it was, youth unquenchable laughed from those shrewd, brilliant eyes, though she was sixty. Her little bonnet of white camellias with its big, black bow, that so became her, was all Paris in a hat-frame. She evidently had a "sweet-tooth" for confections in dress, just as some people have for actual bonbons.

She had not talked in her natural, easy, laughing way for ten minutes before Sophy thought her the most delightful woman she had ever known. She asked almost at once to see Bobby—won his heart immediately. Told Sophy that she needn't worry in the least about doctors on the Lake—that there was an excellent one, an old friend of hers, at Stresa—Cesare Camenis.

"Eh!—the *tousin* (little fellow) has adopted me for his Nonna!" she added, laughing again the next instant, as Bobby hauled himself up by her fan-chain and tried to pull off her bonnet, saying:

"Take off! Tay wiv Bobby!"

As for Sophy, if she had not fallen in love with Amaldi, she had certainly fallen in love with his mother. The feeling was mutual. The Marchesa had had two sons but no daughter. She had always longed for a little girl. Now she thought that she would like to have had a daughter as much like Sophy as possible. And, as this thought came to her, it brought another less agreeable.

The sad destiny of her Marco made the Marchesa very lenient in facing certain problems, though she was essentially a woman of broad, indulgent views. Since twenty-six (he was now thirty-one) he had lived like a widower whom some mistaken vow has cut off from re-marrying. Not that the Marchesa deceived herself with the credulity of the average Anglo-Saxon mother in such cases. She did not for one moment think that her son had led the life of an ascetic during this enforced widowhood. Light *liaisons* she knew well there had been; but Marco was not a sensualist. Such flitting fires could never really warm or console him. And as she looked now at Sophy, thinking how pleasant it would be to have such a daughter, she also realised that this lovely, tall girl, with her spellbound looking grey eyes, and sensitive, romantic mouth, was the very type of woman to appeal to Marco with the threefold lure of spirit, mind, and flesh. Though he had spoken much of Sophy to his mother, since his return from England, with frank admiration and compassion for her sad fate in being married to such a man as Chesney, he had not given the slightest impression of being *amoureux d'elle*. But there came over the Marchesa a strong prescience of danger—of something to be guarded against. Should Marco see too much of Mrs. Chesney, should he become "in love" with her, why, then there was here no passing

liaison to be considered, but something of the nature of tragedy. Not only was Marco bound by his disastrous marriage, but here was a woman doubly bound—not only by marriage, but by motherhood. A bad mother may make an enchanting mistress, but a bad mother will never make a true wife. The Marchesa knew her Marco well. She knew that, should he love a woman of Sophy's type, he would not want her for a mistress, but for a wife. That was what love—the one big, crowning love—would mean to Marco. Now if in future he should love this woman and she him, and should give up her son for him—she would not be what his love had imagined. If she should not give up her son—his love must burn out in bitterness.

Yes, she must watch; she must be wise as many serpents and harmless as a flock of doves; but she must also be prepared, at the first sign of real danger, to give Marco a word of serious warning. This action on her part would have all the more weight with him as she rarely, almost never, interfered in his personal affairs.

And all the time that she was thus reflecting, she smoked Sophy's gold-tipped cigarettes and chatted pleasantly.

Sophy heard with delight that the Marchesa was returning to the Lake the next afternoon by the same train on which she also was going.

She was early at the station. It thrilled her to read the placards with such lovely, well-known names on them. *Como!*—They passed that sign on their way to

the carriages bound for Lago Maggiore. It seemed very odd to see that name of romance written upon a railway carriage.

Amaldi and his mother joined her shortly. As they settled down comfortably in the queer little carriage, Amaldi bought copies of the leading Milan papers and handed them in through the window. To Sophy's surprise, when he entered the carriage a few minutes later, he laid a fresh copy of *Harper's* on the seat beside her, smiling at her astonished look.

"We're very 'up to date,' as you say, in Milan," he laughed.

But Sophy could not read. She was too excited. She sat in a lazy, happy trance gazing from the window.

The Marchesa dozed frankly. Bobby was sound as a top. Sophy had never felt more keenly, vividly awake in her life. She began to day-dream. And as she sat there, now glancing out of window, now watching the pleasant smile which sleep had drawn on the Marchesa's face, now the soles of Bobby's sturdy shoes protruding from under the arm of the seat as he lay with his red curls on Miller's lap, now noticing how sharp-cut was Amaldi's dark, irregular profile against the flashing green outside, she found herself suddenly thinking:

"Suppose this dear, charming woman were my mother-in-law instead of Lady Wychcote—suppose *he* were my husband—suppose I were Sophy Amaldi instead of Sophy Chesney—going for a happy summer to the Villa Amaldi—sure of kindness, sure of sympathy, sure of love——"

This fancy did not form itself into regular phrases

such as these, but came in a flashing, involuntary impression. She started with dismay and glanced around nervously. Amaldi was looking at her. She bent forward, lifting up one of the papers that had fallen to the floor. Her hand touched the Marchesa's foot. That lady started wide awake.

"Oh, *Dio*!" she exclaimed, glancing out. "We're nearly there! Marco, my umbrella, please—and Mrs. Chesney's. You'd better tell the maids to get ready."

She looked tenderly at Bobby. "What a shame to wake the *tousin*!" she said.

Now they were rattling round a great haunch of mountain—the southern flank of the Sasso di Ferro. They had reached Laveno. Lago Maggiore lay before them. The lake spread milkily iridescent. The sky was the colour of periwinkle, with towards the zenith a flight of silver cloud wings. The glimpse of Alps beyond Baveno was a hush of violet. It was one of those delicately veiled afternoons when the Lake is at its best. It looked mysterious, promising, like the tempered beauty of a woman beneath a gauzy *yashmak*.

Amaldi saw the maids and luggage safely on the little steamer that was waiting at the *imbarcadero*. Sophy and Bobby were to go with the Marchesa in the steam-launch.

As into a mirage the little launch shot forth across the Lake. Sophy sat with Bobby in her arms.

But there was something wistful, faintly sorrowful in this aerial beauty. There was a soul in it, a yearning as in all souls. She put down her cheek on Bobby's head, and, thus unseen, the tears came stealing.

"Poor child," thought the Marchesa, who divined those tears she could not see, "poor child ... but I must speak to-night—I must—I really must."

When they reached Baveno, the Marchesa insisted on getting out and going up to the hotel with Sophy to see that she was given nice rooms. Something about the young woman, all alone with her little son, went to her heart. The Marchesa herself had not been very happy in her marriage. Her fullest life had been lived as the mother of her two boys. Thus Sophy and Bobby touched her very nearly.

"She seems quite worn out all of a sudden, poor child," said she, as she rejoined Amaldi. Without apparently looking at her son, she saw the quick change that came over his face when she said that Sophy seemed worn out. He made the *Meccanico* sit in the bow, and himself steered the little *Fretta* all the way to "Le Vigne." He talked very little on the way home, chiefly about the farm and the weather. He was afraid it might be going to rain to-morrow. There were clouds slowly rising behind the Sasso.

"Then you'll have to put off your villa-hunt with Mrs. Chesney," he said. He said this very naturally, pronouncing the name without the least self-consciousness. The Marchesa felt that her task was going to be very difficult indeed. She, too, lapsed into silence, now watching the lovely sky, now glancing at her son's dark, nervous hands as they turned the little wheel slightly from time to time. Passionate hands they were. The Marchesa had been a passionate nature herself. She could feel with Marco as well as for him.

Le Vigne, or the Castello Amaldi, as it was sometimes called, lay on the Lombard shore of the Lake not far

from Angera. It had been one of the old hunting lodges of the Amaldi, in more sumptuous days. It was really no more a castle than the Castello di Frino, on the hills above the village of Ghiffa; though it had, what Frino had not, a massive reconnoitring tower at one corner of the quadrangle of buildings that formed a court behind the house itself. It made a delightful summer home, standing close to the lake shore and surrounded by a farm of some two thousand acres. It was of white stucco with thick, ancient walls. A terrace along the front led by long, shallow steps to the lawns and gardens, which reached to the water. Behind, in the buildings enclosing the court, were kitchens, laundry, carpenter shop, stables, *et cetera*. Big arched ways led from the cortile into the kitchen garden and the open country beyond.

When the Marchesa had come to Le Vigne as a bride forty years ago, she had regretted that it did not lie in the mountainous portion of the Lake. Now she had grown to love this wistful, reedy shore more than any other part of Lago Maggiore.

She stepped out in the big *darsena* with a sigh of pleasure, and walked across the lawn, stopping to put a spray of white oleander in her belt.

Marco and his mother dined on the terrace, at a little table set with old Lodi ware. There was a bowl of white oleander—the Marchesa's favourite flower—in the centre. Its fragile blossoms gave off a perfume strangely heady and spiritual at the same time—a faint, sweet perfume as of blossomed peach-kernels.

The dusk came on gradually, spangled with stars and fireflies. All the clouds had melted from the sky. It spread above them like an endless expanse of violet

smoke, glittering with vari-coloured sparks.

"No rain for to-morrow, *caro mio*," said the Marchesa, as she and Amaldi sat smoking companionably after dinner, each in a long willow chair. "I can go villa-hunting with your charming friend to-morrow, beyond a doubt."

"Yes. That's good," said Amaldi.

The Marchesa glanced at him. He was smoking contentedly, with a very tranquil expression on his face. It was still light enough to see even the colours of flowers quite plainly. The Marchesa put her own cigarette back between her lips. Then she took it out and looked at it, smiling.

"You haven't noticed my new *splendore*, Marco," she said, waving the gold-tipped cigarette towards him.

"Eh?" he said, as though rousing suddenly.

"These 'gilded luxuries,'" said his mother, indicating the cigarette between her big, handsome fingers.

"Why, Baldi! What swagger!" he laughed, taking in the cigarette. This name of "Baldi," by which both her sons sometimes addressed her, had arisen from the fact that as a bride she had arrived in Italy with a severe cold in her head, and had pronounced her new name "Abaldi." Her husband had begun to call her "Baldi" for fun, in the honeymoon days. Later on the children had taken it up. She associated it more with her boys than with her husband, and liked them to call her so. Only when very serious did they say "Maman."

"Yes. Don't you wonder how I came by such gorgeousness?" she now asked.

"I do indeed. I thought you scorned such vanities."

"I do, as a rule, but that dear thing pressed them on me so prettily that I hadn't the heart to refuse. Mrs. Chesney I mean. She *is* a dear thing, Marco."

Her son's voice at once became on guard.

"Yes. I thought you would like her," he said. "You know I told you so."

"You didn't tell me half, my dear. She is a very unusual woman indeed—girl, I feel like saying. Really she seems amazingly girlish to have been through such bitter experiences. That terrible dinner you told me of——"

"Yes. That does strike one."

The Marchesa smoked for a few moments.

"Does she seem very *éprise* with her husband?" she asked at last.

"I haven't seen them together more than twice—I couldn't say. I haven't seen much of Mrs. Chesney herself, you know."

"I didn't know," reflected the Marchesa; but matters seemed to her all the more serious because of that statement. If she, his mother, could see in a few hours the strong influence that Sophy had upon him, and if this influence had resulted from such a slight acquaintance, then it was more necessary than ever that she should speak.

She threw away her cigarette, and leaned back.

"*Caro Marco*," she said, "I'm going to do a thing that I've rarely done. I'm going to do it because I think I

ought to, though I dislike doing it very much. And I want you to be indulgent to Baldi—eh? Will you?"

Now Amaldi was more than ever on guard. Something seemed actually to click in his breast. It was the lock of his heart snapping home. It is a way that some heart-locks have of doing at the least touch.

His voice was very gentle and courteous as he said:

"Dear Baldi, you know very well that you can speak to me in any way whatever that you wish."

"*Aie!*" thought the Marchesa. "He's gone under the boat like a sulking *lusc* (pike). What a dear, fine, provoking boy to be sure!

"Well, then, Marco, I'll come to the point at once," she said in a frank, practical voice. "But first I must ask you if you don't really think that I've trespassed very little on private ground with you, since you've been grown? Even when your marriage was in question, I said nothing after giving you my honest opinion, when you asked for it. Isn't this so?"

"Yes, Maman; it is perfectly true," said Amaldi.

This "Maman" fixed the Marchesa in her opinion that Marco was going to make things as difficult as possible for her. She was no longer his intimate "Baldi," she was the revered "Maman."

"*Ebbene, Caro*, I'm glad you admit that so frankly," she continued, taking her courage in both hands; "because it makes me feel that you will be lenient if what I'm about to say jars on you very much. It's this, *figlio mio*— I want you to be very, very careful about your attitude towards this lovely, unhappy woman. I

see real danger for you there, Marco—unless you are on your guard every moment of the time you are with her. A woman feels such things intuitively—and intuition is a very sure force, no matter what sceptics may say of it. I want you to open your 'mind's eye' wide, my dear boy, and look this possibility squarely in the face. Will you?"

Amaldi sat perfectly still. The only sign that he was moved in any way was the cigarette which went out between his fingers, and which he put to his lips now and then as if unaware that it was out. His mother waited, rather nervous. Then he said quietly:

"I was just trying to see exactly what you meant, Maman. Do you mean that you fear I may compromise Mrs. Chesney by undue attentions?"

The Marchesa felt discouraged, but her will upheld her.

"Not that alone, Marco," she said firmly, "though that might be one of the consequences of what I fear for you. What I meant, in plain language, since you force me to it, is that you may come to care too much for her. There would be no issue to such a thing, Marco. You must see that for yourself. I do you the honour," she added quickly, "of supposing that your feeling for such a woman would be a serious one."

"*Grazie*," said Amaldi. His tone was perfectly respectful, but there was a crisp note in it that hurt his mother. He was in truth deeply indignant, not with her, but with himself, at the idea that his love for Sophy was so transparently evident to observing eyes, when he had thought it hidden in the utmost depths of his being. It was excruciatingly painful and mortifying to him that even his mother should touch

on such a subject.

The Marchesa, in the meanwhile, was thinking very hard indeed. She was years in advance of her day in many respects. For instance, she believed that a serious union between a man and woman devotedly loving each other, and determined to be true to that love, is as sacred and worthy a thing, as really and wholly a "marriage," as any union made by priest or law. The law of one's highest being she considered the highest law of all. To the marriage of true hearts and bodies, as well as that of true minds, she would not admit impediment. But—she realised that for the man and woman of her day to enter upon such a marriage was also to enter upon a *Via Crucis*. The massive, sometimes crushing, weight of such a yoke was not to be accepted in any light, joyous spirit of newly kindled passion. Over the gateway of that stern temple of love was written the implacable, well-nigh impossible mandate of the Delphian Oracle, "Know thyself."

Moreover, in her view of the question, the man and woman who would enter on such an engagement must be quite free from certain ties—pre-eminently the tie binding a mother to her children. The Marchesa admitted the forsaking of all in the world for a great love—except the child that a woman had borne into the world.

Marco, despite his luckless marriage, from which as an Italian he could not with dignity escape—(both he and she scorned the idea of his becoming naturalised in another country in order to obtain a divorce there)—Marco she considered free to form a new and serious relationship if he so desired. Therefore, it was not the question of the possible irregularity of his

future relations with Sophy that dismayed her; it was that she did not consider Sophy free. She had her son. Never would she receive as Marco's wife the woman who had deserted her child for him. But then, merely glimpsing Sophy as she had done, she felt instinctively that she was incapable of such an act.

Remained then only the possibility of a dark tragedy of unavailing love, and the odious quagmire of scandal.

And thinking as she did, and knowing that her son was well aware of her opinions, this "*Grazie*" ("Thanks") of Marco's hurt her deeply. It seemed to say: "I am glad that at least you do me that much justice."

It was she, however, who broke the silence that followed.

"I shall not allude to this subject again," she said, rising. "This once I felt that I had to speak—no matter how much I hurt or offended you—only this once——"

"*Prego, prego, Maman!*" he murmured in a colourless voice.

"Yes, that I had to do," continued his mother firmly; "for, as I said, there is no issue. Mrs. Chesney has her son. Should you ever care for her—should she ever care for you—her son stands between you. If she were to desert her boy for you—she would not deserve your love. If you wanted her to desert him—you would not deserve hers——"

"*Maman! Te ne scongiuro!*" cried Amaldi, springing to his feet. She could see his face white as silver in the

heavy dusk. His brows made a straight line across it.

"I have finished, my son," she said, with dignity. "You will never hear me allude to this again."

And she left him.

XXXIII

The finding of a suitable villa for Sophy proved to be quite an undertaking. Three days did the kindly Marchesa devote to helping her in this quest. And as they chugged about the Lake in the little *Fretta*, Sophy grew more and more impressed with the hideousness of the houses that man had thrust upon this lovely nature. She had dreamed of columns—white columns rising from groves of lemon and orange, reflected in pale blue water. The reality was a noticeable lack of these trees and a collection of ugly boxes, now bristling with ginger-bread towers, gilded, pricked out, machicolated, decorated in red and blue, now roofed and verandahed in clumsy imitation of Swiss chalets, the stucco walls painted to represent yellow wood. Sometimes these houses would be ornamented with gaudy flowers like a frieze of chintz; sometimes they would wriggle all over with the results of modern *graffito* work. Only a few villas, here and there, were simple and attractive in architecture—and these were always old buildings, not to be rented.

Sophy was in despair. She thought she had better remain at the Hotel Bellevue or slip over to the Eden

Hotel in Pallanza. But the Marchesa never gave up an idea once she had determined to accomplish it. So, finally, they found in the "Villa Bianca," near Ghiffa, what even Sophy admitted was the very thing.

It took her two weeks to get settled—to have the walls whitewashed, and to cover the frightful furniture with slips of chintz. She was so busy over this that she had no time to feel lonely, though Amaldi and his mother came to see her only once during that period. The letters from Anne Harding were very encouraging. Bobby looked like a bit of brown bisque and had already gained in weight. It was wonderful after the day's bustle to sit on the broad, flagged terrace that overlooked the Lake. Two huge cypresses towered on either side. At the foot of the priestly trees two oleanders in full bloom spread their pinky skirts, like court ladies kneeling in perfumed humility before stern spiritual directors. Their heady fragrance streamed through the night, stirring vague desires and regrets. The stars swung low, plaques of quick-gold. The grim Stone of Iron across the lake had changed to tourmaline—reddish at one end, dusky violet at the other, as the glow from the lime-kiln at Chaldee lit it to the east and the soft starlight to the west. Yes, this, too, was Italy. And there came to her a strange, elusive sense as of heart-break for sorrows long forgotten when a nightingale began its desperate, sweet cry of passion forever unassuaged. She had thought that in England she had first heard the nightingale. It was not so. This was the true flame of song; that had been but the flame's shadow. In ecstatic staves the tiny soul flung out its supernal melody, as though weaving a poem in music—sapphics of sound—stanzas ending each time with a new melodic phrase—the cry of a

celestial Improvisatrice, singing against the morning stars. It brought the sense of infinity—as though from everlasting to everlasting that marvellous *ritornello* might go pealing on....

One morning Luigi, the little Milanese butler, brought her Amaldi's card.

She ran down to greet him, in her white linen skirt and blouse, forgetting to take out the oleander flower that Bobby had stuck over her ear as they played together that morning on the terrace. The pink flower with its dark, spiky leaves, thus nestled against her shaded hair, gave her a careless, festival look that was delightfully new to Amaldi. It was hard to keep his eyes steady under the look of frank pleasure with which she met him. He told her that his mother had sent the *Fretta* to fetch her to Le Vigne for luncheon if she cared to come.

"I should love to!" she cried. "I'll just get a hat and a sunshade. I won't keep you a minute."

"My mother begged that you would bring Bobby if you wished to," said Amaldi as she was rushing off. But she called back over her shoulder:

"Thanks! No.... I'm afraid he might get tired and fret."

The morning was wonderful—too bright and unveiled for an artist's pleasure, but not for that of mere human beings with youth and joy in their blood. The Tramontana was still blowing. The whole lake was a-flutter with it. The *Fretta* sped onward between jets of foam. Peder, the young *meccanico*, grinned with the wavelets, as an occasional spray-shower flew past him and sprinkled the *sciori* further aft.

The Marchesa was waiting for them on the terrace of Le Vigne. She gave Sophy a little nosegay of white oleander and stephanotis, and kissed her cheek in greeting. She looked very imposing in her straight robe of embroidered white muslin.

Sophy was charmed with the outer view of Le Vigne. Its mellow, white walls, so severely simple, and the fluted edge of its red-tiled roof gave her a relieved pleasure after her own orange-brown "chalet." The entrance hall was big and plain, with mosaic under foot, and great beams overhead, painted in between like the wings of night-moths.

They lunched on the western terrace under a pergola of star-jessamine. Sophy felt strangely and rather unquietly happy—as if something were going to happen. And she was very hungry. It was such fun to eat from a plate dappled with little sun-flecks. Every one had silvery reflections from the white tablecloth playing over their faces. It made Amaldi look pale and strange somehow.

Sophy thought that after luncheon she would be taken to see the farm and gardens, but the Marchesa said that she must not go out into the sun directly after eating. Instead, they went into the big, cool Salotto, and the Marchesa taught her a game of double patience. While they were doing this, Amaldi strolled in with his pipe. It seemed odd to Sophy to see him with a pipe. It didn't suit him somehow.

The Marchesa sent Amaldi off to order the pony-carriage. She was going to drive Sophy over the Tenuta herself. As he went, she called after him:

"Is your study *in ordine*? I want to show Mrs. Chesney the view from the Tower before we start."

"I'll send Peder up to report," said Amaldi.

His "study" was in the top of the square tower. It was lined with books and maps, and pierced by four windows. A heavy *quattro cento* table covered with papers ran across one side, and on the other was a grand piano. Sophy's eyes went from this to the papers on the table, many of which were manuscript music.

"I didn't know that the Marchese composed music," she said, "though I've heard of course what a wonderful musician he is."

"Marco is even greater as a composer than as a musician," replied his mother, pride in her voice. "The world will hear of him some day. But he's such a student of other things also, that it rather hampers him, I think. Young as he is, he's already one of the authorities on the history of the Risorgimento—and no one in Italy knows more than he about our architecture and art. He has predicted a rising of Iconoclasts within a few years—haters of beauty—so he's preparing for them, in his own way. He has very original ideas."

Then she broke off suddenly, extremely vexed at her own garrulity on this subject. It was certainly far from her wish to interest this eager-eyed girl in the attainments of Marco.

"*Che imbecille!*" she said within herself, as she led the way from the big table, where Sophy was gazing with respectful admiration at some beautiful architectural designs in aquarelle.

"Did the Marchese make those lovely drawings?" she asked, as she followed his mother to one of the great

windows.

"Yes—he draws quite nicely, I believe," replied the Marchesa with some primness.

Sophy felt the change in her manner, but only thought that she had withdrawn her interest from Amaldi's work to the marvellous view that spread below them—all the Lombard plain out-rolled like the fecund floor of a vast temple to Ceres, whose roof was the blue dome above. And in the apex of this immense *Rotonda* the sun's disk seemed the opening into further heavens of gold.

As they re-crossed the room on their way back, Sophy's attention was caught by the photograph of a blond youth, strikingly like the Marchesa.

"Oh—is that your other son, Marchesa?" she asked. "What a handsome boy and so like you!"

"*Grazie mille*," said the Marchesa, laughing. "Yes, that is Nano—my younger son Giovanni. He is a good-looking *baloss* (scamp) as you so kindly observed, my dear. Much better looking than Marco—but Marco is our strong one. He has more character in his little finger than that lovable imp."

Again she broke off, biting her lip severely this time. What ailed her? It was like some perverse obsession —this constant harping of hers on Marco's fine qualities.

"Come, my dear," she said. "If we dawdle, the teams will be stabled—I want you to see our white oxen in the late sunlight."

Sophy never forgot her first sight of the big white oxen, four to a plough, sturdily plodding against the

westering sun. Their white hides in shadow were pearly blue; where the sunlight glanced along their backs they seemed outlined with silver fire. Their great horns gleamed like agate. Their ears, suffused with the sun, showed a lining of dusk-rose. Semi-divine creatures they looked as they moved with calm, majestic patience against the background of earth and sky—gleaming offspring of Europa's Olympian Bull, by Hathor, goddess-cow of Egypt....

It was nearly six o'clock when Carletto reported that the *Fretta* was awaiting them.

The Marchesa had persuaded Sophy to stop for tea and now she made her accept the loan of a warm cloak. It could be very chilly on the Lake at this hour, she said, even in midsummer. Carletto had put in the launch a basket of delicate golden plums called "*nespole del Giappone*" which cannot be exported. The Marchesa came with them to the darsena. The *Fretta* lay quaint as an orchid in the shadow, all red cushions and glowing fruit, with the Italian flag at her stern, and the pennon of the Amaldi at her prow.

"Where is Peder?" asked the Marchesa rather sharply, as Amaldi got in and held out his hand to assist Sophy. He looked up at his mother.

"I promised Peder last week that he should go to see his people at Belgirate this afternoon," he said composedly. "I lent him the dinghey after luncheon. But I am an excellent *meccanico*. Mrs. Chesney need not feel nervous."

What was there to say? The Marchesa at least could think of nothing.

She stood in silence, while Marco pushed off with one of the oars kept in the launch in case of the engine's failing.

Sophy looked up, smiling. She waved her hand, kissed it to the Marchesa as the *Fretta* slowly glided out of the darsena into the open lake.

"Thanks! A thousand thanks!" she called back, her voice sounding strangely clear and sweet over the water. "I shall never forget my first day at Le Vigne."

"What absurdly innocent eyes she has," thought the Marchesa irritably. "A married woman has no business having such innocent eyes as all that!"

But she waved her hand in reply, and called, "*Buon Viaggio!*"

Then she went back to the terrace, and sat watching the *Fretta* as long as it was in sight. The soft afterglow engulfed it at last. They were there, in the lovely twilight alone together—those two—who of all the world should be farthest apart. The Marchesa felt very angry with Marco, with herself, with poor Sophy, with Fate. She did not know which she was most angry with—— Yes, perhaps with Marco....

XXXIV

The *Fretta* rushed straight towards the sunset, like some little water-creature magnetised by light. On either side of the wheel, opposite each other, Sophy and Amaldi sat gazing at the gorgeous, cloud-

suffused sky. They had both thrown aside their hats. His face had a new, boyish look with his hair blown back by the wind. It was still so warm in the mellow glow from the sunset, that he had also taken off his coat. Sophy liked his slight figure freed of the dark-blue coat. It, too, looked boyish somehow. This pleased her. Sometimes his grave stillness almost made her nervous. There seemed to be so much at work under the smooth surface. She thought that he was rather like a still, dark, mountain pool. One saw reflections so clearly—but never what was really in the depths of the pool.

But now some quickening change had come over him and his face looked eager, joyous—the face of one who could be a delightful companion. His eyes seemed to have dismissed more serious thoughts.

The sun, with disk hidden behind a mass of purple cloud, sent forth vast spokes of light on every side; and this immense, fiery wheel, whose axle was the hidden sun, whose tyre the extreme round of pale blue air, made Sophy cry out:

"There 'tarry the wheels of his chariot'! Apollo's revealing himself to me because I'm a good Pagan!"

"*Are* you a 'good Pagan'?" said Amaldi, smiling. "Then you shouldn't have dealings with the priesthood that have stolen his rays to set round the vessel sacred to another god."

She shook her head at him, smiling, too.

"No, no. I won't let you quarrel with me to-day. It has all been too beautiful."

"I couldn't quarrel with you," he said, "even if you let me—even if you insisted on keeping a pet priest. Or,

yes—then I might be tempted to 'quarrel'—though I'd have no right to."

"Friendship gives rights. We agreed to be friends long ago—in England," answered Sophy happily.

Then she looked again at the golden wheel that filled the west.

"The clouds are beautiful—but do you think they mean rain?" she asked rather anxiously.

"So our peasants say," replied Amaldi. "They have a rhyme that goes: '*Sol che varda in dree, Acqua ai pe*'-'A sun that peeps backward, water over the feet.'"

"Oh, I love this dialect. Would it be *very* hard to learn?"

"But you should learn Italian, not dialect," he said, smiling.

"I should like to know both. I'd love to talk to the people in their own language. Is that very hard to do? Steering, I mean. May I try?"

He showed her how the wheel worked, indicating a white house far away as a point for her to steer by.

"Oh, how nice! How well she answers—like a little water-horse to a bridle!"

She was charmed to feel how the *Fretta* glided this way or that at the lightest touch. They had now reached a part of the Lake, near Santa Catterina, where at this hour there is no faintest stir of air. The water spread beneath them so still, so clear, that it was almost as if they were rushing through a golden vacuum. Only the arrowy silver of the *Fretta*'s bow-waves showed that the element through which they

fled was water and not air.

Suddenly the Intragnola—the land breeze that blows from shore near Intra—met them full. The sky was fast fading.

"Hadn't you better let me get you that cloak?" said Amaldi. As she turned to let him put his mother's cloak about her shoulders, his heart flashed hot on a sudden. Just so might he be folding a wrap of his mother's about her—if she were his wife. It seemed subtly, wildly sweet to him to see her nestling there in that cloak so intimately associated with his mother—with his daily, familiar life.

"She is so sweet—your mother," said Sophy, looking down at the warm folds. "It was dear of her to think of lending me this cloak. I almost envy you your mother."

"And—yours?" asked Amaldi softly.

"She died when I was a young girl."

"That is very sad," said Amaldi, but the tone of his voice was better than the most florid words of sympathy.

All at once Sophy started. She had given him back the steering-wheel some time ago. She clasped her hands under the folds of the grey cloak.

"Marchese! Your dinner! How will you get your dinner!" she cried regretfully. "I am so selfish—I had forgotten all about your dinner! There will be nothing—nothing at all for you to eat at—at my villa. I told Luigi not to order dinner—just to have some milk and bread and fruit for me."

Amaldi reassured her, smiling.

"There are dozens of places where I can dine capitally," he said. "The 'Isola Pescatori'—just ahead of us to the left there—that is a delightful place to dine. You must go there with us—Baldi and me—some time—— That is, if you'd care to——"

"Oh, I should—of course. But I can't think of anything now but that you'll be hours late for your dinner. It's so far yet to Ghiffa."

"We shall be there in half an hour—easily," he consoled her. He glanced at his watch. "It's not yet half-past seven."

But Sophy felt very worried. She was essentially the old-fashioned woman where the regularity of masculine meals was concerned. In regard to food, men impressed her as machines that would run down or collapse altogether unless stoked, so to speak, at exact intervals. Women were flightier, more happy-go-lucky creatures, when the solemnities of eating were in question. She had been thoroughly grounded in this conception of the matter by her husband. Amaldi guessed as much.

"My dear lady, if only you could know how often I make a meal off of rye bread and cheese; when I'm out for a day's sailing," he said. "Really my dinner hasn't the gigantic importance for me that your kindness imagines."

He spoke rather stilted English sometimes when he was serious as now, but Sophy loved it, because he was trying to make her feel less self-reproachful.

"It's very, very good of you, Marchese, to want to make me feel less dreadfully selfish," she now said. "But"—her tone was mournful—"these hours on the

water have made *me* dreadfully hungry—so I can imagine what *you* are feeling!"

Amaldi laughed. At the same instant he had a veritable inspiration. Her remark in reference to the servants showed him how far she was from any conventional pruderies.

"I'll tell you what we can do—if you approve," he said. "The Isola Pescatori is just over there to our left. Do you see? Where the lights cluster in a little bunch there? We could land there and have an excellent dinner."

"Oh, what fun! I should love it!" she cried, without an instant's hesitation.

"*Benone! Benissimo!*" he said, lapsing into Italian as he always did when excited or deeply moved.

It was now after eight. The purplish dusk was velvet overhead, and silken smooth below. Stresa to the left, and Pallanza far away to the northeast, fretted the twilight with points of orange. Between the scudding clouds stars flitted in and out like fireflies. There was the soft, orange glow from a rising moon behind the Sasso di Perro. Its huge crouching bulk seemed steaming with phosphorus.

Now they were under the lee of the little island. Sophy saw the clustered houses jutting above her, and a wide terrace, brightly lighted, under its pergola of grape-vines. People were eating there at little tables. She could see their heads above the wall. They had dined already, for it was fruit and nuts that they were lifting to their mouths. It seemed droll to see these greedy heads peeping above the terrace.

They got out on the rough, stone quay, and climbing a stairway found themselves on the terrace. It was very gay, with electric lights hung from the lattice of the pergola. Half the terrace was uncovered. Sophy hoped that they would sit at one of the tables out there under the violet-blue, star-freckled sky. The Padrone came forward, followed by one of his daughters. He was a much travelled man—had been a head waiter in Vienna, London, New York. The daughter had a sweet, long, pensive face under a big black pompadour.

He greeted Amaldi with respectful effusion. How well the Marchese looked! He had not seen the Marchese for some years, but truly the Marchese seemed to grow younger. And was this the Marchese's Signora Marchesa? He had the honour to felicitate——

"Babbo! *Babbo!*" whispered the daughter. She had caught hold of her parent's coat. She gave it two agitated but peremptory jerks as she spoke. Her "Babbo" had been so long away from home that he did not realise that the young Marchese's "Signora" was most unlikely to be with him. The Padrone retreated backwards, saying, "Prego! Prego!" confusedly.

They chose a table close to the edge of the terrace, near a big terra-cotta vase filled with scarlet geraniums. The blood-red blossoms, gleaming with electric light, stood out against the violet dusk. All Italy was in these flowers burning against the night sky.

The meal that followed was veiled with poetry for them both. For Amaldi because he loved her; for Sophy because she loved Italy. They were also very

hungry, and it is odd how it increases sympathy for two young and hungry people to eat together. Sophy felt that she had known Amaldi a long time when they rose from the little iron table on the terrace of Isola Pescatori.

They went for a stroll through the crooked streets. As they passed the Village Church—Sophy hesitated, then entered. He followed and they stood side by side, glancing about them. Three peasant women and a man were kneeling on the dark benches. The women glanced up at the *forestieri*, frankly curious; only the man kept his anxious, faded blue eyes on the image of the Virgin, that, life-sized and brightly tinted, held out compassionate hands towards the suppliant. His lips moved rapidly, without ceasing. Sophy imagined that he was pleading for the life of some one dear to him—a little child maybe. She just touched Amaldi's arm, and they went out again.

"I'm afraid it jarred on you—my going in there," she said softly, looking up into his face in the gloom of the narrow street. "But the places where the poor worship always draw me—they seem so real—I can't explain—but they move me—deeply."

"I understand," said Amaldi. "It is so with me, too."

"But I thought——"

She broke off.

"The faith of the simple-hearted is always moving," he said. "It isn't the faith of the people I question. It is the good faith of the Roman Catholic Church towards the people."

"I see," Sophy said thoughtfully. Then she turned to him again.

"You are so much more serious about it than the other Italians I've known, who were anti-clerical. They seemed just to shrug their shoulders over it—took it half laughingly."

"A man shouldn't take it with a shrug or half laughingly that the women of his country are under the thumb of a hierarchy," said Amaldi with some vehemence. "There is a great hour coming for women, all over the world—yet a true Italian can't wish this for his country-women, as long as their fuller power would be just another weapon in the hands of priests."

"You look far ahead, Marchese. Your mother told me to-day of another movement that you foresaw. Something about 'Iconoclasts.'"

"Yes," he said, "lands that have been saturated with beauty as Italy has must precipitate some reactionary movement sooner or later. First we have the mere inertia of saturation—the numbness to beauty—the incapacity to produce or even appreciate it. Next will come the positive reaction—the rise of the Image-Breakers. What queer name they will call themselves by I can't divine—but I can forefeel their rising."

Sophy walked on in silence for a moment, then she said:

"It must be wonderful to have such a country as Italy for your birthright, and to love it as much as you do."

He glanced at her with a changed look.

"Yes—I love it," he said. But he was thinking how much more than any country he loved her.

When they left, Signorina Rosalia accompanied them

down to the little landing. The engine of the *Fretta* took up its busy hum again. Swiftly they backed away from Isola Pescatori, and spun round towards Pallanza.

"*Buona sera, Signora! Buona sera, Signor Marchese!*" called the Padrone's daughter in her high, fluting voice. She stood on the little quay in the moonlight till they were some distance out upon the lake. "*Gli amanti—gli amanti*," she was thinking sentimentally. She stood there thrilled with the romance that she felt rushing away from her into the ecstatic moonlight....

And out there in the soft magnificence of the summer night Sophy and Amaldi sat silent, with only the little steering wheel between them. They felt the sense of exhilaration that comes from being close to the prow of a boat speeding low on the water: they were so intimately breast to breast with the vastness of air and lake. Stresa lay behind them, a tangle of yellow sparks. The Barromean Islands brooded sleeping on their shadows. Pallanza was a faint spangle to the left. Far away in front, towards Switzerland, what seemed a silvery mist shaped like mountains, floated against the pearl dust of the sky.

Sophy leaned towards him suddenly. Her eyes looked dark and mysterious under her white, moonlit brow.

"Need we go quite so fast?" she said. "It seems a pity to hurry through such beauty."

Her obvious faith in him gave him joy and pain at the same time. If she had felt one hundredth part for him what he felt for her, she could not have suggested so simply a thing that meant their being longer together. He set the engine to a slower speed.

They had passed Pallanza, and were running near enough the shore to see the ghostly loveliness of white roses and oleanders pouring above the walls of villa gardens. Where the shore was wild and overgrown, tangles of honeysuckle showered them with voluptuous fragrance. Above, on the hills, the little villages shone in the moonlight, like handfuls of scattered mica.

Now they had passed Intra. The dark foliage of the Villa Bianca came into view. They could see the colonnade of its old eucalyptus trees, above the retaining-wall of granite.

"Oh, why should such lovely hours have to end—when they need not," sighed Sophy. "I hate convention when it lops off such hours as these like a grudging old Procrustes. Don't you hate the sheer tyranny of convention, Marchese?"

"Indeed—yes," said Amaldi.

Glancing back at their evening together, as he spoke, Sophy thought that he had been unusually taciturn. He was not a talkative man, but it really seemed to her, now that she thought of it, that he had been almost oddly silent most of the time. She wondered if he were worried about something.

High up above the thirty-foot retaining-wall, behind its palms and pollard acacias, the chalet was pouring forth a stream of light from its open door. The faithful Luigi was evidently sitting up for her.

Amaldi stepped out and held out his hand to her. Sophy was close to Amaldi on the narrow plank of the *banchetta*. That look in his face hurt her. Then his eyes turned suddenly away.

"Thank your mother for me, please, Marchese," she said, "for the lovely day she gave me, and for lending me her cloak."

She slipped it from her shoulders as she spoke and put it, all warm with herself, into Amaldi's arms. He shivered as he felt the warmth of the folds under his hands. Murmuring some civil commonplace, he stood aside to let her pass. She went up the little pathway followed by Luigi.

As she entered the doorway in the terrace-wall, the clock in the Campanile of San Maurizio, on the hill above, began slowly striking midnight. Amaldi stood until it had finished, then started the *Fretta*'s engine. He sat with one hand upon the wheel, the other grasping the folds of the grey cloak. Suddenly he bent and pressed his face upon it. It was still warm, and this warmth gave forth a fresh, faint scent of citron....

XXXV

That day at Le Vigne was the beginning of a very happy period for Sophy. Not only was she infatuated with Italy, but her pleasure in it was doubled by the fact that she had two such charming friends to share it with her, to reveal it to her from within as it were. The Marchesa had perforce to accept Sophy's invitation to lunch with her at Villa Bianca—Amaldi was of course asked, too. His mother was much reassured by the perfect composure of his manner on this occasion and on others that followed in natural sequence. But what gave her the greatest feeling of security was Sophy herself. No woman in the least *éprise* with a man could show such perfect, cordial liking for him in his mother's presence. Such was the Marchesa's opinion.

And she began to think that she might have been mistaken also about Marco. His manner, the evening that she had spoken to him on this subject, might very well have resulted from his intense dislike of personal discussions. He had always been astringently reserved, even in childhood. Altogether the Marchesa felt immensely relieved, though she did not relax a whit of her precaution. She was always one of the party on the pleasant trips they took to different points of interest on the lake, that Samuel Butler justly calls "so far the most beautiful of all even the Italian lakes."

Sophy could scarcely realise now those ghastly days at Dynehurst when the never ceasing rain had made

misery more miserable. Only when Anne Harding's letters came, as they did about once a week, and when she wrote herself to Cecil, was she plucked for a moment from her joyous illusion of a new existence that might go sparkling on indefinitely. And she began to take a quiet delight in her growing knowledge of Amaldi's character. They spoke to each other without words sometimes, for they had grown to know strangely well how certain things would impress them both. Indeed Sophy did not at all realise how she had come to count on Amaldi's companionship, until one afternoon, when going down to the *banchetta* to join the Marchesa for one of their jaunts, she saw that he was not with her.

"Yes, my dear," said that lady, answering the question in her eyes, "we shall be two 'lone, lorn women' this evening. Marco has been called to Rome on business. He was much disappointed, as you may imagine. I bring you '*tanti saluti e rincrescimenti*' from him. He went at eight o'clock this morning."

The fact was, Amaldi had come to a point in his passion for Sophy when he found it suddenly insupportable to be thus near her day after day, exposed to the kind cruelty of her friendship. He had decided, over night, that he must escape, if only for a breathing spell as it were, and he had invented this excuse of *affari* at Rome.

Then the Marchesa herself had to go to Milan again for a few days. Sophy was left quite alone, save for Bobby and the maids. And somehow, the whole lakeside seemed different suddenly—beautiful but empty. September was drawing on. Soon she would have to be leaving. She feared the October winds and rains for Bobby. It was apt to be rainy in October,

the Marchesa said. Only one month more. Perhaps she would not see Amaldi again before she left. She would not admit the sinking of her heart at this idea. No, her sadness was chiefly that she would have to leave this lovely spot. She thought of going to Florence—or Venice—— She felt unsettled.

One afternoon, when the warm hours dragged rather heavily and she was tired of reading, she ordered a little *carozza* and went off to hunt antiques at Intra. She spent two dusty, pleasant hours of rummaging, and returned with many parcels.

"Wait," she said to the *cocchiere*; "I will send some one to fetch these things."

It was already dark, the violet dusk that is called "dark" in Italy. She ran quickly up the two flights of stone steps leading to the terrace. Some one was standing there, and came towards her as she appeared. She thought it was Luigi at first.

"Luigi, please go——" she began. Then broke off short.

"Is it—you?" she asked in a low voice.

Something in this "you"—the way she said it—made Amaldi's heart go hot for an instant. Then he answered quietly:

"Yes—— It's I."

"Ah ..." she breathed. "You—you startled me," she added as if in explanation.

They were standing close together. The light wind blew her long veil against his cheek. From it there came that faint fragrance of citron. He was glad that it was so dark here on the terrace. He said, with an

effort:

"Luigi told me that you would be back shortly, so I waited."

"I ... I am glad," she said. Her heart was beating fast. It was because he had startled her, she told herself. She had thought him in Rome. Now he was suddenly here—close to her. She could think of nothing to say. She felt awkward—shy.

"Won't you ... won't you stop to dinner?" she asked lamely, but her voice sounded lukewarm. She was a little frightened again, because she wanted him to stay so much. The Anglo-Saxon in her put this chill note in her voice just because she so much wanted it.

"Thanks—no," he said. "It is very kind of you, but Baldi is waiting dinner for me."

She said again, murmuring the words, slurring them together:

"I'm sorry."

"But I will stay a few moments if you will let me," said Amaldi, hesitating a little.

"Yes—do," she answered, somewhat recovering herself. "I will just send Luigi down for my parcels, and come back—it is cooler here." She did not want to go into the lighted house with him just then. She still felt that queer shyness.

"Let me call him," said Amaldi.

When he came back, she was sitting on one of the little stone seats near the railing of the terrace. He longed to see her face more clearly, yet he, too, did not want to go into the light just then.

"It was very hot in Rome," he said conventionally. "I'm glad to be back again."

"Yes," said Sophy. "It is nice to have you back."

She felt the flatness of this "nice."

"We ... missed you," she added quickly.

"Thank you," said Amaldi. His voice shook a little.

"I ... I thought perhaps you mightn't come till I had gone."

He was silent a second, then he said in a queer voice:

"Could you really have thought that?"

"Well ... I ... I was afraid you might be kept," she stumbled. There had been a hurt in his voice.

"Nothing could have kept me from saying good-by to you," he said quietly.

Her head turned towards him, quick and startled.

"Oh! Are you going away again?" she said—then caught her lip between her teeth in the soft gloom.

"No," said Amaldi very low.

Sophy felt the strange tension of this halting talk. She rose suddenly.

"Perhaps we had better go in after all," she said, and her tone was full of the embarrassment against which she struggled. "We seem like two disembodied spirits talking out of the dusk like this."

"I wish we were," came the answer, tense and abrupt as though in spite of his will.

"Oh, no," she faltered, attempting a little laugh which died out helplessly. "We are both too fond of life for that, Marchese."

"I could be fond of it."

"No, no. You are fond of it now."

"Yes ... now."

"Come—Luigi has taken up my parcels. Such lovely things. I want to show them to you."

"*Prego* ... but I must be going—Baldi will begin to fret."

He had recovered a more ordinary tone. He had himself gripped hard. What was there in her shy voice which had almost made him lose command of himself for a moment? There had been something. No; he was a fond fool. He held out his hand for good-night. She put hers in it. The man's blood and spirit was one cry within him. It called to her so wildly that he thought she must hear that voice of silence. Her hand seemed to quiver as it lay in his, then she withdrew it quickly.

"Good-night," she said. He murmured "good-night," turned and was gone. Sophy stood gazing out to where the *Fretta* lay a whitish blur along the *banchetta*. Then she saw the little jewel of its lamp shine suddenly—Peder's face glowed yellow-red in the flare of the match, then went out as it were. Now Amaldi had got in. She heard the engine begin to hum. In a second the dusk had swallowed them.

She stood gripping the iron rail, till the chill struck along her arms. She was very honest with herself. "I care too much ... not *that* way ... but oh! ... I care too

much!" she was saying. "And he cares ... he cares ... I must go away ... I must go even sooner than I thought...." Then she sank down on the little stone seat, and pressed her forehead to the rail.

"Life is hard ... it is hard ... hard," she thought, a great wave of bitterness going over her.

But the next day she was so worried about Bobby, who had caught cold in some way, that she had no time to give, even in thought, to other anxieties. The child looked pale, the glands in his little neck were swollen, he seemed to have pain, clasping his fat little stomach with pathetic hands and saying: "Naughty tummy. Bobby tummy bad—naughty." He was a manly little chap and wouldn't howl outright, but he curled into a ball on his cot, murmuring, "Oo ... oo ... o—o" plaintively.

Sophy would not have felt so anxious had Miller been with her, but that personage had found Italy with its "gibberish" and lack of most domestic conveniences insupportable after the first two weeks, and so she had respectfully given warning. Bobby, to Sophy's great relief, took her departure calmly. Miller had been a dutiful but not endearing nurse.

Then the Marchesa had come to the fore with her usual kindliness, and provided Bobby with the nurse who was to prove the love of his young life. This woman was Rosa Ramoni, a Lombard peasant. Her dark, square-lidded eyes reminded Sophy of the Duse's, but their expression was very different—almost bovinely guileless, yet sparkling with merriment, that gushed over at the least trifle, into her free, delicious Contadina's laugh. Rosa had one of the wisest hearts in the world, but her knowledge of nursery physic was primitive to say the least. Even

after seeing Dottore Camenis from Stresa, and hearing to her great relief that Bobby's "naughty tummy" was only the result of indigestion brought on by cold, Sophy was afraid to leave him quite to Rosa's care for a day or two, so she had to refuse the invitation which came from the Marchesa, the morning after Amaldi's return, and which said that now they must have the *gita* which Marco's visit to Rome had broken up.

When Sophy wrote to explain, the Marchesa answered by saying, "Then the first day your dear *tousin* is well enough." Sophy could not refuse without seeming ungracious. "This time, then," she thought, "but I must make definite plans to-morrow for leaving. Bobby's cold gives me just the right excuse...." But her heart felt very heavy and very lonely at this decision of her reason.

The afternoon was all blue and gold—one of those perfect days in late August, when the summer warmth sparkles with the zest of autumn. An old school-friend of the Marchesa was arriving by the evening train from Milan. So they were to use the *Fretta*, starting at five o'clock from Villa Bianca and stopping at Isola Bella for tea. Afterwards Sophy would be left at home, and the *Fretta* would go on to Laveno to meet the Marchesa's friend.

It seemed strange, startling somehow, to see Amaldi's face in this blaze of sunshine, after last seeing it in the dim starlight. He was as quietly composed as usual, however. The only difference that she noticed about him was that he managed always when looking at her not to look directly into her eyes. This relieved and saddened her at the same time. But when they got to Isola Bella, and he grasped her

hand, assisting her to step in and out of the row-boats that lay between the *Fretta* and the shore, she caught her foot on a seat, nearly falling into the water: then his eyes went into hers. He had to catch her to him, rather roughly in the exigency of the moment, close against his side. As he glanced down at her, she glanced up involuntarily:—his eyes went deep into hers—a keen, quick ray, making her feel as if her spirit had been stabbed. It winced from that suddenly unsheathed stabbing look, as her flesh would have winced from a blade. He loosed her instantly, but she felt the contact of that look through and through her.

During tea she talked rather fast and rather more than usual. She made the Marchesa laugh her gay arpeggio of "Ha-ha's"; Amaldi smiled politely. He was smoking after his tea. He seemed to enjoy his cigarette especially—inhaling deeply and letting the smoke escape through his nostrils very slowly, his eyes watching it.

"I am still worried about Bobby, Marchesa," said Sophy suddenly. "He has a little cough. I think I shall take him south. I thought of Sorrento."

"But, my dear, September is a warm, lovely month with us—like summer. Only the nights and mornings are crisp. Aren't you over-anxious?"

The Marchesa had not been a fussy mother herself. She thought Sophy inclined to coddle Bobby.

"Yes—I know," Sophy replied hurriedly. "But the change will be best for him I'm sure. Besides—my husband will be well enough to travel shortly—I heard from the nurse to-day. He loves the sea—sailing and fishing. I'm afraid he'd feel the lake too

shut in——"

"Oh, in that case...." said the Marchesa. She was pleased to hear Sophy mention her husband in this way. It had struck her how rarely she mentioned him. Never before had she done so when the three were together, that the Marchesa could remember. She had wondered sometimes what could ail Mr. Chesney, that his wife seemed so reticent about his illness. Now she felt that things were settling down into just the right form. It was very good that Marco should hear Sophy planning thus for the pleasure of her husband. She glanced at him *à la dérobée*. He was smoking as imperturbably as ever. He seemed to be interested in the movements of some fishermen who were putting out for the evening cast.

"I've heard that there's splendid sailing and fishing around Naples," Sophy went on, nervously garrulous. "Cecil won't be coming for another month, I suppose; but I could go and look up a villa and—and get things ready."

"And what will you do with *this* villa, my dear? You've four months yet to run. You should sublet it."

And the Marchesa, always practical, began to discuss with Sophy the possibilities of subletting Villa Bianca.

It was six o'clock when they left Isola Bella. The train from Milan did not reach Laveno until half-past seven. Amaldi spoke of this as they went toward the landing.

"What shall we do with our extra hour?" asked the Marchesa. "What would you like to do, my dear?" she said, turning to Sophy, who was gazing at the

Palazzo on the Isola Madre.

Sophy started, as she often did these days when some one spoke suddenly to her. She had been immersed in a sad, prescient feeling, as though this afternoon were one of long farewells. Now as the Marchesa spoke, she yielded to a wish that she had often had, and that came to her in this moment very strongly. They had never visited the Isola Madre. There had been so many other things of more obvious interest to see; but Sophy had always felt drawn to that tranquil, tree-clad spot, with its rosy Palace in which no one lived.

"Do you think—would there be time, for us to go to Isola Madre?" she asked hesitatingly.

The Marchesa said briskly that it was the very thing —and on their way, too.

The evening came stealing on as with a gracious modesty. There was no flare of gorgeous colour—not a cloud. Very delicately, very slowly, sky and water became suffused with soft, dim saffron. The Isola Madre lay against it like an island of dark-green smoke, sent up to the lake's clear surface by some submerged volcano.

They found another boat at the landing. No sooner had they reached the upper terrace than the Marchesa was approached by a lively French lady who had brought some friends to see the island. There was a flutter of introductions all round. Sophy was much disappointed. This vivacious lady seemed so jarringly out of key with the lovely hour, and the wistful beauty of the island. Amaldi was standing near her.

"Shall we walk on?" he said, in a low voice. "I know the island well...."

She turned away with him, feeling that perhaps she should not, feeling also that whether it were wrong or right she would have this last, beautiful hour with him.

They went in silence across the lawns to the flagged walk behind the Palazzo, which leads, broad and stately, set with shallow steps, beneath an avenue of ilex trees. The dark, pointed leaves made a gothic fret-work against the saffron of the sky.

"Ladies in Genoa velvets and silk gowns embroidered with golden castles, like the gown of poor Isabella," murmured Sophy. "I see them moving on before me —with white peacocks mincing after.... There.... Don't you see them, too? This walk is haunted...."

"It will be haunted ... when I return to it ... alone...." said Amaldi.

She tried to think of some answer. She could not. Yet the silence must be broken. Silence had such a terrible eloquence of its own.

"I ... I shall come back some day," she said at last. It was as if the words sprang of their own volition. Yet as she uttered them a feeling leaped also within her. She felt sure, sure that she would come back some day—that he and she would be walking here together—that all would be different—that they would say to each other: "Do you remember that other evening when we walked here?"

"So you feel that, too?" he said, in that same low voice. And now he was looking into her eyes steadily, and there was exultation in this look.

Here the Marchesa called them. She was walking briskly towards them, holding up her little watch on its jewelled chain, stopping where she was.

"Time to go!" she called. As they joined her, she said vexedly: "That *oca* of a woman kept me standing there till a moment since—I'm glad Marco thought of taking you on, my dear. You wouldn't have had time for even a peep, otherwise."

It was quite dusk when they reached the Villa Bianca. Amaldi helped Sophy out and went up to the villa with her. As they mounted the last step, and came out upon the terrace, they saw that some one was standing there—the figure of a man, looking almost gigantic in the thick twilight. He walked towards them with a long, swinging step that brought him near in a few paces.

"*Cecil*...?" Amaldi heard her whisper.

"Is that you, Sophy?" came Chesney's voice. "This is the most confoundedly tricky light." He was close now.

"Ah, yes!... I see it's you," he ended, with a note of vibrant satisfaction in his voice. "How d'ye do?" he added, peering at Amaldi.

"The Marchese Amaldi——" murmured Sophy, as once before.

"How d'ye do?" said Chesney again.

"How d'ye do?" said Amaldi. The men bowed without shaking hands. The three stood a little awkwardly for a second in the dusk. Luigi came pattering down the third flight of steps that led to the upper terrace on which the house stood. Amaldi yielded Sophy's cloak

to him.

"Excuse my haste," he then said, "but my mother's waiting for me below. We've a train to meet. Good evening, Mrs. Chesney. Good evening...."

He was gone.

Chesney stood immovable till he heard the descending footsteps die away. Then he said:

"Sophy!" His voice was thick with feeling. Sophy felt giddy—the twilight seemed closing in on her in waves. She breathed it like a stifling vapour.

"Sophy!" said Chesney again. He caught her to him—felt for her mouth with his in the blinding dusk—crushed kisses down upon it until she winced with physical pain. That London smell of his coat was strong in her nostrils. The past two months shrivelled like a wisp of paper in a flame. There was no Italy ... no dream ... only this great man holding her, bruising her with his lips and body. In the utter quiet of the evening, she could hear distinctly the throbbing of the *Fretta*'s engine as it sped away towards Laveno.

XXXVI

Sophy felt very anxious when she learned that Cecil had not brought either Gaynor or Anne Harding with him. The letter that she received next morning from Anne did not reassure her: "Mr. Chesney has certainly done wonderfully for such a short time," it

said; "but *he's not out of the woods yet*, by any *manner* of means! I don't mean that he hasn't stopped taking all drugs, but that he hasn't *stopped long enough to go it alone*." (Anne was a great underscorer—her letters reminded Sophy of her vehement, italicised speech.) "He should have me with him this minute. He won't be *entirely* safe for *two years*. But we could do nothing. His constitution is *amazing*. He really *is* well—in *a way*—but he isn't near as strong yet a while as he *thinks* he is—either mentally or physically. Dr. Carfew was *much* displeased by his leaving so abruptly; but, as I said—we could do *nothing*. This is a free country—worse luck for it in some ways!"

And yet Cecil certainly seemed normal in all respects. His good temper over inconveniences was astonishing in so fastidious and pampered a man. Never since he was twenty had he been without a skilled valet. Now he put up with Luigi's amateurish ministrations, as though it were a sort of lark to have his boots treed rights on lefts, and his ties, socks, and handkerchiefs mingled confusedly. Luigi himself was fully aware of his shortcomings. He was a finished butler, but had never valeted any one. Still he was intelligent. "Direct me ... direct me, milor'," he would plead. "I shall improve with time, like wine."

So, far from being irritated by the lake, Chesney seemed to feel its charm strongly. He questioned Sophy about her life of the past two months; expressed himself much touched by the kindness shown her by the Marchesa.

"You must take me there," he said. "We'll hire a steam-launch of our own for the rest of the time we're here—from what's-his-name—the man at Stresa.... What did you call him?"

"Taroni," said Sophy.

It was the day after his arrival. She still felt rather stunned, as though a bolt had struck the quiet house of her content. She felt blasted by his renewed, torrential passion and the quintessential strength of his personality. Fortunately for her, she could be merely the leaf in the storm—had only to let it sweep her along without effort on her part. The storm does not take account of the leaves it whirls in its imperious grasp. Chesney, in his present volcanic gusto of renewed health, would as soon have thought of pausing to ask whether the partner in his feast of love shared his transports as an eagle would think of inquiring of a lamb whether it enjoys being devoured. He was fond of calling her "Diana." He was sure that even with Endymion, the goddess had been veiled and reticent. And Sophy had been "in love" with him once. He took it for granted, in his lordly way—that, after all, had something grandiose in it—that she was still in love with him. He had been an "ill man" when he offended her—(sometimes it made him wince that he must have offended even more terribly than he could recall). It was, as Heine had said of *le Bon Dieu*, a woman's *métier* to forgive.

And he rushed exuberantly to and fro, ordering a fast steam-launch from Taroni; sweeping Sophy off in it to Intra to choose a piano—it vexed him that she had no piano, had not been singing at all during her stay in Italy; spending hours in trying to find a small sailing yacht to his liking.

"That's a ripper your friend Amaldi's got," he said to Sophy. "*The Wind-Flower*. Jolly name, by the way. Perhaps he'd help me find a good 'un. Let's go over to their place this afternoon. I want to thank the old

lady for being so decent to you and the little chap."

So they went tearing through the autumn-coloured water to Le Vigne, at a rate that would have made the little *Fretta* look like a water-snail. And this new, powerful, highly-polished mahogany launch, glittering with a sort of defiant grin of shining metal, hissing through the quiet lake like an Express, seemed symbolical to Sophy of the ruthless power which had suddenly seized her life and was hurling it blindly to some unknown goal. As she sat quiet in the new launch, so she sat quiet in the grasp of Chesney's will. So, she told herself, it was her duty to sit quiet. Where she was now, her own act had placed her—besides, she still felt affection for her husband, though love in its highest, divinest form was gone forever. If only he would not stun her with those fiery crashes of unshared passion! She felt like some sentient lyre, on which a giant without sense of music strums with a mighty plectrum. The fine chords of her nature snapped with the clashing shocks. She felt as though she had been through some wild fever of which the delirium left her brain dazed and numb.

What she now dreaded most was to see Amaldi. Not because of any feeling that she had or might have had for him, but because he was so vividly a part of something that was gone forever, and that had been so beautiful. Yes, that tranquil dream of which he had been a part was as utterly dispelled as the reflection in a quiet pool shattered by the crash of a boulder. She felt that numbness, that lack of acute pain which it is said a soldier experiences when in the heat of battle a limb is suddenly shot away. She was maimed for life, she felt, and she regretted it—but it was as if her mind rather than her heart

suffered from this regret.

They found the Marchesa alone at Le Vigne. She was sorry, she said, that her son should miss the pleasure of seeing them. He had gone to Milan for a few days. The relief of hearing this was so great that Sophy paled with it. The elder woman thought she looked exhausted and oddly listless. She firmly believed in the "Vampirising" qualities of some people; taking in Chesney with her shrewd, lustrous eyes, she decided that he was probably a most "Vampirising" person. By this, the Marchesa did not mean that one actively plays the part of Vampire towards another, but that, whether or no, some natures suck the vitality from those with whom they are in contact. Yet Chesney attracted her in a way, while at the same time he repelled her. She was too completely the woman not to feel the force of his extraordinary vitality and superb physique, but she was herself of too imperious and dominating a temperament not to resist tacitly the stress of his somewhat overpowering personality. She made herself perfectly charming, however.

"What a gorgeous old lady!" exclaimed Chesney, as they rushed home again. "Amaldi must be a decent sort with a mater like that. Wish he'd come back from his damned Milan. I want that yacht."

Amaldi returned in three days, and came for a formal call to Villa Bianca. He had conquered the first well-nigh unbearable recoil from the idea of Chesney's presence, and realised that certain civil forms were obligatory, after the rather close relations that had grown up between his mother and Sophy.

Chesney took one of his violent fancies to the young Lombard, on this occasion. He had utterly forgotten

the jealousy with which Amaldi had once inspired him, when morphia ruled his moods.

He and Amaldi began talking boats and boating. Amaldi was afraid that just then there was no such yacht as Chesney wished to hire on Lago Maggiore. He might find one, however, he thought, at Costaguta's, in Genoa. But Chesney didn't want to go such a long trip by rail. He looked disgruntled and his big shoulders hunched with a boyish petulance, rather engaging—had not his every gesture been salt on Amaldi's open wound.

"I should be very glad if you would come with me in *The Wind-Flower* whenever you like," said the latter. He had not once glanced towards Sophy since he and her husband began their talk; but he saw, without looking at her, the tall figure in its white serge gown, bending over the masses of Michaelmas daisies that she had brought in from a walk, and was arranging in one of the old apothecary jars from Intra.

It hurt Amaldi to look at Chesney as it hurts some people to look on blood—gave him just that faint, gone feeling. The very fact that he was so magnificent a man to look at hurt him that much more.

Chesney accepted this proposal about *The Wind-Flower* with frank alacrity.

"What d'you say to an all-day sail to-morrow?" he asked. "You're as keen on sailing as I am, my wife tells me. If it's convenient...." he added; then said quickly, laughing: "I must say, I've landed rather plump on your offer, Marquis."

Amaldi murmured banal assurances of the pleasure

that it would afford him to sail all day with Mr. Chesney.

"Good!" Cecil exclaimed, much pleased. "And I say, suppose we drop the 'Mister' and the 'Marquis'—such rot, really—thanks. Well, Sophy—what d'you think? Will you come along, too—eh?"

"No.... I don't think I can to-morrow, Cecil."

"Why not?"

"I ... I don't think I care to sail all day. The glare gives me a headache if I'm out too long in it."

"Just as you like, of course. But I rather fancy 'twould do you good. A bit of sunburn wouldn't hurt—you're looking a bit pale, I find. What do you think, Amaldi? Don't you find Mrs. Chesney paler than she was in England?"

"I don't think so," said Amaldi. His throat seemed to close.

He and Chesney went for that sail and several others. With a sort of grim satisfaction Amaldi would tell himself on these occasions that the more Chesney was with him the less his wife would see of him. He felt in every fibre the relief it was to Sophy when her husband's towering figure stepped over the side of *The Wind-Flower* and was gone for long hours together.

For the week following Chesney's arrival the weather had a crisp tang quite autumnal; then suddenly it changed, becoming summer-like and even sultry again. On the first day of this change Amaldi and Chesney were out in *The Wind-Flower* together. It was noon. The Tramontana had died out. The Inverna

had not yet risen. They had been running before the wind, and now, when it suddenly ceased, the heat was intense.

Though Amaldi's sailor, Peppin, was always aboard, Chesney loved handling the ropes himself when not at the tiller, which Amaldi insisted on his taking most of the time. He had been springing about at a great rate that morning, shifting the spinnaker. Now, all overheated and sweltering in the breathless pause between the breezes of morning and afternoon, he announced his intention of "going overboard for a swim."

Amaldi cautioned him that the September air played tricks on one, and that the Inverna would probably blow rather strong that day.

"I don't think I'd do it," he said. "We've no extra coats aboard. You might get badly chilled."

"'Chilled'?" echoed Chesney, with his most good-natured grin. "My dear chap, that's what I'm hoping...."

He was getting out of his flannels as he spoke.

"I really wouldn't, you know," repeated Amaldi.

But Chesney only whipped his shirt over his head for reply; his feet were already bare. And against the blazing mainsail, in the full glare of sunshine, he stood there naked—a magnificent, glistering shape of manhood that caused Peppin's eyes to shine.

And Amaldi, too, could not withhold his admiration. So superb was this huge, stripped man—so perfectly proportioned—so admirably free from the least ounce of unnecessary fat.

"*Accidenti! Che Marc Antoni!*" (Lord! What a Mark Antony of a man!) breathed Peppin, as the sunlit body flashed off into the water.

But its very splendour as of the supremacy of flesh sickened Amaldi. Were they primitive men—men of the Stone Age—and should they grapple, man to man, what chance would he, Amaldi, have against those mighty thews and sinews?

Chesney swam a few strokes, his white body greenish under the clear water, like the silver belly of a fish; then dived beneath the yacht, came up the other side, swam on his side, his back, dived again; then swung himself aboard, gleaming with wet like a great mother-o'-pearl image. He took the towel that Peppin handed him with a "Ha!" of gusto.

"I feel like Jupiter!" he called, rubbing his sides, and back, standing on one foot to dry the other, his glossy skin all rosed in patches from his vigorous rubbing.

Getting quickly into his shirt and trousers, he announced that he was "hungry as ten hunters."

Peppin opened the luncheon hamper. There were sandwiches of salami and anchovies, purple and white figs, a fiasco of red wine from Solcio.

"By God! this is living! Eh? What?" asked Chesney, his lips fresh and ruddy with wine. He grinned with the sheer lust of life, splitting a fig, and laying its seedy pulp against his tongue as Peppin had shown him how to eat them without getting the rough bite of the skin. "When you find rye-bread and fish and raw fruit better than pressed ducklings at Voisin's—you're jolly thoroughly alive, I take it. What are you

peering at? Wind coming?"

"Yes," said Amaldi.

Chesney leaped up, still munching the other half of his fig. All about them the water lay in long, smooth fluctuations as of molten glass; but here and there a dark-blue patch spread widening like a stain on some shining fabric. The sails filled, though near by the water still shone clear and smooth as glass. Far out, beyond the point of the Fortino, there was a band of indigo, stretched right across the lake.

"The Inverna," said Amaldi, pointing. "Won't you take the tiller?" he added.

Chesney grasped it willingly. All his blood was beating in little pleasant hammer-strokes of exultant health and strength. Yet as the first chill breaths of the coming breeze played over him, he felt a shivery sensation not altogether agreeable.

"Going to be a bit of a blow—eh?" he asked, screwing up his eyes against the sun to watch the iron-blue band that was widening every second. "Think I'll just get my coat on in that case," he added.

Amaldi took the tiller while Chesney got into his coat. Now there came white flashes from the band of blue.

"*Un Invernung, Scior Marchese*," grinned Peppin.

"What's he say?" asked Chesney.

"That we're going to have an '*Invernung*'—'a big Inverna'—'a stiff breeze,'" translated Amaldi patiently.

And indeed the South Wind pounced on them in a

few moments, blowing more than a capful. As the full gust struck her, the little *Wind-Flower* heeled till her shrouds were under water. The spray came from her dipping bows in a silver sluice, drenching them even where they sat. Against the wind they ran, and the sails bulged full and hard as though carved from marble—only a slight flutter near the mast showed how close to the wind Chesney was holding her. He shouted like a Viking with the fierce fun of it, as the spume slapped his face now and then with the topping of a bigger wave—exultant with that exultation in sheer health known only to the lately redeemed morphinomaniac. Amaldi thought him strangely effusive in his pleasure, for an Englishman. The more he saw of him the more distasteful he found Chesney. He sat balanced on the upper side of the cock-pit, gazing steadily forward. Peppin lay flat on deck to windward. The whole lake was now one welter of white and indigo.

But though for a while his delight in this wild game with wind and water shut out lesser things, by the time that the Inverna had romped with him for half an hour, Chesney felt chilled to the bone. Pride kept him from admitting it. He was vexed to think that Amaldi's warning had been justified. Also, it annoyed him that he should not have sufficient vital force to resist getting chilled by a whiff of wind on a day so mild as this. Anne Harding had told him that he was not yet so "almighty strong as he thought himself, by a long shot."

He reached Villa Bianca two hours later, feeling rather moody, and with a nasty, teasing pain in his legs and the small of his back.

XXXVII

The pains in his back and legs persisted all that night, and in the morning he confessed to Sophy that he thought he'd "caught a damned cold somehow," that his legs felt like a pair of red-hot compasses, and could she suggest a remedy? Sophy brought him ten grains of phenacetine from her little travelling medicine-chest, and in an hour he was much relieved. These pains were all the more annoying, as he had heard lately of the yearly boat-races on Lago Maggiore, and was keen on having Amaldi enter *The Wind-Flower* for these races.

"And if I get shelved with an attack of sciatica, there's the end of it!" he growled. "It nipped me once before, in Canada, so I know the strength of its cursed fangs."

Amaldi, finding that he would have to endure more than a good deal of Chesney's company, unless he devised some mitigation, had introduced him to several friends of his—keen yachtsmen, members of the R. V. Y. C. (Royal Verbano Yacht Club), an offshoot of the R. I. Y. C. This club has no seat, and its funds are devoted to prizes. It meets at Stresa, in a room, always gratuitously provided by the *Hotel des Isles Barromées*. There Amaldi took Chesney. The latter was much pleased with these Italian devotees of *le sport*, though he was also vastly tickled by some things about them. For instance, he could not get over the fact that, while they were one and all very well dressed in London clothes, three at least of them wore evening pumps with their yachting flannels, and one kept gloves on all the time, and even shook hands in them. That they spoke such excellent

English struck him as astonishing. He had thought Amaldi an exception.

So Chesney was invited to sail also in other yachts, and Amaldi was relieved from such incessant contact with him. However, he found it impossible, with civility, to decline all his invitations to lunch and dine at Villa Bianca. In this way he saw even more of Sophy than he had hitherto done. But seeing her in this way was more painful to him than not seeing her at all. He longed for the time to come when they would leave Lago Maggiore. And Sophy talked very little when the two men were present.

"I thought you liked Amaldi?" Chesney said one day, looking at her rather keenly.

"I do," said Sophy. "Very much," she added, feeling that the coldness of her tone might seem singular.

"Well, upon my soul, no one would guess it," he retorted, rather crossly. Those pains were beginning to irritate him again. "Sometimes I wonder that he comes here at all—you're so confoundedly glacial and snubby in your manner to him."

"I?... 'Snubby' to Marchese Amaldi?" asked Sophy, really surprised.

"Yes, by Gad! Just that," said Chesney. "You never open your lips to him if you can help it. You sail out of the room for the least excuse—and stay out. The other night, at dinner, he asked you a question and you didn't even answer him."

"I didn't hear him ... really I didn't, Cecil." Sophy felt much distressed. Could Amaldi think that she meant to be "glacial" and "snubby" to him?

"I'm very sorry. I do like him sincerely," she added.

Cecil was in a really bad humour. That right leg of his, from the hip down, hurt like the devil!

"And the way you refused to sing when I asked you after dinner, that same evening, was downright rude!" he fumed on. "You'd been singing for me every evening that week—I'd told the poor devil so. Fancy how he must have felt, when you minced out: 'Not *this* evening, please, Cecil.'"

To her intense dismay, Sophy felt herself flushing. She had excused herself from singing because Amaldi had never heard her sing and she had felt that it would be sad and painful to sing before him for the first time under these circumstances. She knew how much he liked music. He had said once in her presence that he thought a contralto voice the most beautiful of all. She did not want to sing for Amaldi at her husband's bidding, and a slightly relaxed throat had made her feel that she could refuse reasonably. Now this flush added to her distress.

"You know, Cecil, I explained that I had a sore throat," she murmured. "I am sure the Marchese didn't think I meant to be rude."

"Well, I hope you'll have recovered from your sore throat by the next time I ask him here," said Chesney drily. "It's annoying to have one's wife even seem discourteous to one's friends. Have you any more of that stuff you gave me yesterday?" he wound up. "I took the last tablet two hours ago, and my leg's cutting up hell again."

"Won't you see Doctor Camenis, Cecil? Do. Let him come here, or see him some time when you're in

Stresa, I don't like giving you so much phenacetine. It's so depressing—so bad on one's heart."

"Oh, damn doctors!" he said impatiently. "Get me the stuff, can't you?"

But when she came back with it, he looked ashamed of himself.

"Sorry if I was rude, Sophy," he said; "but I've had just about as much doctoring as I can stand for the present."

This was the only allusion that he had made to his experience with Carfew since his arrival in Italy. Sophy thought it most natural. She could imagine the horror and loathing with which he looked back on those two months in the sanatorium.

Next day, however, he came to her quite meekly.

"Just give me that doctor chap's address in Stresa, will you?" he said. "This damnable leg is getting too much for me."

Dr. Camenis wanted Chesney to go to bed for forty-eight hours and take large doses of salicylate of soda. Chesney said that he would take the stuff, but refused to go to bed.

"In that case, Signore," said Camenis firmly, "I cannot prescribe salicylate of sodium. It produces heavy perspiration. You would probably increase this attack of sciatica."

Chesney said very well, to give him the prescription and he'd promise not to take it unless he went to bed for two days.

He had gone to Stresa that day by one of the Lake

Steamers. By the time he returned to Intra, he was in severe pain. Camenis had said that he could suggest no palliative but opium in some form, and he was averse from prescribing anodynes except in extreme cases. As he came up the slant of the embarcadero, Chesney had actual difficulty in walking. His face was flushed with that drilling anguish in his sciatic nerve. He limped across to the Piazza. At once the *vetturini* waiting there on the boxes of their rusty little traps began to hail him. One red-faced, grey-eyed fellow shouted out:

"*Hé!* Meester! I drive you Villa Bianca—*né*?"

But Chesney, leaning heavily on his stick, had his eyes fixed on a sign that ran along the front of a shop just across the way. "*Farmacia Lavatelli*," it read. His heart was thumping hard with a bolt-like thought that had just struck him. He had set his teeth. The vetturino, his scampish grey eyes looking white like glass in his dark-red face, drove nearer.

"I drive you at Villa Bianca quveek, sir," he said. "I spik Engleesh. Liva Noo York two year. I name John. You wanta me drive you, *né*?"

Chesney glanced around with a start; then clambered painfully into the *carrozzella*.

The man gave his old screw a flick, it started forward in a gallant shamble.

"Hold on!" cried Chesney.

The vetturino nearly drew the poor nag onto its haunches.

"*Hé?* What's it?" he asked.

Chesney pointed with his stick at Lavatelli's sign.

"Is that a good chemist's?" he asked.

"*Hé?*" said the vetturino, glancing where the stick pointed. "You say Lavatelli—is he good?"

"Yes," said Chesney.

"Veree good," said John cheerfully. "Lavatelli he all right. Caccia he good, too. You want go there?"

Chesney hesitated an instant; the blood rushed to his face, then ebbed.

"Yes. Drive there," he said, throwing himself back against the greasy seat and clenching his teeth. A pang like the throb of a red-hot piston had shot from the joint of his ankle to his hip. His muscles drew with the anguish of it.

"Where I must go—Lavatelli or Caccia?" asked the vetturino.

"There," said Chesney, indicating the shop opposite. Somewhere behind those gilt-lettered windows was relief ready to his hand. He had determined very seriously to tamper no more with morphia, but agony such as he was enduring at this moment certainly justified him in making an exception to his self-imposed rule. Besides, he was no sottish weakling, who could not trust himself to take one moderate dose of morphia without risking the danger of a renewal of the habit. Of course, old Carfew would howl blue ruin at the mere idea. Sophy would be horrified. Anne Harding would lash him with her prickly tongue.... Well, thank the Lord, there was no need of taking them into his confidence! One, or perhaps two, moderate doses—that was all. He could take it by mouth. He would go to bed—sleep it off. No one would be the wiser. But he would be relieved

of this maddening "tooth-ache" in his leg. He might even try that old Italian prig's remedy, afterwards—do the thing up thoroughly while he was about it.

As the vetturino drove across the street, Chesney got out his pocketbook. His fingers slid as from habit to a little flap on the inside of the case. As he felt the paper that he was in search of under his fingers, a queer thrill ran through him. He started, flushing. This thrill had been one of exultation; at the same time he had a sense of guilt. What rot! He was a responsible being—independent—he had a brain. What was it for if not to guide him in just such cases as this? He had endured this grinding pain for a week now—had only slept in wretched snatches for seven whole nights. Why should he feel that absurd, little-boy sense of guilt because he was going to provide himself with a good night's rest?

When the man drew up before the chemist's shop, Chesney sat for a moment reading over the prescription in his hand. Yes, it was perfectly preserved—quite legible. It was a prescription for soluble tablets of morphia for hypodermic use—one grain of morphia, one one-hundred-and-fiftieth of a grain of atropine. The atropine was to prevent nausea. How cursedly dry it made one's mouth! That was the drawback to atropine. But it was better than nausea. And still he sat there fingering the prescription—something holding him back—something more imperious than reason. His reasons appeared all excellent and logical to himself; yet this something refused them—said: "Not so.... Not so"—with the iteration of steady clockwork. Also, as often happens when one is sure of relief, that hot drilling in his leg had ceased completely. Without the excuse of that anguish, it seemed in a flash monstrous, even

to him, that he should be sitting there in the lovely Italian sunshine before Lavatelli's, after all the horrors of the past months and years, deliberately contemplating purchasing and taking a dose of morphia. He slipped the prescription suddenly back into his pocketbook and put it away.

"Villa Bianca!" he called sharply to the vetturino.

The man caught up the reins again, again smacked the old bay's quarters with his whip. They started at a splaying trot towards Ghiffa. But before they reached the Intra post-office, the fierce pain had again gripped him. He was ashamed to tell the man to go back to Lavatelli's. With his stick he tapped John's shoulder.

"What did you say was the name of the other chemist's shop.... Pharmacy.... Whatever-you-call-it...?" he asked.

"*Pharmacia? Hé?*"

"Yes; the other one."

"Caccia? All right, I go at Caccia."

He turned round and drove to another chemist's, this time in a farther Piazza. It took about four minutes. Chesney got out and entered the shop. The keen, medicinal smell of the place brought the past in a gust upon him. He took the old prescription again from his pocketbook. It was stamped with the names of various chemists where it had been filled before.

"I am suffering severely with sciatica," he said, in a casual tone, to the clerk who took the prescription from him. "I need sleep very badly. I only want enough morphia for two doses—well, perhaps three

would be better, as the pain might not yield easily."

The clerk said: "*Si, Signore*," and went to consult a senior member of the firm. He returned and said respectfully:

"I am sorry, Signore. We do not keep *Sulfato di Morphia* in this form."

Chesney flushed and paled rapidly as he had done in the cab outside.

"Do you mean you refuse to sell me even one or two doses?" he asked haughtily.

The clerk looked admiringly and a little timidly at his immense, angry customer.

"*Prego, Signore*—but not at all," he said. "We will sell it to you. This is a good prescription—good firms have filled it before. It is only that we have not the morphia in tablets—but in solution. And we have it not with the atropia."

"Ah!" said Chesney. His face relaxed. "Well, show me the kind you have," he said curtly, but not uncivilly.

The clerk brought a little cardboard box divided into cells. These cells, which were lined with cotton-wool, each held a small glass globule filled with a solution of morphia and sealed at one end with wax.

"It is safer so, Signore. One escapes to infect oneself. One breaks the seal and fills the hypodermic *siringa* direct from these little globules."

Chesney was silent for a second, gazing at the little transparent amphoræ that held Nepenthe. Then he said:

"Do you keep hypodermic syringes? I have broken mine."

He winced as the unnecessary lie escaped him. It made things more plausible, but need not have been uttered. Untruth seemed somehow the inevitable attendant of morphia, even when innocently indulged in as he was now about to do. Yet all this time his pulse was racing. The clang of the little bell attached to the door of the pharmacy, that rang when customers went in or out, made him start and glance round each time that it sounded....

He went out and got again into the *carrozzella*. In his pocket were three of the little globules and a shining new hypodermic syringe in a black Morocco case.

"Villa Bianca!" he said.

The vetturino glanced up, struck by the new, firm ring in his voice.

"They must have given him some devil of a good medicine in there," he thought. "He's another man, *per Bacco*!"

This time the patient screw shambled on to the gates of Villa Bianca without check.

XXXVIII

He was very cautious about this dose of morphia. He felt that he must guard in every possible way against the nausea that might follow it, thus taken without

atropine. Sophy was pleased and surprised to hear that he had seen Camenis, and still more surprised when he said that he was going to bed at once, and would she be a dear girl and read aloud to him. He was looking forward with a half-shamed excitement to the luxury of relief and stimulation which he knew the morphia, so long refrained from, would give him to a superlative degree. But he knew also that it would be apt to make him garrulous. He did not want to talk. He was afraid of "giving himself away" somehow. So he asked Sophy to read aloud because he did not want to be alone either. It would intensify that sensation of blissful *bien être* which lay just ahead of him to have some one near. This feeling was akin to that with which a child, cosily in bed, regards its nurse sewing beside a shaded lamp.

Yes; he would go to bed, take the morphia, and then, later, the salicylate of soda. Two days of it would knock out the sciatica, that old doctor had said. Well—the morphia would keep him from being bored, in addition to easing his pain. One was never bored while under the effects of morphia. He would take one dose now, sleep off the bad effects. Then, next day, take the other in the same way. The third—well, it depended on how he would be feeling whether he took the third dose or not.

Sophy sent Luigi to kindle a fire in his bedroom before she would let him undress there. The *Mareng*, as the Scirocco is called on Lago Maggiore, had been blowing all day. Now a fine drizzle had begun to fall. As she went to find the book that Cecil had asked her to read aloud, she thought of how odd it was that his illnesses should always be associated in her mind with rainy weather. And the weather had been so glorious nearly all the time, until now. Some

splendid *Temporali*—the crashing thunderstorms of that region—had come in July and August. But there had been no steady, sullen rain such as was now falling.

As for Chesney, he congratulated himself on having this acute attack just at this time. The *Mareng*, Luigi told him, would not last more than two or three days. *The Wind-Flower* was at Taroni's having her bottom scraped for the races.

As soon as he was rid of this deuced pain, he would go and look up a rowboat. He needed exercise. There were good boats, cheaper than elsewhere, Amaldi had said, at a little village called Cerro, on the other side of the Lake.

When Luigi had kindled the fire, he went up to his bedroom and closed and locked the door. The blaze from dried roots and scraps of wood looked very jolly tucked away in the corner like that. He glanced at the fine strands of rain outside his window, and the soggy brown of the balcony beyond, and thought the contrast only made the fire seem jollier.

Then he took off his coat, spread a fresh towel on the bed, and laid out the hypodermic syringe and one of the glass globules upon it. There was one instant when, as he stood with the syringe poised above the opened capsule, a strange impulse came over him. He thought: "What if I throw all this stuff into the fire? Just go to bed, take the salicylate—'grin and bear it'?" His heart beat violently. Then, with a sudden gesture, he thrust the nose of the syringe into the capsule, and drew the piston up till the cylinder was filled with the colourless liquid. Each dose of the solution held half a grain of morphia. He screwed the needle into place—pushed up his shirt-sleeve....

Another instant and the needle was home in his flesh. He pressed the piston gently down—withdrew the needle, and rubbed the puncture with a bit of cotton soaked in spirit. Then he cleaned the syringe, put a wire through the needle, locked all away into his travelling-bag, and, after setting the door slightly ajar, undressed and got into bed. In two minutes the little clutch at his midriff told him that the morphia was at its work.... Then he called to Sophy. And as he lay there with slow bliss stealing over him, and heard her light step coming up the stair, he justified his action to himself with persistent and plausible reiteration. The pain was already lessening—he felt tender and affectionate towards Sophy—longed to talk to her. But he kept saying to himself: "No, no—I must not. I must not, on any account." So he only smiled at her and moved his head against the pillow in assent, when she asked if he felt easier, warm in bed like this. When she sat down in a low chair beside the bed and began to read, he reached out and took her free hand, holding it, playing with her rings—that vague smile still on his face.

The rain fell faster and faster—it became a heavy downpour, rattling on the magnolia leaves outside and veiling the more distant trees. Sophy read until he seemed dozing—then went down to her lonely dinner in the ugly little dining-room. Somehow she felt strangely depressed. The *Mareng* seemed to have soaked into her very soul.

Chesney stayed in bed three days. He took all the morphia, but he also took the salicylate prescribed by Camenis. He suffered a good deal from nausea; but when he got up again, on the morning of the fourth day, his attack of sciatica was entirely over. He felt abominably weak, though. On the second

day, he had sent Luigi to Pallanza to buy some good Cognac—a small glass of this revived him. He scrupulously avoided taking more than a small quantity at a time. He did not for a moment intend to lapse into his old habits.

But after he had been about for two days, back came the sciatic pains. He grumbled savagely. The *Mareng* had ceased. The Maggiore seemed kindling the heavens with its clear, fierce blast. The sun would have been hot as in August but for the wind. There seemed no earthly reason for the return of the sciatica. He must get rid of this nuisance before the races, by hook or by crook. He shrank from the idea of taking more morphia in its Italian form. The nausea had been too wearing. Besides, he did not wish to go to Caccia's a second time for it. It occurred to him to take the motor-boat and run over to Stresa. The first chemist there would probably have English or American preparations of the drug. He succeeded in finding a little case of an American preparation of morphia and atropine. But he was still extremely cautious, not only in regard to others, but about himself. Such doses as he took were very small (he would cut the tablets in half with his penknife—carefully burning the blade first in a candle-flame). And he always took them at bedtime, so that by the next morning the extreme dryness of his mouth would have passed. The pain kept nagging him. And in the intervals between the doses of morphia that hateful weakness came over him. He began to drink Cognac regularly with his meals. This worried Sophy—she could not think so much brandy good for him. At her suggestion he bought some Scotch whiskey in Pallanza. But the smooth, oily liquor, tempered by soda, was not what he wanted. It was even distasteful to him. What he craved was the keen bite

of the raw brandy in his stomach and blood.

He grew very irritable at times, under the double stress of the intermittent pain, and the desire for larger doses of morphia than he dared take. His extreme caution would not let him continue drinking the Cognac at meals, since Sophy had objected to it. It might make her suspect something. So he fell into the way of taking a glass here and there, wherever he chanced to be, at some *café* in Intra or Pallanza, or even in Ghiffa.

He did not find Amaldi so companionable, either, since he had been suffering in this way.

"Rather a wooden chap, that Amaldi, when one comes to see more of him," he said to Sophy.

One evening, when Amaldi chanced to be at Villa Bianca, Chesney again asked his wife to sing. She went at once to the piano. Amaldi sat leaning forward, looking down at his hands, which were clasped loosely between his knees. Chesney kept glancing towards him vexedly all the time that Sophy was singing. Amaldi's expression *was* rather "wooden."

"Sing that Grieg thing," Chesney had said. She sang Solweg's song from the Peer Gynt series. It seemed to Amaldi that he could not bear it, when the voice of the woman he loved poured over him in that soft wave of heart-break. His face looked ever more and more "wooden" as she sang on. When she stopped and Chesney fixed his eyes on the other man with that sort of irritated challenge in them, Amaldi said in a cut-and-dried tone: "Thanks. It was most beautiful."

Chesney couldn't get over it for the rest of the evening. He mimicked Amaldi's tone and manner to Sophy again and again.

"Damned constipated mind the fellow's got, by God!" he said. "He hears for the first time a great imperial-purple voice like yours, and all he says is: 'Thanks; most beautiful.' Why didn't he say: 'Very nice,' and have done with it!"

Sophy shivered at his ever-increasing irritability. Sometimes she thought the gentle Luigi would surely burst into flame under Cecil's fierce cursings and depart forthwith; but the little man merely looked stolid, as if slightly deaf, on these occasions. She thought that Lombards, whether noble or peasant, had singular self-control, for something in the little Milanese's manner under provocation reminded her vaguely of Amaldi. Then one day she heard him remark to Maria, the cook, who also seemed astonished at his patience:

"*Cosa te voeuret? L'è matt quel diavol d'un milord. E quella bella sciora l'è tanto bona.*" (What'll you have? He's mad, this devil of a milord, and his lovely lady is so good!)

One afternoon Amaldi called to tell Chesney that *The Wind-Flower* was in the water again. He found Sophy alone on the terrace. She was sewing on a little blouse for Bobby, who had worn out most of his wardrobe. She loved making his little fineries herself. Amaldi was more natural in his manner that afternoon. It was long since he had seen her alone. Sophy had recovered from the first shock of her husband's return; she also felt more natural. Before long she was talking to Amaldi almost eagerly. She had been thinking of her far-away home in Virginia

when he arrived. She ran to fetch some photographs of it to show him. Chesney was away in the motor-boat—at Stresa, she believed.... But at that moment Chesney was driving back from Pallanza, having left the motor there to be mended. It had broken down just before he reached the embarcadero, and he had been obliged to row ashore. He was in an evil temper. His leg was "drilling" again, and he had had two glasses of Cognac within an hour.

When he reached the lower terrace he looked up and saw Sophy and Amaldi bending together over the photographs like two children over a picture-book. She was talking eagerly, looking often at Amaldi. There was a pretty flush on her face. Her grey eyes sparkled.... Chesney was so gruff in manner that Amaldi went almost immediately. Sophy sat gazing at her husband with a puzzled expression. She had not yet realised that Chesney had taken a dislike to Amaldi as sudden as his first liking.

"Well, I must say you're making up for lost time!" he threw out roughly.

"How?" she asked, astonished, not getting his meaning.

"Why, a week ago you hadn't a word to throw that chap; now you palaver with him like an old crony."

Sophy reddened with anger.

"Please don't speak to me in this way," she said coldly.

He reddened, too.

"You speak to Amaldi as you damn please—I'll speak to you as I damn please," he said.

"No," said Sophy, "for I shan't stay to listen to you."

And she gathered up the photographs and went into the house with her head high.

"Women are the devil!" said Chesney, scowling after her. "Women are the devil!" he repeated, flinging himself morosely into a chair, and gazing down at the outstretched leg which ached so infernally. Then he rose, went upstairs and injected a fourth of a grain of morphia into it. He sent word that he would not be down to dinner. At twelve o'clock that night, he took another fourth.

XXXIX

Chesney was very much on his guard for two days after that. The pain in his leg was better. He took no more morphia, until just before day on the third morning. The sciatica had again roused him with its fierce stabs. But he took a very moderate dose—only the eighth of a grain. A cup of black coffee before going down to breakfast steadied him. He lay on a wicker chair in the sunshine all the morning—reading between dozes. He looked very pale. Sophy felt sorry for him, although she was still indignant at the way he had spoken to her about Amaldi.

He ate a light lunch and drank two more cups of lye-like coffee after it. He felt so much better that he asked her to come with him to Cerro.

"I'm going to hire a rowboat," he explained. "We'll go trolling together—I'll row and you can fish. Come

along. It's a jolly day—not too hot."

But Sophy said that she had ordered a *carrozzella* to go shopping in Intra for Bobby. "I *must* get some autumn things ready for him," she said. "I brought so few clothes. And this warm weather won't last much longer."

Chesney felt a spurt of anger, as she made this excuse for not going with him. He had taken a glass of Cognac, after Sophy had left the dining-room. The wearing out of the morphia left him irritable, and the brandy whipped this irritation. He tried hard to keep himself in hand. He really wanted her to come with him very much.

"Do come," he said. "Let the Italian woman—let Rosa go for the boy's things. She must know exactly what to buy for children. Do—there's a good girl——"

"No—really, Cecil—I couldn't explain to her. She's very stupid about such things. And Bobby simply must have warmer clothes ready."

"By George! I don't believe you want to come! I believe you're just putting me off with a lot of bally excuses, because you don't want to be with me," he said, glowering at her.

Sophy coloured a little. It was true that she did not want to go with him. She saw too plainly the ugly mood that was gathering in him, and would probably break into a storm of hectoring before night. But, on the other hand, she really felt it necessary to see at once about those warm things for Bobby. He caught cold so easily. The Marchesa had warned her that the weather was apt to change suddenly in October.

"Do you come or do you not?" asked Chesney

sharply, watching her.

"I can't to-day, Cecil," she said earnestly. "If you'll wait till to-morrow, I'll go with pleasure. It isn't kind of you to take it like this—as if I wanted to vex you."

"Oh, well; do as you like!" he said, with his ugliest smile. "I've married a '*femme mère*,' it seems. Just as well, perhaps, that it wasn't a '*femme courtisane*.' There might have been ructions sooner or later."

He turned and ran down the steps of the terrace. He was very light on his feet for so big a man. Sophy stood watching, while Luigi handed him his overcoat and steadied the launch at the *banchetta* while he got in. Then she saw him dart off at racing speed for Cerro. She drew a breath of relief to think she was not with him. It was then one o'clock. At three she went upstairs to change her tea-gown for the drive to Intra. As she was putting on her hat, Luigi knocked at the door to say that the Marchese was in the drawing-room. She went down at once, and found that Amaldi had come to bring a note from his mother asking Cecil and herself to lunch at Le Vigne the next day. She said that they would be glad to come—if her husband were well enough. He had been suffering a good deal of late. While they were talking, Luigi came again to say that the *carrozzella* was waiting. Amaldi rose at once, but she said:

"No—don't hurry away. I'm only going shopping. I can go just as well a little later."

But though Amaldi sat down again, they could not find the pleasant, natural ease of their other talk over the photographs of "Sweet-Waters." There was a constraint on them both. Sophy asked about the Marchesa and the autumn crops at Le Vigne. They

were talking in this rather forced, desultory fashion, when she heard Cecil's step coming fast up the terrace stairs.

He, in the meantime, had looked in vain at Cerro for the rowboat that he wanted. This, of course, put him in a still worse humour. He had also miscalculated the duration of that eighth of morphia taken in the early morning. Its effects had entirely worn off by two o'clock. This left him stranded at Cerro, with that gone feeling of intense weakness. He went from the boat-yard to the little *osteria*, and asked for Cognac. Of course there was none; but the Padrone, who spoke a sort of bastard French, explained that they had the most excellent *Grappa*. In his opinion, *Grappa* was superior to all the Cognac in the world.

"*Q'est ce que c'est que ce sacré 'Grappa'?*" Chesney had growled. Then the Padrone explained, and further illuminated his explanation by bringing a bottle of the clear white, fiery liquor—one of the fieriest and most heady of all liquors—the native spirits of Italy distilled from the must of grapes. Chesney, not aware of its strength, drank several glasses. This made him feel so much more "fit" that he drank yet another before leaving. By the time he was halfway across the lake on his way back, his brain was in flames from the ardent spirit. He found himself clenching his teeth till his jaw ached, in a spasm of vague rage against everything—every one! Then he recalled Sophy's refusal to go with him—and his anger concentrated on her.

When he ran up the terrace steps at Villa Bianca, fifteen minutes later, he was half-blind with unreasoning fury. Hearing voices in the drawing-room, he tore open the door and burst in on Sophy

and Amaldi. The *Grappa* had made his face dead-white and his blue eyes black. He looked terrible, towering there, glaring at them speechless for the first second. Then he strode forward and took Sophy by the arm.

"So you lied to me!" he said. "You lied to me! You wanted to stay here alone for your——"

Amaldi also took a step forward. His face, too, was ghastly. Chesney whirled on him, releasing Sophy's arm. She fell back against the wall, grasping at the window curtain for support. She seemed to press against the hard stone of the wall, as though trying to melt into it.

Chesney, his head lowered between his shoulders, roared at Amaldi like the bull he resembled.

"You damned little sneak, get out of here! Out of this house!" he shouted.

Amaldi looked him in the eyes.

"'*Charbonnier est maître chez lui*,'" (A coal-heaver is master in his own house), he said icily. "I will go. But I will give you a gentleman's chance—I will send you my seconds."

Chesney vented a great "Ha!" of utter, insolent derision.

"Why, you little emasculated Don Juan—— You——" he spat an unmentionable name—"d'you think I'd fight one of your tin-soldier farces with you? Clear out!"

"Coward!" said Amaldi, in that same low, icy voice.

Then Chesney, inarticulate with rage, lifted his

walking-stick and rushed on him. Amaldi was a master swords-man. With his own stick he parried the other's blows. Once, twice, thrice he parried; then, suddenly, by a quick, sharp stroke across the wrist, disarmed him.

Chesney stood dazed for an instant by the unexpectedness of the thing. As he stood thus, Amaldi left the room. But even as he did so Chesney broke from his trance and leaped after him. At once Sophy had her arms about him. She clung desperately, swinging round in front of him, hanging upon him with all her weight and strength.

"You shall not! You shall not!" she kept saying through her set teeth.

It was impossible for him to move quickly with the tall, frantic woman clinging to him, adapting herself to all his movements with supple instinct. He could not tear himself loose from her without hurting her brutally. He was not so lost as to do that. At last he caught the folds of Sophy's blouse over her breast in a fierce grip, dragged her to her feet, shook her to and fro as he held her. His whole face was a distorted snarl.

"Be quiet!" he ground out. "Keep still! Your lover's safe ... for this time...."

She panted, wordless, her frenzied eyes pouring loathing on him.

"Ay ... look at me as if I were a toad ... a horned toad." He grinned convulsively. "You've made me one ... you with your dirty little lover!"

Sophy got her breath. She was beside herself. She tore from his grasp, leaving some of the light

trimming of her blouse in his clenched hand.

"I wish he *were* my lover!" she panted. "I wish *any* one were my lover. Oh, if I could only tell you that I had a lover! If I only could! Brute!... Coward!..."

She faced him quivering with detestation.

The dementia of hatred in her wild eyes sobered Chesney for an instant.

"Cut that!" he said sullenly. "What you've got to do is to swear to me, by all you hold sacred, that you'll never see that little skunk again. Come—out with it!"

She laughed.

"Swear!" he cried furiously, "or I'll ... I'll...." He half-lifted his balled fist.

She went on laughing.

"Oh, you brute...." she whispered between the spasms of laughter. "You great, helpless brute!..."

He gazed at her villainously, out of sideward, blood-shot eyes.

"Swear!" he said. "Swear ... or it'll be worse for you!"

Her laughter renewed itself. Tears of laughter ran down her wild, working face.

"I laugh"—she stammered—"I laugh—because you think it could be—worse for me——"

He stood balked, humiliated before this fierce paroxysmal laughter. Then cunning flashed into his look of thwarted beast.

"*I'll* tame you!" he said; and, laughing himself now,

turned and rushed from the room. A throe of intuition gripped her. Bobby! He was going to wreak his spite against her on her boy. She was after him like the wind. But not fast enough ... not fast enough.... Just before her ... just out of reach ... as in a nightmare ... he was leaping up the steps three at a time. She had a horrible illusion of not moving—of standing stock-still—of being fastened to the spot by heavy weights.

The nursery was on the third floor. She had put the child there because it was the sunniest room in the house. It had two large windows, each with a little balcony before it. Yes—it was the nursery he was making for. She was just in time to see him plunge in. The light door, swung to close of itself, as in most Italian houses, clapped to behind him without latching. She fell against it. As she did so she heard Rosa scream. The wild "dirling" sound of this scream checked her blood. At the same instant she saw. He was out on the light wooden balcony before the west window—with the child, grasped by its middle, in both hands. Then the great arms straightened. He was holding the boy out in the blinding sunshine—out in the empty air, above a drop of thirty feet sheer to the gravel drive below. She saw this red as though bathed with blood. The Italian woman had cast herself prone on the ground—she tore at her hair in a sort of fit. Sophy stood congealed. Even her eyes seemed stiffening. Her breath stopped ... her heart.... She saw the boy begin to writhe—then her heart writhed in her; but she stood fast. Was the boy screaming? Deafness seemed to have smitten her. She could see the piteous round of the little mouth—wide open—but no sound reached her.

Over his shoulder the madman flung with a laugh:

"Perhaps *now* you'll do as I tell you."

She heard a "Yes" go from her. It seemed like some faint, winged thing fluttering from her mouth towards him. She was afraid it would not reach him. She sent another—another. "Yes.... Yes...."

"You swear it?"

"Yes...."

"Never to see that little cur again?"

"Yes——"

"Then here's 'the pledge of love,'" he chuckled. He strode back and dropped the boy into her arms.

But the next instant his face sobered into a scared look. The child was in spasms. Like a little fish upon a bank, he jerked and twitched on his mother's breast.

"I say," muttered the frightened man; "I've gone it a bit too thick ... eh?"

She was gazing with blind eyes at her boy. All her face looked blind. She had sunk down on the floor with him. There was a dreadful, dulled, yet crazed, look in the very way she held the jerking body. She kept whispering: "A doctor!... A doctor!... A doctor!..." It was as if she were choking and this hoarse word "doctor" were what she coughed up to keep from strangling. Neither she nor Chesney noticed the appalled group that had gathered at the nursery door, drawn there by Rosa's scream—Luigi, Maria, Tilda, the gardener's boy, Tibaldo. Rosa, now sitting up on the tiled floor, muttered and sobbed senselessly.

But when Sophy began her monotonous croak of, "Doctor!... Doctor!..." this group vanished as by magic—all save Tilda, who came and crouched down by her mistress, helping her hold the struggling child. And all at once, Chesney, too, dashed from the room.

When he reached the terrace, he saw Luigi, like a little black hare, scudding towards the *banchetta*. At his heels ran Tibaldo and the two women. The huge man, in his day the fastest runner in England, overtook them in a few bounds. Now his head was clear. Now he knew what was needed and exactly how to get it. He leaped into the racer, Luigi after him. Within eight minutes they were at Intra. Claudio Mora, a young doctor from Turin, returned with them.

XL

Mora succeeded in checking the boy's spasms, but was much relieved when Sophy asked to have Cesare Camenis in consultation—there were things about the case that he could not understand. He said so frankly. That such a robust, sunburnt little fellow, past the age for teething, should have convulsions baffled him. Camenis arrived at five o'clock. To him Sophy told the whole truth. He was a quiet, grey man of about sixty, whose own life had been tragic. The comprehension of dominated sorrow was in his face. Sophy felt that she could trust him, and that he should know all if he was to save Bobby for her. She

could not have spoken to Mora. He was too young—and he was still encased in the hard shell of happiness. She could not have laid the wound of her life bare to him, as she did to this quiet, sad-eyed man whose only son was a cripple born, and whose wife had left him for a singer.

After hearing her, Camenis released his young *confrère* from further responsibility. He would stay himself that night, he said, at Villa Bianca.

Bobby was very ill for some days. He had fever and was delirious. Sophy never left the nursery. Camenis stayed with her till the crisis was past—being taken to and fro between Stresa and the Villa during the day in the launch.

Chesney avoided being alone with the doctor. He had his meals served at different hours, also in his room, for the most part. When he could not avoid meeting Camenis, he would halt awkwardly for a moment, and say: "Little chap going on well?" or, "Don't let Mrs. Chesney break down, will you?" or some such commonplace. He did not like to feel those shrewd, sad eyes of the Genoese physician on his face. He had slipped into the way of taking morphia pretty regularly, ever since that fatal afternoon. To face the prospect of Bobby's possible death, with clear, undrugged mind, was too much for him. And Sophy would not see him—had sent him a sealed line as soon as she could command herself enough to write, saying that she would not.

"Do not try to see me," she had written. "It is all I ask of you."

It was the fourth day of Bobby's illness. The late September evening was still as warm as August.

Chesney lay on his bed in the darkness, his hands under his head, staring out at the onyx wall of the Sasso di Ferro, that rose against a sky pricked with stars. The fronds of a big mimosa tree just outside his window, furled sensitively from the heavy dew, made a delicate pattern against the sombre stolidity of the mountain. Through them, as though winking with sardonic humour, the red eye of the Chaldee lime-kiln glowed intermittently. Chesney was not undressed, though he lay upon his bed. He lay there because he felt dead tired, soul and mind and body, and because he had just taken his evening dose of morphia. He was so tired that he was not even thinking his own thoughts. Emile Verhaeren was thinking for him—Verhaeren, the one poet that he had ever really cared for. The great Belgian's volcanic and almost demoniacally virile imagination had appealed to him from the first, as no other had ever done. His own tempestuous, rebellious, intolerant nature echoed to these trumpets of anguish and defiance and exultation. Spirit writhing in the blast-furnace of untempered and primordial sensuality, the distorted religious instinct easing its throes with supernal blasphemies, a dark Prometheus thrusting with his defiant torch at the eye-sockets of the God from whom he had filched it—these things stirred him to the very depths. And, to-night, it was as if Verhaeren had written for him and him alone. Who but he and Verhaeren had ever felt what these words expressed?—these words that thundered and howled through his mind translating himself to himself, with such appalling fitness:

"*Dites suis-je seul avec mon âme,*
Mon âme hélas maison d'ébène
Ou s'est fendu sans bruit un soir
Le grand miroir de mon espoir."

And again:

"*Aurai-j'enfin l'atroce joie*
De voir nuit aprés nuit comme une proie
La démence attaquer mon cerveau,
Et detraqué, malade, sorti de la prison
Et des travaux forcés de sa raison
D'appareiller vers un lointain nouveau?"

He lay there thinking through the terrible, implacable mind of Verhaeren until midnight. Then a foot on the stair roused him. It was light and swift—a running step—Sophy's. Was the boy worse? Was he dying, perhaps? He leaped to the door, jerked it open. His haggard, drug-ravaged face stared out between the cheap yellow wood of the newel-post and the door. Sophy was coming down the stair opposite. She looked like a somnambule in her long white dressing-gown, with eyes fixed before her. He came out and stood facing her. She looked straight at him, but her face was blank of recognition.

"Sophy!" he muttered—there was anguish in his hoarse voice: "Sophy!"

For all response, she leaned over the banister.

"*Dottore! Dottore!*" she called.

"*Vengo—vengo, signora!*" came at once the reply of Camenis. As soon as he answered, she turned and ran fleetly up the stairs again. She had not even glanced towards Chesney. Then Camenis went by, also very quickly. Chesney wanted to ask what it was ... he could not speak. Later, he waylaid the doctor coming back. Yes—the boy was conscious again. He would

live. The crisis was past.

Chesney hung so heavily on the door that it swung back a little with him.

"Can I do anything for you, signore?" said Camenis, hesitating. "You look ill yourself."

"No—thanks—the—shock——" Chesney mumbled. He retreated, closing the door. Camenis stood a second looking at the closed door. Then he passed on to his own room.

The next day he said to Sophy:

"Signora, now that the little one is out of danger, I feel that I must speak to you about your husband."

He saw her grow rigid.

"Signora," he pursued very gently, "one forgives much to illness. Your husband is an ill man, signora." He saw her eyes waver, but her nostrils were still set.

"You have been kind enough to trust me with your confidence, signora," Camenis went on in his flat, gentle voice. "And so I feel it my duty to speak quite plainly to you."

"Yes," said Sophy mechanically.

Camenis looked at her with that tender pity, which from the wise eyes of a kindly priest or physician does not hurt. His look reminded Sophy of Father Raphael of the Poor. She braced herself to meet what was coming.

"Then, signora," said Camenis, "I will remind you that your husband came to me two weeks ago, to consult me about a severe attack of sciatica. He asked for a

palliative. I told him that I knew of none save opium —morphia ... that I did not give it except in extreme cases. Now, signora, from what you have told me—about the unfortunate habit that your husband has only lately escaped from.... You will pardon my perfect frankness, signora?"

"Yes.... Yes...."

"Then.... You must not be too shocked—too horrified. We, who have not endured it, cannot imagine this terrible temptation of morphia. But to one, only so lately cured ... to whom severe pain comes...."

He hesitated again, and Sophy said in a hard, clear voice:

"Do you mean that my husband is taking morphia again?"

"I fear so, signora," said Camenis very gently.

Sophy sat looking down at her hand which she clenched and unclenched as it lay on her knee.

"Yes—I think it's very likely," she said at last, still in that hard, resonant voice.

Camenis was silent for a time; then he said:

"I think your husband has suffered much for what he did the other day, signora."

Sophy's face flamed. Her eyes glittered.

"Don't speak of it ... don't speak of it...!" she cried, as though suffocating.

Again Camenis waited.

"Forgive me, signora," he then said, "but I must tell

you that I think this is a crisis for your husband as well as for your son."

Sophy turned suddenly and hid her face against the back of her chair.

The tired, kind eyes of Camenis looked at the bent head compassionately. After another pause, he said:

"I think—as a physician—if you could go to him—gently—he would confess and try once more to—to be what you would have him be, signora."

Then Sophy broke down and wept like a desperate child.

"I can't! Oh, I can't!" she sobbed. "You don't know.... I can't bear even the memory of his face—his voice! How am I to go to him? I can't! I can't!"

The little doctor's face looked very worn as he sat watching her, while she clung to the big, ugly chair as to a rock of refuge, clutching it with her white hands that had grown thin in this one week of Bobby's illness—staining its gay chintz cover with her tears. Suddenly he rose, and went over to her.

"*Bambina ... bambina* ..." he said tenderly, "when you have saved him, you will love him. We always love what we have saved."

He just touched her hair softly, once, as a father would have done.

"*Coraggio* ..." he murmured, in his kind, faded voice. Then he left her.

Chesney was filling his hypodermic syringe that evening, about seven, when there came a low knock at his door. He started, nearly dropping the little

instrument.

"Who's there?" he called sharply. In every nerve he felt the need of this dose that he was preparing—so soon does the tyrant morphia assert its sway. He was transfixed to hear Sophy's voice reply:

"It's I, Cecil."

Hurriedly, his hands shaking as with ague, he bundled everything into a drawer, and closed it. Then he went to the door. He stood with it in his hand, staring at her as though just waked.

"May I come in?" she said very low. "I—I want to talk with you."

He was still too overcome to speak. Silently he stepped aside, drawing the door with him. She entered quickly, her head a little bent, her hands clasped nervously in front of her. The weather was still very warm; she had come from the nursery, and wore a long peignoir of white muslin. The soft, straight folds made her seem taller than ever. Her bent head contradicted the haughtiness of her body. It was as if she wanted to command a mood of gentleness by forcing its physical semblance.

"Will you sit here?" asked Chesney. His voice shook.

"Thanks...." she murmured, and took the chair that he pushed forward.

She didn't seem able to say what she had come for. She sat silent so long that he felt forced to speak.

"Is ... is Bobby all right?" he faltered.

The colour streamed across her cheek at these words, as though he had struck her.

"Forgive me," he said humbly. "I.... I really care, you know."

"He is better," she managed to reply. Her lips moved stiffly. Then she lifted her head with a sort of desperation of resolve. Her eyes fixed on his.

"Cecil...." she said, "I've come ... one, last time...." She broke off; then went on: "This one, last time," she repeated, "to see if you ... if we ... if together...." Again words failed her. Looking firmly at him, she ended more quietly: "I've come to beg you to tell me the truth," she said, and her dark eyes rested on him full of doubt and pain.

He could scarcely have grown paler, but his head drooped; he sat looking down at his great hands which he clasped and unclasped nervously.

"Well...." she whispered finally. "Will you?.... It's our last ... last chance."

With difficulty he articulated, "Try me."

"Then ..." she went on, after a slight pause, still whispering, "are you ... taking morphine again?"

There was no pause before his answer.

"Yes," he said, his face still drooped away from her.

She caught one hand to her breast. She could not believe her own ears. Had he said "Yes" at once—simply—outright like that, to such a question? Something fine and brave in her throbbed response to that unequivocal "Yes."

"Cecil...." she said.

All at once he tossed up his hands to his bent face.

His great figure, huddled on the little chair, began shaking from head to foot.

"Oh, my God!" he said. "My God! Don't be kind to me ... don't be kind!"

And dreadful sobs began heaving through him.

"Oh ... *poor Cecil*...!" came from her in a gasp.

And then he fell forward on his knees before her, his face in her lap, his hands grasping the soft folds of her gown. His tumultuous, painful sobbing shook them both—as if torn up by bloody roots came the great sobs.

"Sophy.... God.... Sophy.... I've suffered.... I've suffered.... If he'd died.... Yes ... one shot ... yes ... one...."

And his passion of grief, torrential as his passion of love, flooded her, shook her with its cyclonic abandonment, until she seemed one flesh with him in this unmeasured tragedy of wild remorse.

Through her thin gown she felt his tears soak to her very skin—a hot chrism baptising her once more his in this terrific rite of sorrow.

She bent over him, her hands upon his head, her own tears falling.

"No ... no!" she pleaded. "No ... no, Cecil! Don't ... don't despair like this ... we will begin again.... The truth.... You have told the truth...."

She began to sob herself now.

"And the truth shall make you free ... the truth shall make you free, dear...." she kept sobbing.

Now she had his head against her breast—her cheek pressed down on it. As she held Bobby to comfort him, when he was frightened, so she held the great man. He was afraid now—afraid of himself—like a child. Close she held him to comfort him ... close ... close....

XLI

That night they talked things over quietly. Sophy was very gentle with him—almost incredibly generous, he thought. With his permission, she consulted Camenis about the amount of morphia that he ought to have, to "tail off," as he said humbly—in order to get him back to England without too much discomfort from the sciatic pains and the sudden snapping of the habit that he had formed again—albeit to such a moderate extent. Camenis gave his opinion, and Sophy undertook to give her husband the properly diminished doses. Chesney was almost pathetically humble. It hurt her in some subtle nerve to see the big, domineering man, so subdued, so timidly anxious to conciliate her, to redeem himself in her opinion. It was beyond doubt that he had suffered excruciatingly over the boy's illness and his part in it.

"The little chap won't be able to bear the sight of me, I suppose," he had ventured once, and she saw his lips quiver as he said it.

She felt a submerging pity for him.

"Leave that to me," she answered gently. "I've thought of a way.... I think I can manage ... but it will take time, of course."

Another thing that proved to her the depth of his self-humiliation and genuine regret was the fact that he wished to apologise to Amaldi.

"I shall tell him the brute fact," he said, "that I was drunk with that *Grappa* stuff. He can accept my apology or not, as he chooses."

He wrote the note of apology the morning after their talk.

"Shall I post it or send it by Luigi?" he asked, looking not at her but the letter which he was holding. Sophy thought a moment, then she said:

"We are leaving Wednesday, and I ought to see the Marchesa before I go. Suppose you let me take it! I can leave it with her."

"Do," he said, giving her the letter; then he took her hand in both his. "Thanks, Sophy," he added, under his breath.

Sophy started for Le Vigne about ten o'clock. She took Luigi with her to run the launch—he was fortunately cleverer as a *meccanico* than as a valet. The sky was coloured like blue morning-glories, and the lake like gentian. Clouds and foam dissolved on the great sheets of blue like snow melting upon flame. But the beauty of the day seemed cruel to Sophy. It was like the laughter of water in sunlight above the place where a ship has foundered. Camenis had happened to mention the fact that Amaldi was in Milan, else she could not have gone for that farewell visit, onerous as she felt it to be.

And even as it was, she shrank from seeing the Marchesa. Had Amaldi told her? Her cheek tingled shame at the thought. But the next instant she felt that she knew him better than that. No; he would not have told any one of that scene which had been so degrading for her.

But when she reached Le Vigne, she found that the Marchesa had gone to Belgirate for the day. Old Carletto seemed deeply sorry for her disappointment.

"*Che peccato, signora! Che peccato!*" he kept saying, shaking his white head slowly and clicking his tongue. The Signora Marchesa would be so sad, so very sad to miss the signora. Then he brightened up.

"But the Marchesino is here, signora!" he exclaimed. "The Marchesino is very busy in his study ... but he would wish me to disturb him on such an occasion. He will know how to find the Signora Marchesa."

Sophy had started for the darsena again in real panic. She even forgot to leave Cecil's letter with the old butler.

"No—no! Don't disturb the Marchese," she called back. "I desire you not to do it."

As she was speaking, Carletto, who was following her as fast as his bent legs would amble, called out:

"*Ma, eccolo! Ecco il Marchesino, signora!*"

She hurried on, her head bent, the letter in the pocket of her gown seeming to scorch her fingers. Amaldi overtook her, just before she reached the darsena. They murmured vague greetings. Both were very pale. A trembling had seized Sophy. Everything grew dim before her in that moment. Amaldi, seeing

how it was with her, offered her his arm. She took it from the sheer instinct of self-preservation. The ground seemed falling from beneath her feet in slanting jerks.

"You are tired...." he said, speaking with an effort. "There is a seat here ... among these ilex shrubs.... You must rest a moment."

Walking giddily along the unstable, sliding earth, she allowed him to guide her to the old stone seat on the south terrace. The dark foliage screened them from the house. Between them and the blue dazzle of the lake was a low balustrade of stone. Amaldi helped her to the seat, and then went and leaned upon this balustrade.

The faintness passed, and Sophy sat thinking feverishly how she must act. The directness of her nature guided her. She drew the letter from her pocket, and, rising, went towards Amaldi. He turned when he heard her footstep. As he turned, she stopped where she was, holding out the letter to him.

"Marchese," she said, "I had meant to leave this letter with your mother. I was told you were in Milan. It—it is from—my husband.... Wait!" she cried almost imperiously, as she saw the recoil of his whole figure. "You must listen—you must understand. He ... my husband ... has been very ill. This ... this letter is an apology, Marchese—an apology to you."

Amaldi bowed formally, and took the letter. His face was inscrutable. He started to put the envelope unopened into his pocket.

Sophy, flushing deeply, murmured:

"Won't you even read it?"

Amaldi bowed again.

"There is no need," he said. "An apology offered in this manner"—his tone was rather bitter—"I accept without reading."

Sophy stood silent; then her head went down a little.

"I ... I thank you," she whispered.

A quick change came over Amaldi's face; but she was looking down on the flagged walk and did not see it.

"Do you go soon now?" he asked, his voice almost as low as hers.

"Yes ... on Wednesday."

"It will doubtless be long before you come again to Lago Maggiore?"

"Yes."

"Do not forget us ... entirely."

"No."

"You will not be forgotten...."

There was in his voice such an intensity of pain with difficulty subdued that the trembling seized her again despite all her will. He continued:

"This is farewell ... is it not?" he said.

She could not control her voice to answer. She moved her head in assent, her eyes still downcast.

"Then ..." said Amaldi, "will you not look at me—to say farewell?"

She lifted her eyes to his—it cost her much to lift

them. But she looked up as he had desired, and it was into his bared soul that she looked. There was an instant's silence; then he spoke.

"It is my whole life that goes with you," he said.

She stood gazing at him as though spellbound. Then she half-lifted her hands like a suppliant. She was as white as her gown. But the flood-gates were open now. Neither of them could stay the flood.

"Yes," he went on, "I love you. I've loved you from the first ... with all my soul, with all my life.... I love you with my soul.... Do you understand?... with my soul...."

He took a step towards her. They were both trembling now.

"If you would trust me ... if you would let me shield you ... with my whole life ... with my love ... with love that is worship ... worship...."

She found her voice at last, and cried out to him as if for mercy:

"No, Amaldi; no! Oh, I implore you!... Stop! It can't be ... it can't be!"

He wheeled where he stood so that his face was hidden from her. It was the instinctive movement of the body that seeks to hide the bared soul. A moment passed. Then she said brokenly:

"I must go now.... I must go back...."

Now he turned to her again. His face was livid. His lips drew when he spoke.

"You will *go back*...?" he stammered. "You will go

back to that ... that *Minotaur*?" His teeth ground on the word. It was terrible to see the man, usually so still, so self-controlled, stripped of all reserve.

"I must.... I must ... for my boy's sake. Ah, don't look at me with such eyes!... I can't bear your face ... so different!"

She trembled still more violently, put up her hand to shut out the ghastly, devastated look of his face.

"You go back? You go back to him?" he kept muttering. "*Che orrore ... che orrore*...." All at once he gripped himself. He said in a strange, level tone: "There is nothing I can do, then. I would give my life ... yet there is nothing ... no way that I can serve you...."

"Amaldi ... Amaldi ..." she murmured. She caught his hand in both her own. "Oh, forgive me...." she said; "dear, dear Amaldi, forgive me!"

He bent and kissed the hands that clasped his.

"There is nothing to forgive," he answered.

It seemed to Sophy afterwards, when she came more to her usual self out there on the glee of blue waters, far from Le Vigne, that they two had been like actors moving through some pantomime, during those last moments. In silence they had walked together to the darsena; in silence he had assisted her into the launch; in silence she had sat watching Luigi start the engine. No other farewell had passed between them. In the moments following that disastrous, tragic crisis, all convention had withered. They had not even a subconscious sense of the mimic civilities due to Luigi's presence. And over Sophy stole that numbness which comes as anodyne to deep natures

which have been called on to endure too many and too violent shocks within a short period. For a few moments, there face to face with Amaldi, she had suffered intensely. Now that was past. She felt quiet, and oddly cramped, as though crouching in a little capsule of stillness at the cyclone's heart....

They could not leave on Wednesday as they had expected. Bobby's fever had culminated in a sharp attack of jaundice—the result of fright, Camenis told her. But the little fellow recovered rapidly. Only his nerves seemed still taut from the shock. He would shriek out wildly in his sleep, and no one but his mother could soothe these paroxysms of terror. As he grew stronger, she began to pursue with him the course of which she had hinted to Chesney.

"My darling," she would coax, "dada was only showing you how strong he was ... how safe he could hold you. Why, dada wouldn't hurt his little boy for all the world! He's so strong, so strong! He *couldn't* let Bobby fall. Don't you see, sweetheart?"

Thus she would coax him by the hour. At last it seemed to "seep" into his little brain. "Dada so st'ong," he would repeat. "Dada show Bobby 'ow st'ong! Good dada ... not dwop Bobby!"

At last Sophy ventured to ask one day:

"Don't you want to see poor dada? He's so afraid his little boy doesn't love him any more?"

But Bobby began to tremble.

"Dada *so* st'ong...." he pleaded, clinging hard to

Sophy's breast. At last, however, he consented to let his father come.

Chesney entered, hesitating—stood near the door. Sophy, who had her arm about Bobby as he lay against the pillows in his crib, beckoned him to come forward.

"Now, now, my little man ... my *brave* little man...." she murmured in the child's ear, her cheek to his—encouraging, soothing him. Chesney came and got awkwardly on his knees beside the crib. He felt thankful to make himself smaller in the boy's eyes. Timidly he ventured to steal one of his great hands towards the little fist, clutched in Sophy's laces.

"How are you, little man?" he said, "gentling" his voice as to some shy animal. "Won't you say 'how d'ye do' to dada?"

The boy, trying so hard to "be a man," regarded him with wide eyes, and the most touching, wavering smile of courage on the verge of tears. Then he looked with desperate appeal up at his mother. The set, wavering smile grew pale.

"Dada *too* st'ong...." he said. "Bobby *so* little...."

Chesney put down his face upon the crib and wept. Sophy knew that he was weeping, though no sound came from him. Then she told Bobby that "poor dada had been very, very ill"—he wasn't "too st'ong" any more. And taking the little unwilling hand in hers, she "poored" his father's bent head with it. Chesney turned his face presently, kissed the little hand, then got up silently and left the room. Sophy went to him, five minutes later, and found him face down on his bed, sobbing like a child. His own nerves had gone

completely under the dreadful shocks of the past ten days.

XLII

Bobby's attack of jaundice was soon over. After that glimpse of his father, so gentle and so very kind—kinder than Bobby had ever known him—the boy began to recover with the quick resilience of childhood. By the following Monday he was quite fit to travel, Camenis said.

Physically, Chesney was much better also. Camenis had succeeded in routing the sciatica. A strong tonic had somewhat restored his appetite. Altogether, he felt more fit than he had believed possible under the circumstances. At first, Camenis had wanted him to take hot hip-baths mixed with sea-salt. But here Chesney rebelled. He loathed hot baths. He demanded either a quick, cold tub in the morning, or else his usual swim in the lake. Camenis and he tussled for some hours over this question. Finally, it was agreed by the physician that as this September was such an unusually warm one, Chesney might have a very short swim during the hottest hours of the morning; then, after drying himself, lie and bake in the sun on the scorching pebbles of the shore. Late in the season as it was, he acquired the most beautifully toned mahogany-brown back and chest by this method. He was boyishly proud of this splendid tanning.

"The old boy'll think he's got a nigger-chief to

monkey with, this time. Eh—what?" he asked Sophy, turning about before her in his short bathing-trunks that she might see the full glory of his sunburnt torso. She smiled approval, saying that to her he looked more like a well-roasted turkey than a "nigger." And she thought what a boy the big man was, at heart. It seemed pathetic and strange and very nice to her, all at the same time, that he could take such pleasure in such a thing, after all that had passed and was to come.

Sunday evening she spent in having the last things packed away. The dismantled villa looked the picture of sordid cheerlessness, when stripped of all the little touches she had given it. They dined by one, virulent jet of acetylene gas, blazing in an iron loop from the middle of the ceiling.

"By George, this *is* funereal!" Chesney could not refrain from exclaiming. "Two more meals like this—is it? Well, they'll give me melancholia."

"We needn't have two more," Sophy consoled him. "I've thought it out already. To-morrow morning we can breakfast on the terrace. Then we can go to the Hotel Ghiffa for luncheon. Our boat doesn't leave until three."

He looked at her with cordial appreciation.

"Clever girl—so we can!" he said. "But, I say"—his face fell—"what about my swim and sun-bath? That would cut me short—lunching at Ghiffa, I mean."

"But there's a capital bathing-shore at the hotel," she reminded him. "You can have your swim there while they prepare luncheon."

About eleven o'clock next morning they sauntered

together along the white high-road to Ghiffa.

"You will have a glorious swim...." Sophy said, looking at the lake that drowsed under the faint breath of a listless Tramontana.

"Those sleek, snaky trails on the water mean rain, they tell me," answered Chesney. "I'm in luck to have a sunny day for my last swim."

"Yes," she assented dreamily. "Rain isn't becoming to Italy. She's like a beautiful woman who doesn't know how to cry."

"Sophy! How feminine! Do *you* know 'how to cry,' pray?"

"No. I haven't the knack at all." She laughed a little. "I make horrid faces.... I can feel myself making them."

"Poor lass!" he said in his abrupt way, suddenly gripped by this idea of her grimacing under sorrow. He had given her such a lot of it—by George! He grasped her hand with a quick gesture, and frown of pain, drawing it through his arm.

"It's to be a clean slate, my girl," he said, looking down at her.

He felt the slight fingers pinch into his arm.

"*Yes*," she said. "Yes, Cecil." But she looked in front of her face gave him another pang. He was glad that gether, as though the dazzle of the white road and clouds and walls along the way, hurt her eyes.

Chesney fought off a great fog of depression that seemed suddenly to settle down on him.

"'Cheerly! Cheerly!'" he cried, putting a bluff note into his voice that he was far from feeling. "What's it the old chap in *The Tempest* says?—'Heigh, my hearts! Cheerly, cheerly, my hearts!' That's the 'barbaric yawp' for us, Sophy—eh? Don't you feel it so?"

"Yes.... I do.... I do, Cecil," she responded eagerly. Her grey eyes looked up at him now. The bright bravery of her face gave him another pang. He was glad that their next step brought them to the little Hotel Ghiffa. Sophy ran up to see how Bobby was faring, in the rooms that she had taken till the hour for leaving. She found him clamouring to go down and "p'ay ball wiv mens" in the garden. A game of *Boccie* was going on there. She sent him down with Rosa to look on. Then she went out again to find Cecil. He met her at the door of the second bedroom. When he saw her, he stepped back into the room and signed her to come. He reached out and shut the door behind her. His face looked strange, all pale under its heavy coat of tan.

"Sophy," he said, "don't think me a sentimental ass—but you've never told me ... in so many words that ... well ... that you forgive me?"

He was gazing at her hungrily, with a look half ashamed, half determined. She went straight to him, and put her arms around him. It was queer how much he appealed to her as Bobby did.

"Oh, I'm so sorry that I've let you feel the need of words!" she said. "But if you want them I'll say them over and over——"

"No...." he stopped her; "I don't want them ... now. Will you...?" His arms held her painfully close. She

turned her face to him and he kissed her—almost shyly. Her eyes stung. She put up her hand and pressed his cheek to hers....

"Now I'll go order our luncheon," she said gaily. But he knew well that there was no gaiety in her heart. And as he got out his bathing trunks, and took his bath-sheet on his arm, lines from Verhaeren began again to haunt him:

"*Je m'habille des logues de mes jours*
Et le bâton de mon orgeuil il plie,
Mes pieds dites commie ils sont lourds
De me porter, de me trainer toujours
Au long le siècle de ma vie...."

Down to the sparkling hem of the lake the sombre voice accompanied him. He stood in a sort of muse, his bare feet wincing from the hot pebbles; then, letting the ripples lave them, he went on musing. And in a sort of dark flare the joyous scene vanished, and he saw smoke-blurred, autumnal London gape before him. Here, too, Verhaeren whispered with gloomy sympathy:

"*Gares de suie et de fumée ou du gaz pleure*
Ses spleens d'argent lointain vers des chemins d'éclair,
Ou des bêtes d'ennui bâillent à l'heure
Dolente immensément qui tente Westminster."

He had a flash of grim amusement at the idea of "Westminster" used by the Belgian poet to rhyme with "éclair" ... then he flung himself forward into the glittering blue, and began to swim.... After all it was good to be alive no matter what the odds.... Perhaps the knowledge that this was his last swim for many months whetted his appreciation, but he had never felt more jocund a delight in the elastic

clasp and purl of living water upon his naked flesh....

Sophy went out on the little terrace before the hotel to wait for his return. She had ordered luncheon served there, and a *cameriere* was already throwing a fresh tablecloth over one of the iron tables. A late tea-rose nodded from the terrace railing in the languid wind. She went and leaned near it, watching her husband's splendid figure against the flickering, sunlit blue, as he stood those few moments musing, before he plunged forward for his swim. The late, wistful rose, its petals slightly shrivelled at the edges, kept tapping softly against her hand. She stroked it lightly with her finger tips. The Padrone bustled up.

"*Con permesso—con permesso, signora*," he smiled, unctuously affable. And with a table-knife he detached the rose and presented it, bowing low.

"*Grazie*," murmured Sophy. She was sorry that the poor, passée rose had been beheaded for her, but very kindly she fastened it in her belt. Then, leaning on the low railing, she watched the fine rhythm of Cecil's arm, as it rose and fell, shearing the blue water. He was only a few yards from shore. He swam in a big semi-circle. Now he was returning. She was glad he was coming back. It seemed to her that he had been long enough in the autumn-chilled water.... But now he seemed to have stopped swimming. Ah, he was treading water. She felt a little vexed with him for lingering—but then, she realised that this was to be his last free, vigorous pleasure for so long. Still, he really should be coming back. She stood up and called him:

"Cecil!... Do come out!"

She could see his face plainly. All at once she gave a startled movement. He was answering her with grimaces ... frightful grimaces. She knew his sardonic ideas of "fun," but this struck her as unnatural ... cruel.

"Don't ... don't...." she cried to him. "You frighten me.... Come back!"

The Padrone had approached again.

"*Il signore ama scherzare*" (The gentleman likes fun), he observed, smiling. Sophy did not hear him. Half frightened, half indignant, she was staring at the grimacing face. All this had passed within a few seconds. Suddenly Cecil went under—— She held her breath.

"*Che Ercole!*" (What a Hercules!), observed the Padrone admiringly.

But she was holding her breath with the man under water. It seemed to her as though he would never come up again. Then she saw him. And still he made those odious grimaces. But now he called something. What was it? Her heart checked. It seemed to her that he cried "Help!" and as he cried it, he went under the second time.

All at once the Padrone gave a howl of terror.

"*Ma! s'annega! s'annega!*" (He's drowning! He's drowning!), screamed the man.

In an instant the terrace swarmed with shouting people. Sophy rushed blindly for the shore. The crowd, still shouting, pressed after her. The water for yards out was horribly smooth. No object broke its

surface.

"Help! Help!" Sophy cried, strangling. She looked for men to plunge at once into the Lake. Not one did so. A voice called: "A chair! Throw him a chair!" She dashed knee-deep into the water. Some one dragged her back. She was struggling with two cowards who dragged her back from that smooth, tranquil expanse under which Cecil was suffocating. A woman threw her arms around her, sobbing, "*Poverina! Poverina! E matta*...." She fought wildly against the heaving, enveloping breast of this woman.

"Cowards!" she cried. The Italian word came to her, "*Vigliacchi! Vigliacchi!*" she raged at them, beating the woman's heavy breast with her hands. The woman let her go, but a man caught her arms from behind. In her struggles her long hair came loose and blew back into the man's face, blinding him. Still he grasped her stoutly, though his face was covered with her thick hair, and her frantic movements dragged him inch by inch towards the water that he dreaded. Now there was a chair floating on it ... a little yellow chair that bobbed drolly with the motion of the bright wavelets. And still people shouted, and ran to and fro along the edge of the water, like terriers wildly excited over a flung stick which they are afraid to plunge in and fetch. One or two had rushed off towards Ghiffa, still shouting and gesticulating. Boats had put out from the village. The men in the boats shouted and gesticulated also. When they reached the spot where Chesney had gone down, they leaned over, gazing into the water. They rowed back and forth, stopping every now and then to gaze into the water. Suddenly there rose a cry: "*L'è li! L'è li! Vardel!*" (There he is! See!) But no one went overboard. It seemed to Sophy that her heart would

burst her bosom. She tried to find some terrible word that would rouse them to manhood. But even her voice failed her. It was like trying to cry out in a nightmare. Only a hoarse sound escaped her. Her eyes felt full of blood.

Then suddenly a figure came running, bounding. "*Dove? Dove?*" (Where? Where?) it called as it pelted down the terrace steps.

It was Peppin, Amaldi's sailor, bare-armed and bare-legged, in blue singlet and canvas trousers rolled to the knee.

Sophy's haggard blood-shot eyes fixed on the half-naked sailor as though he had been God.

The little crowd on shore bristled with pointing arms. "Out there! Just there!" they called in unison.

Sophy tried to cry "Save him!" to Peppin, but her voice only croaked harshly in her throat.

He did not even hear her. He had thrown his whole seaman's consciousness ahead into that clear yet impenetrable water. Even as she tried to call to him, his body, flashing obedience to his thought, shot into the lake with the curved bound of a dolphin. The water leaped up about him as in applause. Here at last was a *man*.

"*Bravo, Marinaio! Bravo! Bravo!*" shrieked the craven throng.

Sophy stood still enough now. There was no need to hold her. She stood as though her soul had gone from her and entered the body of the sailor who was swimming strong and straight for the point where Cecil had gone down.

The Padrone, who had seemed paralysed until now, came as suddenly to life as Sophy had turned to stone.

"*Il dottore!*" he shouted imperiously. "*Vaa cercare il dottore!*"

Now Peppin had reached the spot about which the boats were gathered. He trod water with head bent low, peering intently into the blue depths. The boats hung near. The boatmen shouted more than ever. They pointed downwards. "*L'è lit! L'è lit!*" they cried eagerly. All at once the sailor dived. It was as if he turned a somersault in the water. His bare, wet legs flashed up into the sunshine as he plunged.

Long seconds went by ... an eternity of minute-long seconds. Yet through this horror of blank pause, wherein time seemed suspended ... which might have been a day or an æon ... Sophy stood waiting for Peppin to bring her husband back to her. She was sure that Peppin would not come back without him. The primordial woman in her had recognised primordial man in the stout sailor. The feminine at its limit waited on the completion of virility. What she could not do, Peppin was doing. So she waited while cycles seemed to pass. She had lost her sense of time.

A sudden roar went up—from the shore, from the waiting boats. The dark blob of Peppin's head had appeared above water. Then it was submerged again for an instant. But now the boats were closer—arms reached out. He was caught—sustained by those eager arms—he and his burden. Ah!—they were trying to lift what Peppin grasped into a boat—but that huge, flaccid body dragged the boatedge over—down—down to the very water. A mass of clutching

hands grasped here, there. Now it was half over the edge—but the boat lay on her side. The great, naked body glistened white like a monstrous fish in the sunlight. Now ... now ... all together!

There was another roar. Then the sailor also was hauled aboard.... The boat pulled for shore....

XLIII

They lifted him out and laid him on the warm beach. The crowd stood aside, respectful and expectant. All eyes turned to Sophy. They were waiting for the thrilling moment when the stone image would spring to life, shriek and cast itself upon her husband's body. There was a hush as in a theatre, just before the eagerly expected catastrophe breaks into a scream or dagger-stroke. But the moment failed of its zest. Slowly, as though moving in its sleep, the tall figure went over to the drowned man, knelt down beside him, laid a white hand on the drenched, sunburnt chest. Then she looked dully up at Peppin, who stood by, honest pity on his rough face, the water that streamed from his clothes making a little patter on the hot pebbles.

"It doesn't beat," she said in English, not heeding that the man could not understand her. "What will you do now...?" she asked. And her eyes still gazed up at the sailor as though he had been God.

The woman with the heavy breast, that Sophy had struck in her frantic efforts to escape, began to sob.

The little, yellow wooden chair still bobbed up and down in the sunlight as some current bore it away towards Ghiffa.

Peppin kneeled down, too. He put his square, dark hand, with its broken nails and tattooed wrist, beside the white one.

Then he sprang up and began fiercely talking and gesticulating to the others. He was telling them that they must help him try to revive the *Scior*. They shrank. It is not considered wise on Lago Maggiore to meddle with a drowned man before the civil authorities come on the scene. One may get involved in all sorts of unpleasantness. Peppin berated them roundly, with good work-a-day oaths. He, too, called them "*Vigliacchi*." But though most of his angry dialect was but gibberish to Sophy, certain words she understood. And these words acted on her like an elixir of life. The blood flashed into her white face. She sprang to her feet.

"I will help you! Show me!" she cried. "*Io*.... *Io*...." (I—I) she kept repeating, striking her breast sharply to show him what she meant. She caught the sailor's hand in hers and drew him towards Chesney. She pointed to the drowned man, and then to herself and Peppin. In her broken Italian—stammering with eagerness—she urged the sailor to let her help revive her husband.

He understood, but he was at a loss. He knew that she could not assist in the violent measures that were necessary. The drowned man must first of all be made to disgorge the water that he had swallowed. This poor *Sciora* could not help him. He stood bewildered while Sophy held his hand, pouring out her eager, broken words.... And as he stood there, at

his wit's end, a new cry went up:

"*Il dottore! Il dottore!*"

The doctor, whose name was Morelli, had a way with him that Peppin thoroughly approved. He ordered the curious throng to keep back, in so sharp a tone of authority that he was actually obeyed. Then he spoke to Sophy, very gently, but in the same authoritative manner. He told her that she must leave him to take at once the necessary measures for reviving her husband.

"I implore you to return to the hotel, signora," he said earnestly. "It will not be well for you to remain here."

Sophy rose at once, but her eyes fastened on Peppin's face.

"Will *you* stay with him, too?" she asked.

"*Si! Si! Sciora!*" he answered eagerly. "*Starò*" (I will stay).

The Padrone came up and offered her his arm. The fat, kind-hearted woman also came up, though her great bust still ached from Sophy's frenzied blows.

"*Cara signora*," she pleaded humbly, "allow me to accompany you."

Between the Padrone and this kindly soul Sophy went obediently back to the hotel.

Tilda and Rosa had both gone for a walk with Bobby along the high-road. Tilda had missed one of the smaller bags, and wished to see if it had been left by mistake with Luigi. So the two women had gone back to Villa Bianca, and were there when the accident

happened. Not until Morelli and Peppin had been at work together over Chesney for twenty minutes did they return with Luigi, who, on hearing the terrible news, ran straight to help resuscitate his master. All the women in the hotel gathered round Rosa. She yielded Bobby to one of them, and began to sob and strike her breast and forehead in despair.

Tilda, her round face blotched with pallor, went straight to her lady. She found Sophy standing by a window that overlooked the shore.

"Oh, Mrs. Chesney!" faltered the girl, beginning to tremble. "May I stay with you?"

"No ... please...." said her mistress without turning. The girl went out obediently, and sat crouched in a chair near the door. Some women stole up and began whispering gruesome details to her. She listened half-unwilling, half-fascinated. The insatiable craving of the lower classes for "*le frisson*" made her listen, but she hated herself for doing it, and them for telling her so eagerly. The fat woman, whom Sophy had not permitted to remain with her, and to whose care Rosa had given Bobby, took the boy to her room and fed him bonbons, eating some herself to encourage him, and turning aside every now and then to cry again over the poor *tousin* whose Babbo had just been drowned, and who was so innocently gay over this unexpected feast of sweetmeats.

And Sophy, all alone at her window in the bleak hotel bedroom, stood and gazed at the little group on the beach, where Morelli, Peppin, and Luigi were striving to restore her husband to life. The first rigorous methods having been used, they had moved him to the shadow of some trees and spread blankets under and over him—only his head and the upper

part of his chest were now exposed. And on either side knelt the sailor and the doctor. They had each grasped one of the massive arms, and regularly, with a machine-like motion, they lifted these arms up above the prone head, then down again—up—then down again. So powerful did the huge man look, even thus outstretched upon the ground, that it seemed to Sophy as though with his naked, herculean arms, he were bending the two men back and forth—back and forth. She would not believe that he was dead. It was as if, should she allow herself for a moment to believe it, he would really die. It was as if his life depended on her will to believe in it. It was impossible—that thus, in the sunlight, within a few yards of shore, within the sound of her voice, with his midday-meal preparing for him, his clothes awaiting him on the warm beach—that thus in a moment—in the twinkling of an eye—he should be dead....

Up and down—up and down waved the massive arms, white and gleaming in the glare from sky and water. Another figure joined the group. Sophy recognised Tibaldo, the gardener's boy from Villa Bianca. The doctor said something, turning his head sharply. Then she saw Luigi turn back the blankets, and Tibaldo take up a bottle that had been standing near. He poured stuff from this bottle into Luigi's hands, then into his own. They began rubbing the naked man vigorously. The doctor and Peppin paused a moment. She saw Morelli mop his face with his handkerchief, and Peppin sling the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. A change was made. Now it was Luigi and Tibaldo who were moving the great arms up and down, while Peppin and Morelli rubbed the outstretched body vigorously....

All at once, without any warning, she could not see them any longer. All that she could see was an endless reach of gleeful, bright blue water, and floating on it, bobbing drolly, a small, yellow chair. Then she saw nothing—then dark clouds that coiled and swam. She did not regain consciousness for five hours. When she came to herself again, she was lying on the bed with Tilda kneeling at her feet, rubbing them. A man's face was bending over her—the face of Doctor Morelli. The Venetian blinds were closed, making a strange green light in the room ... it seemed to be under water. She struggled to rise, feeling suffocated—feeling as though she, too, were drowning. She heard Morelli take a breath as of relief. Tilda had put down her face upon the bedclothes.

"How is he?... How is my husband?" she managed to stammer.

She felt the girl sobbing against her feet.

"*Coraggio, signora.... Coraggio....*" murmured the doctor. Then she knew. He was dead. She sank again into merciful depths of unconsciousness.

This time, when she recovered, it was into the tender, lustrous eyes of the Marchesa Amaldi that she looked up. As soon as Peppin had brought the news to Le Vigne, the Marchesa had set out for Ghiffa. Amaldi was away on a walking tour in the Carpathians. He had left very suddenly. The Marchesa divined that it was his feeling for Sophy that had caused him to leave so abruptly. She applauded him in her heart while she ached, mother-

like, for his unhappiness. Now came this horrible disaster. She was glad that Marco was away. Sheer pity might have stripped him too bare before her, in spite of his powerful reserve. And with the sense of his hopeless, unfortunate love adding to her own passion of pity for this young creature widowed in so horrible a way, the Marchesa gathered Sophy as it were into the very shrine of mother-tenderness. Never again after that were things quite the same between them. Never again could the Marchesa look on Sophy only as a charming woman whom her son unfortunately loved; never again could Sophy forget, that on the heart of Marco's mother she had lain in that tragic hour.

"Can't you cry, my poor darling?... Can't you cry?" the Marchesa kept murmuring, her beautiful large hand folding Sophy's head to her breast, as it had been the head of a child that she was suckling. But no tears would come. It was as though she were bleeding tears inwardly.

When she was strong enough to rise, she said, whispering:

"I want to go to him."

The Marchesa assisted her to her feet without a word. In silence she led her to the communicating door behind which her husband lay, then stepped aside for her to enter.

Sophy closed the door softly as she went in. It was late at night. Candles burned by the bed, on either side. He lay there immensely, majestically long under the white sheet. Sophy went forward unfalteringly, and kneeling down beside him, lifted back the sheet. Awe filled her at the icy splendour of

that face. She had not known how beautiful he was, until thus translated into cream-hued marble. His brow seemed to triumph; on his lips was that austere, secretive smile as of Initiation, that only death can give. It seemed to her that it was not her husband who lay there before her, but a majestic High-priest, dead with the words of some mysterious and awful ritual still on his lips, now sealed with that smile of ultimate initiation.

She bent closer, very reverently, and kissed the thick fair hair, then the wonderful, triumphant brow. She had never before touched the dead. This coldness of what had been so warm made her realise in one sick throe that the imagination of Divinity may be abominable....

Then all at once in the stark silence of the room she became conscious of the ticking of his watch, made resonant by the bare wood of the table on which it had been placed. Like a little metal heart it seemed, continuing the unavailing minutes of the life that had stopped, while it went on. And next to the coldness of the familiar brow, that ticking of the dead man's watch seemed to her the most fearful thing that she had ever known or dreamed of. She sank back on her knees, her hands folded upon the bed, gazing at that loftily indifferent face, listening to the steady pulse of the watch.... She could not bring it all near her. A tragedy had taken place in some far planet, and this was the mysterious painting of it on which she looked. That was not Cecil who lay there in that frozen dignity, Cecil who had been like a flame from the hottest core of life's great furnace ... he could never have lapsed into such seemingly voluntary passionlessness, even in death. Had there been a frown of revolt on his forehead, he

would have seemed nearer, more real. Thus, he was not Cecil, but a stranger.... She felt confused, impassive and appalled. She was appalled at what she thought her own heartlessness. But then why should she weep for him, when he lay there with such plenitude of satisfaction and agreement on his forbiddingly beautiful, stranger's face?

She went back after an hour into the next room. Her face looked dull and wild at the same time. The Marchesa, who had lain down on the bed, rose and drew her down beside her, keeping gentle but firm hold of her hand. Sophy submitted obediently. She lay until day without moving, her eyes wide open, fixed on the opposite wall. Now and then the Marchesa would turn her head cautiously to see if by chance she had fallen asleep. But the dark eyes were always wide open, fixed on the bright green wallpaper.

"Poor girl," thought the Marchesa. "Poor Marco ... she loved her husband deeply, in spite of all. There may be brain fever unless I can make her cry in some way."

At dawn Sophy was still stretched there moveless, her eyes on the green wall behind which Cecil lay in cold, aloof content.

Robins began their sweet autumnal piping in the hotel garden. A thought came to the Marchesa. Babies waked with birds. She rose softly, and slipped out into the hall. Rosa and Bobby had been given a room just opposite. The Marchesa entered without knocking. The wisdom of the old nurse in the song was in her heart. As she had thought, the boy was awake. He was sitting up in bed, his short red curls tousled, the sleeves of his blue flannel dressing-gown

that came far down over his hands, evidently annoying him, for he tugged at them impatiently. He was trying to make two fiercely moustachioed tin soldiers do battle on the pillow that Rosa had laid before him. Every time that one soldier would almost clash swords with the other, down would come the sleeves like a curtain, extinguishing the warriors.

"Bad teeves!" he was scolding them as the Marchesa entered. "*Pias minga a mi*" (You don't please me). He had picked up much dialect since coming to the Lake. Rosa, who also waked with the birds, and who, attired in a red flannel petticoat and cotton underbody, was washing her face in a corner of the room, kept murmuring, "*Pazienza, tousin, pazienza.*"

She looked up as the Marchesa entered, horrified to be found by a *Sciora* in such attire. But the Marchesa did not glance at her. She went straight to Bobby.

He greeted her joyously.

"My 'ady! Take off!" he cried, holding up his muffled hands.

The Marchesa talked with him for about twenty minutes, then she lifted him, all subdued and piteous, into her arms, and carried him to his mother. The sun had now risen and that green light as of watery depths again filled the room.

The Marchesa put the boy down beside Sophy without a word. She did not look at him, but her arm went round him. Bobby snuggled close, then lifted his head and gazed into her white face. He began "pooring" it with his little hand. The Marchesa had turned back the bothersome sleeves. Then he knelt up to see her better.

"Poor dada ... dwownded...." he murmured, caressing her cheek. "Poor muvvah ... all lone...." His lips began to quiver with the sad sound of his own broken words.... "Don't c'y...." he pleaded, big tears bursting from his own eyes.... "Bobby 'tay wiv you.... Bobby tate tare of you.... Don't c'y...."

And with this he began to sob himself as though his little heart would break.

Sophy started from her trance of numbness. She caught the boy to her.... Then her tears came.... Then she remembered Cecil as her young lover ... her husband.... Then he became real to her again, as she clasped his son in her arms and they wept together.

The Marchesa had stolen out.

"*Ringrazio Dio!*" she said in her heart. She, too, was weeping.

PART II

I

Sophy spent the winter that followed her husband's death in the little cottage at Bonchurch. Her one desire, after Cecil's body had been laid in the Chapel-crypt at Dynehurst, was to return "to her own land

and her own people." But Bellamy had warned her against an autumn crossing for Bobby, and the sudden change to a severer climate. At first she could not bring herself to walk or ride—the sight of blue water sparkling in the sun was so dreadful to her. And it grew to be almost an hallucination that, whenever she looked on it, she saw also a yellow chair, bobbing drolly to the motion of the waves. Little by little she dominated this aversion from the sea. Had it been a lake near which Bonchurch lay, she could not have borne it. But here, after two months, she began to ride daily, and gradually grew strong again.

It was on a lovely day in June when she reached the little country station of Sweet-Waters. The chuckle of Sweet-Water creek, that just here made a special music among crowding stones, rose dearly familiar. And there—there were her Mountains! Tears shut them out for a moment. Before she could see them clearly again, Charlotte's arms were round her. They clung together speechless.

"Oh!" murmured Sophy at last, her face buried in Charlotte's neck. "Oh, Chartie ... how you smell of *home*!"

This made them both laugh. But they were crying, too. The sisters loved each other as twins sometimes do, though they were not twins. Charlotte was eight years older than Sophy. And there, in the broad afternoon sunlight, Sophy again buried her face in her sister's neck to savour the sweet "home" fragrance.

Then she put Bobby in Charlotte's arms. Now Charlotte was afraid to speak. She pressed the boy to her in silence. At last she said:

"He has your eyes, darling," adding: "*I've* a new boy to show you, too, you know."

The long, grave shadows of late afternoon, in which there was no sadness, only the serene beauty of sleep, lay over the rolling fields through which the sisters drove homeward, hand in hand. Each native tree and wild-flower went to Sophy's heart. She so loved this friendly, smiling country, that almost she believed it "loved her back again," as children say. The silver-poplars along the road glittered whitely in a soft breeze. The sky changed to sheeted gold above the bluish mountains. As they turned in at the lawn of Sweet-Waters, the old box-shrubs scraped against the carriage in a way that meant home, and only home. Nowhere else in the world were box-trees set so close together on a driveway, that carriages could not pass without being brushed by the stiff leaves.

Sophy smiled, catching at a sprig as they passed, and Charlotte, also smiling, said:

"Yes. Joe is still promising me to clip them properly."

The old red-brick of the house now glowed on them between the boughs of tulip-trees and horse-chestnuts. They passed the clump of great acacia trees, where stood the round, green tables, covered with pots of pink and white geraniums. Sophy recalled that day when the London window-boxes had brought this memory of home. Now she was here. Home was reality—London the memory.

Judge Macon came down the front steps and took her in his arms as though she had been in truth his sister. He was much moved. Somehow to see her in the dull black of widow's weeds struck him as unnatural. Like most men, he hated "mourning." It

hurt him to see her brightness thus quenched with crêpe.

"Doggone it, Chartie," he said to his wife that night when they were alone, "get that black off of our Sophy as soon as you can. For the Lord's sake, get *some* of it off right away. A human being can't go through a Virginia summer draped like a hearse!"

Charlotte said:

"Oh, Joe, *don't* talk so gruesomely. She'll wear white I'm sure—poor darling."

Then she went to his shoulder and cried frankly.

"I hate it as much as you do," she said. "It almost makes me 'lose my religion' to think of Sophy's being a widow. Don't you know how we—how *every one*—always thought of Sophy as being brilliant and happy?"

"Yes, yes; so we did, so we did," he soothed her. Then he added soberly:

"But those are just the people who seem to attract misfortune ... like lightning-rods," he concluded quaintly.

As soon as they had reached the house, Charlotte took Sophy upstairs to show her the nursery she had arranged for Bobby, and the old nursery just across the hall, that she and Sophy used to share together, and which was now to be her sister's bedroom. Even then Charlotte had ventured to suggest timidly:

"Won't you change to something cooler, dear?"

She longed to see Sophy in white blouse and duck skirt as in old days. She opened a closet door, suggestively. "There are some of your summer things hanging here just as they used to. Mammy Nan did them up for you herself."

Sophy stood with her arm about Charlotte's waist, looking at the freshly laundered, white skirts that she had worn as a girl. They seemed like ghosts to her, gleaming there in the dim closet—phantoms of her dead self—of that joyous, exultant, "cock-sure" girl that had been herself and could never come to life again. A new sadness came over her like the sadness with which we look on the garments of the dead.

"No—I don't think I'll change, Chartie," she said gently. "This gown I have on is really cool."

And she picked up a fold of her thin, crêpe skirt that Charlotte might see for herself. She did not realise that it was the blackness of her dress that Charlotte wanted changed. She was so used to wearing black now that she felt more at ease in it. It had become a sort of uniform. She was one of the army of sorrow. To wear its prescribed black made her feel less conspicuous. The repellent custom of "mourning" has this illogical consolation for its adherents.

But her sadness faded as she looked round the familiar room. The very smell of it was the same. A scent of India matting and beeswax, and the Russia leather of her sets of Shakespeare and Chaucer. She went from object to object, touching them lovingly. Colour had come to her face. Her grey eyes shone dark. She stood at the foot of the green bed with its painted birds-of-Paradise, now but faint blurs of gold and crimson, looking lovingly at its fluted pillow-slips and coverlet of old, white "honey-comb."

"What happy dreams we've dreamed there, Chartie!" she murmured. "We were such happy things."

Charlotte called from the window for Mammy Nan to bring the youngest of her three sons to see "Miss Sophy." This was William Taliaferro, usually called "Winks," Bobby's senior by three months. Jack and Joey were still out somewhere on the farm. Winks had his mother's yellow-hazel eyes, dark curls, and decision of character. He accepted Sophy for an aunt, after some solemn pondering, and allowed her to take him in her arms. She bore him across the hall to "make friends" with his new cousin. It was delightful to see the two youngsters "taking stock" of each other. Like two young cockerels they stood, fronting each other, heads down, thumbs home to the hilt in red mouths, hackles ready to rise at the least sign—round eyes fixed on round eyes. Bobby was the first to remove a glistening thumb. His delicious little grin shone forth.

"Bobby boy!" he announced. "P'ay sogers!"

Winks considered a second longer. Then he, too, removed his thumb.

"Mh-mh," he assented, and allowed Bobby to take him by the hand. They trotted off like brothers born, to play with the tin soldiers that Rosa had already unpacked.

"*Che amorini!*" sighed she, looking after them with clasped hands. She did not ask more of life than two such *bambini* to adore. Rosa's was the true mother-heart. Whether born of her own flesh or of another's, children were all in all to her.

Though Sophy felt so dusty from her journey, she

would not take the time for a tub, from these first, wondrous hours of homecoming. She longed to be out in the old grounds. Charlotte left her at last, to "see about supper." How the familiar phrase warmed Sophy's heart! She peeped again into the nursery before going down. She had worried a little as to how Rosa would "get on" with the darkies. She need not have done so. She found the dear old negress and the Lombard peasant woman sitting side by side. Rosa looked up as she entered, and patted Mammy Nan's rather embarrassed, satiny-brown face.

"Ees goo-ood," she cooed. "*La Mora e molto buona ... molto simpatica.*"

To hear Mammy Nan called "the Moor" made Sophy smile. She stood there smiling at them.

"Rosa's a mighty nice woman, Mammy," she said, slipping easily into the vernacular.

"She sho' do 'pear so," agreed Mammy Nan, amiable but nervous. It seemed so very peculiar to her to have a strange "white 'ooman" patting her cheek and calling her "Cara," when her name was Ann.

II

Sophy went out, while Charlotte "saw about supper," and wandered alone but not lonely through the grounds. It was "sundown," as they say in Virginia. All the west was gold above the darkling violet of the mountains. She went along one of the old brick walks towards the garden. From the stable the scent

of horses and fresh straw blew towards her, mingling with the perfume of the June roses. This, too, meant home. The stable was at the foot of the garden. Ever since she could remember, when the wind was due west, the scent of "horse" had mingled with the scent of flowers.

The garden lay in terraces connected by flights of wooden steps. She sat down on the first flight, between two damask-rose trees, and watched the swallows wheeling to nest against the dim gold of the sky. A great bush of calacanthus spread at her feet. She gathered some of the little, hard, maroon-coloured blossoms, and put them inside the breast of her gown. They would only give out their full sweetness thus warmed. Their perfume of strawberries-in-the-sun and fresh vanilla was the very essence of "home." The *tank-tonk* of cowbells sounded along the meadow field. The cows, just milked, were grazing leisurely again. Frogs crooned softly from the mill-pond. A screech-owl trilled.

The soft, fluctuant ebb and flow of blowing foliage—like an aerial surge playing along skyey strands—came to her from the lawn above. She turned and lay at full length in the warm grass—breast to breast with the earth of home. Her heart beat strong and warm against it—her lips pressed it. And a strange, tender, universal thrill such as she had never known, ran through her as she thus clasped and kissed the soil from which she had sprung, and to which she would one day return....

And suddenly it seemed to her that the greatest gift the gods could send her would be the wish to write again. Ah, if she, the poet that was her truest self, could only rise again! It was not a "resurrection" but

a "*risorgimento*" that she longed for. The word came to her with its memory of Amaldi. But he seemed now only like one of the sad phantoms in her phantasmal past. Nothing, not even the lost spirit of poetry, seemed to her so unreal as her past, leaning secure as she now did on the warm earth of home.

"*Risorgo*.... I rise again...." she murmured, pulling the purple-headed meadow-grass from its close sheath, and nibbling the yellow-white waxen stalks absently. That was a home-taste! She stopped thinking more serious thoughts, to smile down at the nibbled stalk in her hand. "You taste of childhood...." she said to the blade of grass. Then she rose to her feet. Charlotte was calling her. As she went towards the house she mused:

"If I ever write another book of verse, I shall call it '*Risorgimento*.'"

For the next two years, winter and summer, Sophy remained at Sweet-Waters. She felt herself a rich woman in these days, for Gerald had insisted on continuing the allowance that he had made Cecil, to her and Cecil's son. This allowance she found to be two thousand pounds a year. Now that she had become a widow with a son to care for, she grew thrifty. During these two years at Sweet-Waters, Judge Macon invested for her every penny of her allowance, with the exception of four hundred pounds a year. This sum, together with her own income of one thousand dollars, enabled her to share the expenses of the household and provide comfortably for herself and Bobby in all other respects. She remembered that at any moment Gerald might marry, and the allowance cease. She knew, of course, that in case Gerald died without

issue, Bobby would succeed to the title. About the property, whether it were all entailed or only a part of it, she did not know. She had been quite happy to find that under the English Guardianship of Infants Act, 1886, she, the mother, was sole guardian of her son, as Cecil had appointed no other. One of her greatest trials, after the first shock of her husband's death, had been the dread that Lady Wychcote might have some control over Bobby. It was with bitter reluctance that his grandmother parted with him. She had exacted a promise from Sophy that she would not allow too long a time to elapse before bringing him back to England. "Five years ... I must have five years all to myself," Sophy had answered. It seemed to her that, even in five years' time, she would not be able to come to Dynehurst without horror.

"Do you propose to make an American of Cecil's son?" Lady Wychcote had asked bitterly.

"No. I realise that Bobby must be educated in England. But he will only be seven years old in five years from now. I am not so unreasonable as you think me. If I am to live to take care of him I must go home for a time," Sophy had answered.

The quiet magic of that first homecoming held through the years that followed. If a rose could "shut and be a bud again" it would feel much as Sophy felt during those tranquil years at Sweet-Waters.

Her nephews adored her. She had "a way" with boys. When she went to ride, they usually scuttled along on their ponies, one at either rein. Her "guard of honour" she called them. Joey, the eldest, went to school in winter, but Charlotte taught Jack herself—he was only eight. And he used to make Joey glum

with envy during the holidays by telling him of how, in the autumn evenings, Aunt Sophy and he (Jack) would roast chestnuts together before tea—while she told him "Jim hummers of fairy stories."

Sophy read a good deal, but nothing that could touch her too nearly. She was afraid of stirring the deeper self that seemed so sound asleep.

It was odd how bits of her own girlish verse had kept haunting her ever since her return. One she often thought of at this time:

"Frailly partitioned is the Inn of Life:
I will go very softly, lest perchance
I rouse the traveller Sorrow...."

During the autumn of her first year at Sweet-Waters a strange quickening came to her spirit. It came swift and sudden, without warning, as such things always come. "Whereas I was blind, now I see," said the man restored to sight by miracle. Whereas Sophy's creative will had been dead within her, now it lived. It was like the immemorially old and ever new mystery of conception. Her mind was with child—in a supreme, sweet pang it revealed itself. The triumphant blue of an October sky glowed through her window. It was ablaze with silver cloud-sails. Sophy knelt gazing up at this splendour, and within her all was splendour—a glory of thanksgiving—a glory of conscious fertility. The majestic blue of the sky seemed to her like God manifest.

III

It was again June in Virginia—the third summer since Sophy's return. Her new volume of poems, *Risorgimento*, had come out that April. It was being widely reviewed. The "people who mattered" had given it praise. This made her very happy. She had a fortunate nature. Things did not grow stale for her. The powers of wonder and of joy were very strong in her. The lines of George Herbert sang in her heart:

"And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing: O my only light,
It cannot be,
That I am he,
On whom thy tempests fell all night."

But apart from the resurgence of her poetic gift, her whole life seemed also quickening. As the spring burgeoned and flowered into summer, she herself seemed burgeoning and flowering. A great restlessness came over her. She felt impelled to rush out with the tide of spring into the glittering, newly wakened world.

One afternoon there was a big storm brewing at Sweet-Waters. The sunlight was dulled—the leaves hung listless. Over the mountain just behind the house a huge cloud of thunderous blue-black was swelling slowly. Now and then came a flitter of lightning—a muffled detonation far away. Bobby was very much afraid of thunderstorms. But he was now five years old. Sophy could not bear it that her boy should be afraid of anything. She took him in her arms and went out to watch the coming tempest.

"See, Bobby man," she said. "The world's asleep. Now the Storm is coming to wake her up."

"I 'spec she'd wavver sleep," said Bobby doubtfully.

He gazed in awe at the great cedars, so black and sullen blocked out against the tremendous cloud. The intense stillness scared him almost as much as the approaching hurly-burly.

Suddenly there came a violet flash, followed by a bellowing blare of thunder. At the same time a sibilation of leaves ran through the sultry air.

"Le's we *go*, muvvah! Le's we *go*!" urged Bobby in a small voice.

"Not yet, sweetheart. It's so splendid out here. See that big cloud come flying! It's like Sinbad's roc in the fairy tale. Don't you remember?"

"I don't like wocs," said Bobby falteringly.

Now the wind fell on them with a shout. The trees tossed. They bowed wildly, almost to the sunburnt earth. Twigs and leaves spun through the air. White fringes streamed from the inky cloud; then lightning —the sky blazed with a gigantic frond of fire. A pulse stroke—then a shattering, re-echoing roar.

Bobby pressed hard against his mother's breast. He was too much a man to howl, but his heart was as water within him.

"Le's go *now*, muvvah," he whispered.

"Just a minute more, darling. Don't you want to see the rain come over the mountain? Hark! You can hear it—hundreds of little glass-slippered feet, like Cinderella's—running—running——"

This idea fascinated Bobby for a second, but another blast of thunder was too much for him. He began to

tremble.

"Darling," coaxed Sophy, "surely you aren't afraid of God's own thunder?"

"Don't like Dod," said Bobby.

"You mustn't say that, sweetheart. God made the thunder, but he made you and mother, too. He loves you."

"*El pias minga a mi*" (He doesn't please me), said Bobby firmly.

Now the rain swirled over the mountain. In grey-white, hissing clouds it came, as though the earth were red-hot, and the cold drops burst into steam as they smote it. Sophy ran into the house with Bobby. She took him to the upper hall, and knelt down before a door that opened upon the railed roof of the front portico.

"Ah, be a man, Bobby," she pleaded. "You're the only man mother's got in all the world."

He stood with both arms about her neck. The bright, buff freckles showed up clearly on his pale little face. But with underlip thrust out and brows drawn down, his eyelids winking with every flash of lightning, he looked the storm firmly in the face, because "Muvvah" had begged him to be a man.

Charlotte, coming upstairs to see that all window-shutters were properly closed, found them kneeling there together. She had hardly appeared before there came a flash and crash in one, so appalling that Bobby could resist no longer. He flattened himself against his mother's breast and shouted clamorously to be removed.

Then Sophy turned and slipped his hand into Charlotte's. An inspiration had come to her.

"There!" she said. "Stay safe with Aunt Chartie and watch mother! Mother's not afraid!"

The next moment she was out in the scented downpour. To and fro she ran, laughing. Her sleeveless wrapper of white muslin was soon soaked through. The wind beat it close to her in fine, rippled lines. She looked like a living figure from Tanagra. And she had never felt anything more exquisite than this cool, pelting of summer rain against her whole body.

Now and then flares of lightning would illumine her, throwing her light, drenched figure into relief against the wind-blown leaves. She seemed dancing to great tambourines of thunder. Bobby, quite made over by his mother's bravery, gazed on enraptured. She called to him as she whirled:

"Look, Bobby! See how mother loves God's splendid storm!"

Suddenly the boy broke from Charlotte's grasp. He sprang out into the tempest towards his mother.

"Me, too!" he shouted. "*Viva Dio!*" (Long live God!)

Sophy was still smiling to herself over this "*Viva Dio!*" as she braided her damp hair into a loose plait before going down to supper. The placid life at Sweet-Waters was very old-fashioned. During the hot weather there was no dinner served, only this light, simple meal at seven o'clock.

"How like me Bobby is," she thought. "I'm always rebelling against the Deity, and then crying '*Viva Dio!*' in the end."

The storm had passed. She went and stood at her window, drawing in deep breaths of rain-freshened air, dense with sweet-shrub and honeysuckle. A serene level light lay upon the glistening grass—the "clear shining after rain." Now and then a shower of heavy drops loosened by the breeze pattered through the magnolia tree near by. The great tree, splendid with creamy blossoms, looked as though covered by a flight of doves. The birds were at their evening gossip as though no storm had ever been. One alighted on a branch close to her window, beside one of the white, chalice-like flowers, and fluffing up its feathers in a sort of musical frenzy, began its joyous song.

Sophy's heart swelled. It seemed to her that she and the bird and the white, impassioned flower, and the spent storm, and repentant Bobby crying "*Viva Dio!*" were all one. The whole, glad, drenched, shining earth and all that clung to it seemed shouting "*Viva Dio!*"

And she stretched out her arms as though to embrace this thrilling wonder called life, so that the bird broke off its song, and flew away with a loud *frrrrt!* of startled wings, leaving the great white flower trembling as with ecstasy....

She put on an old, corn-coloured muslin frock for supper, made cottage-fashion with a soft kerchief. It was one of her girlhood's dresses. She was proud to

find how easily it hooked about her slim waist. She was still as slender as she had been at twenty. As she ran lightly downstairs she sang to a tune of her own improvisation: "For the rain is over and gone ... the time of the singing of birds has come...."

Her song stopped suddenly. The last turn of the staircase had brought her face to face with a little group in the lower hall—Judge Macon, Charlotte, and two men. One was her cousin Aleck Macfarlane, one was a stranger—a young fellow of about twenty-six. Sophy was struck by the pure Greek type of his head, silhouetted against the outer green of the wet lawn. It looked like some classic bas-relief, seen so in shadow against the light, gleaming grass—bronze on a background of verdigris. He was introduced by Macfarlane.

"My friend, Morris Loring——"

Sophy learned that they had been caught by the storm when they were about a mile from Sweet-Waters. They had taken refuge in a farm-house, and then ridden on.

"We got horribly muddy," said Loring, glancing down at his riding breeches and puttees which were plastered with red clay. He had a fresh, clear voice. Sophy guessed that he was a New Yorker. Now that she saw his face in the light, she thought it manly in spite of being beautiful. She had never before seen a man's face that she thought beautiful. It struck her as very singular. But even in England, where the Anglo-Saxon race so often produces perfect Greek types, she had never seen anything so Hellenic as young Loring. In figure he was tall but slight; the regular horseman's figure—flat-thighed and slim of leg. His riding-clothes were almost *too* well cut, Sophy

thought. Loring appeared to her a little too much like the smart tailor's advertisements of sportsmen attired for riding. But she enjoyed looking at him. She wondered, amused, if he didn't enjoy looking at himself. He, on his side, was thinking: "Lord! What a dazzler! She wins, hands down, over anything I've ever seen!"

Sophy suddenly remembered the loose plait that hung below her waist. She laughed, colouring a little. Loring couldn't get his eyes away from her.

"You must excuse my appearing as Gretchen...." she said. "I got caught in the rain, too. I left my hair down because it wasn't quite dry."

"You really needn't excuse yourself for the way you look, Sophy," said Macfarlane dryly.

Sophy slipped her arm through his.

"Old humbug!" she said affectionately. She was very fond of Aleck. He was about ten years older than she was and had taught her how to ride.

Judge Macon took the two men off to tidy up a bit before supper. As soon as they had disappeared, Charlotte darted to Sophy. She began speaking rapidly in a nervous whisper.

"Sophy!... I'm dreadfully worried—Machunk Creek is 'up' and those two boys (all men under fifty had been 'boys' to Charlotte ever since the birth of her first-born), they'll have to stay all night with us. And they haven't a *thing* to sleep in...."

"Well, but Joe will lend them things of course," said Sophy.

Charlotte's anxiety did not abate.

"That's just it!" she whispered hoarsely. "This Mr. Loring looks so *very* fashionable. And Joe never *will* wear anything but those long, old-fashioned night-shirts! I don't see how I *can* put one of Joe's night-shirts on the Blue-room bed for Mr. Loring, Sophy! Aleck's different— I don't mind Aleck."

Sophy stared at her for a second, then she sat down on the lowest step of the stairs and rocked to and fro, hiding her face.

"Sophy! *Sophy!*" said Charlotte, still in that raucous whisper, and shaking her vexedly by the shoulder. "Stop! Get up and help me! You're *too* trying sometimes!"

Sophy tried earnestly to speak, but laughter kept stopping her.

Charlotte shook her again.

"How selfish of you, Sophy! I can't see where the fun comes in. I tell you I don't *want* to lay out one of poor, dear Joe's night-shirts for that young man to snigger over."

"I ... I don't believe he's the ... the 'sniggering' sort...." murmured Sophy, wiping her eyes.

"Well, to sneer at, then. You've *got* to help me. Can't you think of anything?"

Sophy considered. Suddenly her face became convulsed again.

"I ... I might lend him ... a pair of B-Bobby's pyjamas...." she faltered.

Charlotte turned on her heel.

"Very well," she said haughtily. But Sophy ran after her, repentant. She hooked a cajoling arm in Charlotte's stiffened elbow.

"Don't get huffy, dear," she coaxed. "I'm sure one of Joe's night-shirts will do *perfectly* ... really I do...."

They finally went to the Blue-room together—Charlotte with a white object folded very small over one arm. She laid it on the foot of the bed, outside the old brocade quilt. Then she stood looking discontentedly down on it.

"I'm sure it looks *very* nice," said Sophy.

But Charlotte stood absorbed. Presently she said:

"I really think I'd better unfold it. He might think it was an extra pillow-case."

And she displayed the quaint garment at greater length.

"Thank heaven I marked these myself with white embroidery cotton," she then murmured. "Joe *will* mark them with that horrid, indelible ink if I don't watch him like a hawk. Do you think it looks better so?"

"I think it looks perfectly charming," said Sophy gravely. Then she went off again into uncontrollable fits of laughter. "I ... I even think...." she stammered, "that it will be becoming...."

Charlotte turned her back and left the room, perfectly outdone with her. But all during supper Sophy kept smiling now and then, as she pictured Morris Loring's classic head emerging from the Judge's ample night-robe.

IV

October had come. Sophy and Morris Loring were walking together towards the woods that lay along the hills behind Sweet-Waters. He had ridden over from the Macfarlanes' and was to stay to dinner. Bobby trotted soberly by his mother, his mittened hand in hers. He was a reticent child about his deepest feelings. One of these feelings was that he did not like Loring. As he had said of the Deity in His form of *Jupiter tonans* so he said in his heart of Loring: "*El pias minga a mi.*" Bobby thought in the Lake dialect. It was his medium of intercourse with Rosa. He did not know why he did not like Loring. The young man was particularly nice to him—or tried to be. Children are peculiar. What seems "being nice" to grown-ups, does not always appeal to them by any means. For one thing, Loring always addressed him as "General." This soldierly epithet would have pleased some little boys. It did not please Bobby. He preferred to be called by his own name. Doubtless jealousy had something to do with his dislike of Loring. Until the young man had appeared in the neighbourhood, Bobby had had his mother almost entirely to himself. Now "Mr. Lorwing," like the world in the great sonnet, was too much with them. He even intruded on the hours heretofore sacred to Bobby—firelight hours just before bedtime, when "Muvvah" used to tell such lovely fairy tales: hours like this one, in which Bobby had looked forward to gathering the first chestnuts of the season —just he and "Muvvah," with Rosa to throw sticks into the big trees for them. So Bobby trotted along in

sober silence, wishing that something would happen to make Mr. Lorwing go away forever.

Rosa walked happily in the rear, gathering a great posy of autumn flowers.

The afternoon was lovely—mild yet sparkling. The blue autumnal haze veiled everything. The sky was almost purple. Against it melted clouds of silverish azure. Just over the yellowing wood hung a frail day-moon.

"What a blue day!" said Sophy, looking up at the fragile disk. "Even the moon is blue—it looks as if it were made of thin blue crystal...."

Loring was looking at her.

"That's a good omen—a 'blue moon,'" he said. "All sorts of wonders happen in a 'blue moon.'"

"Well, we might find a blue rose," said Sophy, smiling.

"I've found one."

"Ah! Shall you press it or preserve it in spirits?"

"Blue roses don't fade."

Sophy answered flippantly that in that case he would always be provided with a unique and inexpensive "button-hole"—much more unique and economical than Mr. Chamberlain's orchid.

Loring was still looking at her. She did not look at him, but kept glancing about her at the October landscape that she loved best of all.

"It seems queer that you're so contented in this quiet old place after having led such a brilliant life

abroad," he said. This strain of thought had been roused in him by the mention of Mr. Chamberlain's orchid. "I should think you'd long for it again."

"Not yet," said Sophy.

His face lighted.

"'Not yet'? Then you do feel sometimes that this buried-alive-life won't satisfy you forever?"

"Oh, no! I shall fly far and wide again some day."

Loring was silent. His heart gave a hot twist. This was just what he most feared, that she would "fly far and wide" away from him. He had never in all his exceedingly wilful life desired anything with the frantic vehemence that he desired Sophy. And he was not accustomed to having his desires denied him. At home the household word was: "Morry has such a strong will." This had been the slogan of his childhood: "My will—or nothing. My will—or a burst blood-vessel. Death or punishment in any form—rather than yield my will." He had been rather delicate as a child. So his parents had preferred concession to the convulsions with which he threatened them whenever he was crossed in any way. It was a wonder that he grew up to likable manhood. Yet people thought him "perfectly charming"—a bit spoiled, but delightful. Girls called him "fascinating." His own pals said: "Morry Loring's a good sort. A bit ugly if you cross him—you've got to know how to handle him; but he's all right." By "handling" Loring they meant that one must seem to give him his way while skilfully getting one's own. This was not always practicable. Then coolnesses sprang up. Only two out of the old Harvard set stuck to him. But he was, in fact, not at all a bad sort—

provided that you were willing not to announce too positively and publicly that your soul was your own. And his will was certainly strong. It was a brand-new sensation for him to will so ardently the possession of a thing which he was in sick doubt of securing. It had a poignant yet terrible charm of sheer novelty. And at the same time he experienced an inner revelation which shook him even more. It was the undreamed of capacity for adoration. There was no denying it—his spirit was on its knees to Sophy. She seemed to him as beautifully overwhelming as the suddenly revealed goddess to the shepherd of Mount Ida. There was about her, in addition to the aura of beauty and talent, the glamour of a woman who has moved brilliantly in a brilliant world. Had he been told that this naïf snobbishness had much to do with his novel emotion of adoration, he would have received the information with a tempest of incredulous and outraged wrath. Yet, though undoubtedly due to it in part, there was also genuine humility in his love for Sophy—that romantic abasement of self which makes a man find a subtle pleasure in the realisation of his own unworthiness.

Loring had come down to Aleck Macfarlane's country place to buy hunters. When he saw Sophy, he believed suddenly in Fate. No mere chance wish to buy hunters had sent him to Virginia. Here was the Lady of Legend—the Princess out of the fairy-tale books of his boyhood. He had always heard of Virginia as romantic. Now he found that it was inhabited by Romance herself in the person of Sophy Chesney. He had heard often of the Hon. Mrs. Cecil Chesney. He knew that she "had written something." Poems were not much "in his line." Yet he sent to Brentano's for Sophy's poems the day after he met her. He was frankly disappointed in them. He had

expected something more fiery. And he tried to get a volume of her first book, *The Shadow of a Flame*. But it was out of print. He had given Brentano an order to find it for him. Only that morning the book had arrived from England. He was still tingling with the fearless, young passion of her printed words, as he walked now beside her. Her own words seemed to put him from her—far back with that past self which she no longer was, and which he craved to have her be again. And how young she looked ... what a girl! It was absurd, vexatious, incredible, impossible that so keen a flame should have died down into the white ash of philosophy ... as expressed in her latest poems.

"A penny...." said Sophy.

His long silence disturbed her. He gazed down at her, his bold eyes softening.

"I was thinking that you looked about nineteen, with that black bow on your hair," he said.

"And you say that as if you were about ten," she retorted, laughing.

"I don't feel ten."

"And I don't feel nineteen."

"Yet you're really not quite old enough to be so devilish motherly with me." His tone was quite pettish.

She was teasing him on purpose. She had found out at once that he was badly spoilt. It pleased her to see him wince, and flush, helpless under her amiable elderliness. She liked him very much, but she didn't want any love-making, though she didn't mind his

being so evidently in love with her. She thought that a "disappointment in love" might do him no end of good—teach him that he couldn't "swing the earth a trinket at his wrist"—avenge some of the many young women with whom she felt sure that he had flirted outrageously. One wasn't given a Greek head, many millions, and an exaggerated sense of one's Ego, in order that one might practise the homelier virtues, such as unselfishness.

At his "devilish motherly" she laughed out—her ringing, contralto laugh, that was so delicious and that made him want to shake her and to kiss her violently, at one and the same time.

"'Devilish motherly'...." she repeated. "I'm sorry I remind you of Medea—she's the only person I can think of who was 'devilish motherly' ..."

Before Loring could reply, Bobby's voice broke in, austere and haughty.

"My muvvah is *not* deviliss," he said.

Loring went round beside him.

"Bully for you, General!" he exclaimed. "You'd fight a duel with me this minute, if you could—wouldn't you?"

Bobby pressed close to Sophy. He refused to yield Loring his other hand.

"Please go away," he said coldly. "I don't want you."

"Well ... your 'muvvah' don't want me either."

"No. She wants me," said Bobby.

He looked up at Sophy, his chin quivering. He

resented Loring's imitation of the way that he pronounced "mother."

"Don't you?" he appealed to her.

She stooped to him.

"More than anything in the whole, round world or the blue sky," she reassured him. He smiled to feel her lips on his cheek. Close in her ear he whispered:

"We don't want *him*, do we? Make him go away."

"No. We must always be polite," she whispered back.

He sighed deeply.

"It's awful hard being p'lite," he mourned. "Mos' as hard as being good."

They all walked on in silence for a few moments.

Then Bobby said, with what Sophy called his "inspirational look":

"God ain't p'lite, Muvvah."

"Hello!" laughed Loring.

"Sssh!" said Sophy, flashing him a vexed look.

"Why, darling?" she asked her son.

"'Cause ev'y night I talks and talks to God, an' He never even says, 'Mh-Mh, Bobby.' Vat ain't p'lite—are it?"

Loring strode on ahead to have his laugh out. He thought Bobby the "funniest little beggar" in the world. She was always scolding him for laughing at the boy out of season.

"Children and dogs hate being laughed at," she now told him. "Didn't *you* hate being laughed at when you were little?"

"Can't remember," said Loring. "I suppose so. But as for that, men don't like being laughed at either."

"*You* don't, I know. But it's very good for you."

"Why isn't it good for the General?"

"My name's Bobby," came the small but haughty voice. At times her son reminded Sophy strikingly of Cecil. This was just Cecil's tone with presuming strangers.

"Very well, Bobby—do *you* know why it's good for me to be laughed at, but not for you?"

"I don't fink it matters," said Chesney's son, again in exactly the tone that Chesney would have used. Sophy felt too awed to feel amused. She felt that with the law of continuance thus powerful, death, in one sense, ceased to exist.

"You don't like me, do you, Bobby?" asked Loring, looking queerly at the child.

"Not much—p'ease to 'scuse me," replied Bobby.

"Funny little tot you are," said Loring, rather hurt. Then, to his surprise, he suddenly realised that he on his side, didn't really like Bobby. It seemed as if the child came wilfully between him and Sophy. He walked on moodily, cutting with his riding-crop at the pyred flames of golden-rod, his handsome, short-lipped mouth very sullen.

"What's the matter?" asked Sophy, to break another too long silence. "You look like a tinted marble of

Endymion in the sulks."

Loring turned on her passionately.

"Mrs. Chesney," said he, "would you mind letting up on my rotten appearance! It isn't my fault that I've got a nose like a damned statue's!"

His face was scarlet. Sophy put her hands up to her own face to temper the brutality of her wild mirth.

V

But this laughter of Sophy was so winsome, as she glanced at him through her shielding fingers, that Loring gave way and began to laugh himself. This was another new sensation for him—the joining in a laugh against himself.

"I'm a frightful ass, I know, to mind so much when you tease me," he said as they walked on. "But you make me feel such a fool—such a 'pretty fellow'...."

"You *are* a pretty fellow," murmured Sophy. "When you get red with anger like that you're quite dazzling."

"Oh, I say! Don't you think you're a bit *too* hard on me?" Loring protested.

He still writhed inwardly. It is acute agony to six and twenty to be made fun of by the object of its adoration.

Bobby's voice piped in again.

"*I* don't fink you're pretty," he remarked.

"Thanks, old chap," said Loring, this time without laughter.

They had reached the woods, on whose edge stood the big chestnuts, all one-sided from the reaching of their branches towards the free sunlight of the open. Behind them stretched the forest, a glitter of trembling yellow, shot with the velvet black of twigs and stems. Here and there a bough of maple fluttered as with swarms of scarlet butterflies. Above the leathern carpet of last year's leaves shone the lilac disks of autumn asters, and the brown, bee-like heads of self-heal, set with tiny, purple trumpets. The chestnuts were thick with greenish-brown burs.

"I see 'em! I see 'em!" Bobby cried, dancing gleefully, and making a noiseless clapping with mittened hands. For a moment the sight of the clustered burs among the pointed, russet leaves had made him forget his Kill-joy, Loring.

"*Oh! Che splendore!*" cried Rosa, running up.

She and Loring threw sticks among the laden branches. The nuts came down with pleasant *swups* upon the smooth, thick mat of dead leaves.

It was charming to kneel there in the warm October sunlight, at the edge of the rustling wood, pounding away the prickly hulls from the brown, smooth chestnuts. A fresh, pleasant scent rose from the bruised hulls. The breath of the autumn wood was keenly sweet. It smelt of wild grapes and mushrooms. From a field close by stole the odour of pumpkins that had been lying in the sun all day. And this mingled fragrance, so deliciously of the earth

earthy, seemed just the perfume that would be shaken from October's russet smock as he strode across the land.

Sophy stood up at last. She lifted her arms in a boyish stretch, and stamped her feet which had "pins and needles" in them from crouching so long. Her big, clubbed plait had been somewhat loosened by her vigorous pounding. Leaves and withered grasses clung to her short, cord skirt. As she stood there stretching her cramped limbs, and laughing nervously as her feet "woke up" again, with the light wind frowzing the loose strands of hair about her face, and her short skirt disclosing her ankles in their tight-laced, brown shooting-boots, she certainly looked quite young enough, and girlish enough, to be Loring's sweetheart rather than Bobby's mother.

And Loring was thinking vehemently, his hands clenched on the chestnuts in his pockets:

"She's *got* to love me.... I'll *make* her love me.... I'll *make* her marry me.... I will.... I will!"

"Ouf!" said Sophy, letting her arms drop. "That was delicious! And what are you so fiercely determined over? You look ... but I won't say what you look like ——"

"No ... don't, please," replied Loring shortly.

He turned away to help Rosa adjust the top of her hamper, which would not fit into place over the hard, round chestnuts.

It was beautifully still. The western sky was beginning to redden. A crisp rustling came from the shocks of Indian corn in a near field.

"It must be after five ... time for my Bobbikins to be trotting home," said Sophy, taking his sober face between her hands and crumpling it together like a soft flower. Then she laughed and kissed the crumpled flower of the little face.

"*Ho-o-o-g! Ho-o-o-g!*" came the long-drawn, minor wail of a negro-voice calling the swine from the mountain for their evening feed.

Rosa went off down the hill, with Bobby trotting at her side. Once the little fellow looked back—only once. His dignity forbade that he should be thought regretful. And "Muvvah" had promised to come and roast chestnuts for him before his bedtime.

"Now for a brisk walk!" said Sophy. "Let's strike into the woods at random and go a little way up the mountain—not far—I must be back to roast those chestnuts before Bobby's bedtime."

"You never break your word to him, do you?" said Loring, as they plunged into the golden depths that seemed aglow with stored sunlight.

"No. Never. I'd rather break my word to ten grown-ups than to one child."

They went on in silence for some yards, the dried leaves ruffling almost to their knees in places. Then Loring said:

"If you once gave your word you wouldn't break it to child or grown-up."

"I don't know.... I've never been tested."

"I know."

"Thanks. But you shouldn't get into the habit of

idealising people. You'll end as a cynic if you do."

Her tone was pleasantly mocking.

Loring said quietly:

"I've never idealised but one person in my life."

"Well ... perhaps that's being a little *too* cautious."

"Caution has nothing to do with it. Such things come or they don't come."

"Yes ... perhaps they do. Ah! Wild grapes! What beauties!"

She stood gazing up at the little clusters of purple-black fox-grapes that hung against the arch of yellow leaves overhead. The vine had swung itself in great loops about a dogwood tree. The grapes were like a delicate design of wrought iron work against the gilded background of autumn leaves. But they hung high—out of reach. Loring caught at them with the handle of his riding-crop. Some of the ripe, purplish beads pattered about them.

"No—no! You can't get them that way," said Sophy. "They're too ripe."

"Wait.... I'll have a go for them this way," said Loring.

He grasped a bough of the tree in either hand, shook it to assure himself that it was equal to his weight, then swung himself up into its crotch. By standing with an arm about the main stem, he could reach the bunches easily on either side. Sophy held out the lap of her skirt.

"You *are* a nice playmate!" she called up to him, smiling.

He tossed down bunch after bunch from where he stood. Then, seating himself sideways on one of the larger boughs, gathered all that were within reach. His bare head, with its clustered, red-brown hair, looked quite wonderful in the setting of golden leaves and iron-blue grapes.

"Forgive me...." said Sophy. "But I *must* tell you.... You look like the young Dionysus—with those bunches of grapes hanging all about you."

"Well, that's odd," said Loring; "but from here you look to me like Ariadne." He thanked the gods that he had not forgotten all his mythology. "I ask nothing better than to give you a crown of stars. I believe that's what Dionysus gave Ariadne ... when she became his wife."

Sophy laughed.

"You dear boy," said she. "That was very quick of you. And I like you for conquering your evil temper so nicely. You never had a sister, had you?"

"Why! Are you thinking of offering to be a sister to me?"

"Not at all. I was only thinking that you wouldn't be so 'techess,' as the darkies say, if you'd had a nice, blunt sister to tease you when you were young—that is, younger than you are now," she ended cruelly.

Loring swung himself down beside her.

"The atrocious crime of being a young man!" he said, looking into her eyes boldly and somewhat mockingly, in his turn. "It seems hard for you to forgive me that."

Sophy was a trifle disconcerted.

"You are so easy to tease ... it's a temptation," she said rather lamely.

Loring replied with apparent irrelevance.

"I believe the Brownings are the accepted standard of married bliss, aren't they?"

"Why—yes—I believe they are," admitted Sophy.

"Very well. And do you happen to remember that Elizabeth Barrett was some years older than Robert Browning!"

Sophy was annoyed to feel herself colouring.

"Yes, I know that," she said coldly.

Loring kept his eyes on her. She was eating the little fox flavoured grapes as she walked beside him—very deliberately, one at a time.

"What I find so peculiarly interesting about it," continued Loring, his voice shaken, his heart racing, "is that the difference in their ages was even more than the difference in ours."

Sophy threw aside the bunch of grapes with an impetuous movement. She turned, looking him full in the face. She was very pale now and her eyes shone black. She had not foreseen any such sudden climax as all this.

"Don't ... don't spoil it...." she said vehemently, "don't spoil our pleasant friendship.... I beg of you not to do it."

They stood facing each other, shut alone into the great gold temple of the woods. Loring's beautiful bold eyes were black also. He, too, was white. The

pent up passion of his worshipping love for her, that had all the unreasoning fire of a convert's fanaticism, burnt his lips with words. He had not meant to speak. Five minutes ago nothing had been further from his thoughts than the outburst, which now shook him with its violent suddenness.

"You can't stem the high tide with a straw...." he said low and breathless. "Do what you will with me.... I love you.... I more than love you.... I worship you.... I adore you.... Break me if you like.... Snap my life in two.... Throw away the broken bits.... But I worship you.... I worship you!"

He dropped suddenly to his knee on the brown leaves; caught the hem of her clay-stained skirt to his lips. He was past all self-consciousness. He had no dread of seeming ridiculous. Indeed it did not occur to him that he could be ridiculous. Young love has no sense of humour. His white, intense face looked up at her amazingly beautiful—the face of a wood-god kindled with awed passion for some skyey deity. And this sheer beauty of his kept Sophy also from seeing anything absurd in his kneeling there to kiss the soiled hem of her skirt. Supreme beauty, like supreme love, is never ridiculous. The gods wept over Icarus tumbling from his sire's chariot in mid-heaven. They would have tittered had it been lame Vulcan sprawling after his whirling hammer through the gulfs of ether. In the few seconds that Sophy stood transfixed, gazing down into that exalted young face, she understood how the legend of the moon's white stoop to Endymion had been invented. Not imagination so much as material beauty had been the source of the Greek myths. The artist and the poet in her ranged themselves on Loring's side. Her first impulse of anger was replaced by a sad

tenderness. She forgot the Morris Loring of everyday in this Endymion of a moment. She forgot even that she had called him like Endymion "in the sulks" only a short while ago. This youth, with the white flame of worship quivering up from his heart's altar and lighting the antique mask of his ardent face—with his awed, yet eager eyes burning upon hers—this was a different thing—one quite new to her. She was startled by the throe of pitiful regret that seized her. If only she had been different herself ... a young virgin ready to receive this outpouring of virginal love.... What miracles would have enfolded them ... what wonders of dawn-time ecstasy. She had been mistaken. A face so beautiful could be only the symbol of a lovely soul. And this soul was gazing at her from the timid passion of the dark eyes, no longer bold, but infinitely, touchingly imploring. In continuous, swift flashes, like the luminous particles from radium, these thoughts showered from her mind, as she stood gazing down at him.

"I've heard of it.... I never believed.... Now I believe..." he was stammering. "My soul's in your body.... Your beautiful body is more than any soul to me.... I pray to you.... My soul in you prays to you...." He caught up a bit of leafy clay that had adhered to her foot, and pressed that also to his lips. "See...." he stammered on, "the dirt from your shoe.... That's how I love you...."

And even this act did not make him seem ridiculous. But Sophy caught his wrist, holding back his hand from his lips that trembled into a white, half-smile.

"My dear...." she said, her own voice shaken. "My dear boy.... Please...."

She felt her words very stupid—inane.

"Come...." she said, pulling at the strong wrist to make him regain his feet. He yielded to her touch and rose, standing tall and quivering before her.

"Won't you even let me worship you?" he asked in a smothered voice.

"My dear, no ... be reasonable...."

It seemed to Sophy that she had never been at the mercy of such banalities as her mind now offered.

He stared, his lip curling.

"Reasonable!"

"I mean...." Fitting words would *not* come to her. "You forget...." she said confusedly.

"What ... what do I forget?"

"My life ... what is past.... My life is over ... that part of life...."

"*Your* life?... *Over?*..." He gazed at her so that her eyes wavered from his. She could not help this. It distressed her to be standing there before him in her short skirt, bare-headed, with eyes that would not keep steady. She felt that he had the advantage of her out there in those wide, still aisles of gold with their groining of dark branches. It was as if he had her far from home, in his own haunts. The glowing forest sustained him, gave him his natural setting. He stood there facing her, the young wood-god in his own domain. She felt a droll almost hysteric yearning for trailing skirts, and the dignified refuge of an armchair. That absurdly girlish bow of black ribbon seemed to burn her neck. She knew that she looked incongruously young for the soul that inhabited her. She made a desperate grasp at dignity

of voice. Her cold tone should be her trailing garment—make him realise the distance that was spiritually between them. When she spoke it was in a steady voice.

"My life—as regards love—is over, because I have come to a place in it where I do not even wish love," she said icily. A banal quotation slipped from her before she could stop it. "'*Ich habe geliebt und gelebe*n,'" she said, vexed at the crass ordinariness of the words as they struck her ear.

There was silence. A squirrel dropped a nut through the still, flaky gold of lapping leaves—then chittered angrily at its own awkwardness.

Loring said at last in a strangled voice:

"I am jealous of that dead man."

Sophy whitened.

"Don't say such things to me," burst from her in a sharp whisper.

"Have I hurt you?" he whispered back. "I'd die for you ... have I hurt you? Did you love him so much as that? Are you really dead ... with him?"

"Yes."

Another silence. Then the wilful, passionate young voice broke out again:

"No! you are not dead ... you are not dead! You are only sleeping...."

Sophy started as though from a sort of sleep.

"We must go," she said. "I'd forgotten...."

She turned and began walking rapidly away from him.

He caught her up in a stride.

"You break my life like a rotten twig," he said. "And go to roast chestnuts for your son."

The anguish of bitterness in his voice kept his words from absurdity.

"Don't say such things ... don't say such things," Sophy murmured, walking faster and faster. He kept beside her, implacable in the smarting novelty of defeated love and will.

"Your face is so beautiful and gentle.... Who would have thought you could be so hard ... like flint?"

"I am not hard.... I only tell you the bare truth to save you pain."

"You can't save me pain. Why do you throw me these mouldy crusts of old sayings? I offer you the best of me.... Don't you even think me worth a word out of your heart?"

Sophy paused. Her heart gushed pity—and regret.

"Oh, my dear...." she said lamentably, looking up at him with frank pain. "Why do you want to make it so hard for us both?"

"Then ... it is hard ... a little ... for you, too? I mean ... it hurts you to hurt me so?"

"Yes, yes, it hurts me! Do you think I am made of stone? Do you think I like seeing you suffer?"

"Then...." his throat closed on the words he wanted to say. He was ignominiously near to tears. Chokily he

got it out:

"Then ... don't send me away ... just because ... I love you. Let me stay near you.... It can't hurt you ... and it's life to me."

"No, no. That would be horribly wrong of me—utterly, hatefully selfish."

He caught at this.

"You'd like to have me? You've called me a good 'playmate,' you know. I won't bore you with—with"—he gulped—"this craziness of mine.... If I'm 'good' ... you'll let me stay on?"

"Oh, it's all wrong! It's all wrong, my dear!" said Sophy, quite desperately. "You should go away at once. This is all just a phase ... just a passing...."

"Please," said Loring, with real dignity.

Sophy felt very unhappy. She knew that she was doing wrong to temporise. Yet that cruel kindness of the tender-hearted made her hesitate. She could not bear to banish him all at once in this harsh way.

"Well ... for a little while...." she murmured weakly. "But it would be much better for you to...."

"Please," said Loring again. "Allow me to judge of what will be best for me."

"I ought not to," she said miserably. The whole scene had unnerved her—jarred the fine, secure monotony of the life that she had thought so firmly established. One cannot stand face to face with genuine love without feeling a stir in chords long dumb. Loring's young, idealising passion had set certain strings in Sophy's nature vibrating. It gave her that sensation of

aching melancholy with which we listen to the faint notes of an old piano that was rich and mellow in our youth. It made her feel very lonely. She had not once felt lonely since coming home—not once in these calmly joyous years of mental renewal. Restlessness she had known of late, but never loneliness. Now she felt all drooping with the solitude of her own spirit as she walked homeward beside Loring. The soft, dun red of the autumn sky seemed to her like the quiet, sombre glow of her own life that had no more flame to give forth, that had sunk into steady embers, that would presently resolve itself into the white ash of old age. Yet it was wonderful to be loved again—even though she had no love to give in return. It was movingly wonderful —though awful in a way—to feel this tonic answering of slack chords to the full, resonant notes struck from the blazing lyre of youth....

VI

Loring had said that he would be "good" if Sophy did not banish him altogether, and he was, very "good." It was the goodness of a spoilt child that swallows physic for the spoonful of jam to follow. The jam in Loring's case was represented by the hours that he was allowed in Sophy's presence. He had not known himself capable of such self-control. Altogether, his love for Sophy had revealed to him as it were another man cased within the man that he had heretofore thought was himself. This new man was of more sensitive stuff, finer and yet much stronger

than the other man had been. It was something like having a sixth sense bestowed on him—this new appetency for all manner of things towards which until now he had only felt a vague indifference. His life, since college days, had been made up of sport, occasional spurts of travel in wild places, girls—to a moderate degree—the usual convivial, surface intercourse with other young bloods—some ennui, generally dispelled by drink (the average young American's ordinary indulgence in "high-balls" as a panacea for tedium).

Loring had an excellent, but lazy, mind. At Harvard he had read law. Once out of college, he had dropped it promptly. He had inherited fifteen millions at his father's death, when he was only twenty-one. What was the use of moiling away at law? The property was looked after already by a firm of the most distinguished lawyers in New York. He could see no "sense" in racking his brain with work that bored him when this work was absolutely without necessity. So he had spun in gay peripheral circles with the wheel of life—until meeting Sophy. Now she had drawn him to its centre. It was strange how his consciousness, thus centrifugally established, seemed another consciousness. Only the present was real—this radiant and somewhat awful present in which he loved Sophy as he had not believed that human beings could love. His past seemed like a dull, cheap volume of gaudy colour-prints. He could not realise that he had moved through those vulgar pictures of the past. *This* Morris Loring, he felt, had not been part of them. He flared hot with shame, merely in glancing back at them. Yet his life had not been really shameful—in the grossest meaning of the word. Some sensual pleasure he had taken, not much. In the odiously smug phrase with which his

native literature was given to describing virtuous youth, he was rather by way of being a "clean-limbed, clean-minded young American." But the pig of St. Anthony has a trick of running between the limbs of youth, no matter how cleanly—indeed, he seems to take an evil joy in tripping the cleanliest, if only once. It was these chance tumbles into the mire that scalded Loring's heart with shame, as he knelt now at the white shrine of his lady. He would have liked to have a new body as well as a new soul to love her with. For the will in him had not really submitted to her will. It was only bent to this momentary obedience, like a strong spring ready to act at the least touch. Love made him as wary and as cunning as a fox in springtime. Not for one moment did he relinquish his determination to win her ultimately. In the meantime, he was "good." That is, he did not vex her by hinting at his love.

All his energies were concentrated on becoming such "a playmate" as she would miss if taken from her. He was like Jacob serving for Rachel. This new life that had sprung up in him seemed to have the indomitable patience of spiders. And without tiring, ceaselessly, exhaustlessly, he spun about her the fine web of pleasant habit—a mesh of delicate, trivial customs, fine as the silken band that bound Fenris, and that would be as hard to break should the time come when she wished to break it.

His family and friends thought, of course, that he was merely staying on for the Virginia hunting season. It seemed reasonable enough. The "Eldon Hounds"—Macfarlane's pack—were well known in the North; but the Hunt was not fashionable. Most Northern sportsmen went to Loudoun county. There was too much wire in this part of Albemarle. Even

Macfarlane threatened to leave if something could not be done about the wire. So Loring set to work in the matter. He became very popular in the county. This rather bored him, but he must seem to remain for the hunting. He did not choose that there should be gossip. He was very careful about his visits to Sweet-Waters. Even the Macfarlanes did not know how often he went there.

As for Sophy, after the first qualms of conscience had passed, and she saw how easily Loring slipped back again into the old, pleasant intercourse, she was delighted to have him stay on. He had a great charm for her, the charm of sheer beauty and a certain winsomeness that even Charlotte was beginning to yield to.

For this strange baptism of white fire changed Loring in all respects. His egotism shrivelled under it. He glowed with fellow kindliness towards every one. The homely, simple life of the Macons became full of enchantment to him. He did all sorts of little odd jobs for Charlotte, such as riding three miles out of his way to post a forgotten letter, or nailing hinges on the pigeon-house door, when there was no carpenter to be had for days.

Winks thought him a delightful person. He had the most glorious rides around the lawn, on Loring's hunters, every time that he came to Sweet-Waters. Even Bobby grew a little more tolerant. He, too, enjoyed these ambles on the big, shining beasts, that rattled their nostrils with high spirits, and stepped mincing sideways, as Loring walked at the bridle-rein. The boys straddled proudly, their small legs jutting wide apart, on the huge slanting shoulders of "Omicron" or "Proud Aleck."

Loring begged Sophy to try the splendid red hunter that he had bought from Macfarlane.

So she followed the hounds on Proud Aleck, and if Loring had adored her before, he could scarcely keep his love in hand when he saw her riding so gallantly at the tricky snake-fences, mounted on the glittering blood-red horse.

And, when the run was over, came the homeward ride with her, across twilit pasture lands and fallow. They would select low gaps in the fences—then over, side by side, like birds. There would be the reek of ploughed earth and wood smoke in their nostrils. Sometimes a rabbit would leap up under the horses' feet, making them swerve, snorting. They would see the little white, fluffy scut go zigzagging through the yellow broom-sedge.

As winter drew on, and they became more intimate, she read him some bits of her childish scribblings that she had discovered, put away by her mother in an old chest. They made deliciously funny reading in the firelit hours of tea-time. One line from a long, sprawling tragedy in blank verse came to be a saying with Loring:

"'Ah well to rob a comet of its tail
To make the moon a wig!'"

he used to quote dramatically, when anything seemed impracticable. He *was* a dear playmate! Sophy became very fond of him indeed. And Loring, for his part, loved every member of the household, especially Judge Macon. There was such a taking contrast between the genial humour of the man and his gaunt, lean figure with its dark, rather tragic-looking face, that reminded him of the photographs

of Edwin Booth as "Hamlet." Yes, he certainly looked like a world-worn, weary Hamlet who had recovered with only a slight lameness from Laertes's sword-thrust. The Judge limped a little from a bullet in his knee. He had fought in the Southern army when a lad of sixteen. Loring, as he watched the Judge limping about the house, mused sometimes on what life must have been like in Virginia when boys of sixteen had gone to war.

The Judge, on his side, returned Loring's liking in full. He quite exasperated Charlotte by what she called his "real weakness" for the young man.

"Yes, I've got a mighty soft spot for this Yankee boy," he would admit. Then he would chuckle wickedly. "But it's nothing to Sophy's," he would add; "only she don't know it."

Charlotte's more kindly feeling towards Loring did not keep her from being quite miserable over such possibilities. She thought them only too likely. She could foresee nothing but unhappiness for Sophy in such a marriage. Yet she was helpless. Sophy was not the sort of person that one could "guide." There was nothing for it but to leave her in God's hands, as the Judge had once suggested. Charlotte was truly religious. Yet it is strange how hard it is for the truly religious to "leave things in God's hands." "Putting parcels in the Heavenly post-office, and jerking at them by the string of prayer," the Judge called it.

Towards the end of November Loring's mother fell ill. He was telegraphed for. He was very fond of his mother, but the old egotism surged up in him when he read that she was not in danger, only suffering. He could not ease her suffering. That was the affair of doctors and trained nurses. However, he left for

New York at once.

VII

Loring was not able to return to Virginia until the middle of January. He arrived at the Macfarlanes' late in the afternoon, and as soon as supper was over had Proud Aleck saddled and rode to Sweet-Waters.

The night was wild with wind, but very clear. A newly risen moon tilted above the eastern woodlands. The wind played madcap games—now leaping high into the heavens, now rushing low along the earth. The great half-moon just skimming the dark reach of forest was like a silver sail bellying in the flaw.

Loring exulted to feel the bay's withers once more between his knees, and the free countryside about him. He rode at a clipping trot, then galloped; then gave the horse his head up a long hill. Proud Aleck, excited by the gusty wind, sped like a racer over the bone-white winter grasses. They faced the blast gloriously. The warm reek of the flying horse blew back in Loring's face. He felt the great body plying nobly against his legs. Now they swept downward, jumped a brook, leaped into fallow. The huge horse seemed bounding over a floor of dark-red cloud, so easily he took the ploughland of spongy clay, so noiselessly his hoofs went over it. Now they breasted another hill. This was living! To ride with the winter wind through the cold flame of moonlight to the glowing hearth of his Lady!...

Would she be alone, he wondered—in her own study?... Or would she be sitting with her sister and the Judge in the general living room?... He cantered across the lawn. Ah—there was a flicker of firelight from her study window!... Perhaps she was there. Perhaps he would have the joy of seeing her alone, this first moment after those interminable six weeks....

Mammy Nan told him that she opened "de do'" for him, "'caze Miss Chalt an' dee Jedge done step over tuh dee Univussity, an' I'se sleepin' in dee house tuh keep keer uv Miss Sophy."

Miss Sophy was "in her steddy," Mammy Nan further informed him. She "sut'ny wuz glad he done come tuh cheer Miss Sophy up some. 'Peared like, to Mammy Nan, that she'd ben a-mopin' ever sence Miss Chalt an' dee Jedge tuck an' lef' her behine."

Loring found Sophy sitting in the firelight, gazing at the big logs of hickory, and smoothing her collie's head as it rested against her knee. The room was large but cosy. It had old-fashioned curtains of dark-red worsted grosgrain at the windows. Little green "steps" set between them held pots of flowers. There was all through the room a sweet scent of rose-geranium, lemon verbena, and the clean, fresh fragrance of new-cut logs. It was the perfume that he associated with her. He stood near the door after entering, breathing deep of this pleasant, candid scent, and drinking her with his eyes.

She looked up, startled. And he shook inwardly with the soft firelit beauty of her face. She was wearing a gown that he loved—an old gown of olive velveteen trimmed with narrow bands of fur. It was made like the gown in a picture, quite straight from throat to

shoe-tip. The long, wide sleeves opened from the shoulder. They hid her arms usually; but when she reached for something, her lovely, slender arms gleamed between the soft bands of fur. Behind her, on her writing-table, was an old Algerian water-bottle of dull copper, and in it a branch of magnolia. The scarlet seed-cones gleamed like gems or coals of fire among the glossy black-green foliage. Her face as it turned to him against this background of leaves and jewelled seed-cones was something for a lover to remember in old age.... He got a desperate grip of himself and went forward. As she lifted her hand to his, the wide sleeve parted, as he had known that it would do, and the amber-white arm shone bare for his worship.... Without speaking, she smiled a welcome, but the firelight showed him tears caught on her under-lids. Mammy Nan's surmise was correct. Sophy had been "moping" a little of late. When Charlotte and the Judge had left for some festivity at the University two days ago, her mood had been quite tranquil. But she had been rather overworking, and these two days, all alone in the empty house, had set her brooding. It was nearly nine o'clock. The wind thrummed in deep, minor chords between the double doors that shut her study from the greenhouse in the wing. A hound, hunting alone by moonlight, bayed from the distance. Dhu cocked his ears—the supple tips hung flickering an instant, then drooped again. The collie resumed his wide, gold-eyed, tranced stare into the fire. He, too, seemed overwhelmed by melancholy. Sophy drew him to her at last, and leaned her cheek against his silky black shoulder which smelt like warm, clean straw. His sire was not a kennel dog, but tended sheep in the Highlands. Now when Sophy put her head against his shoulder, he leaned down his head

on hers much as a person might have done.

With her arms around him and her eyes on the fire, she listened to the beating of his heart. The warm, red mystery of hearts—even a dog's heart—awed her. What was this love that even dogs could feel, and why was it so immeasurably sad? The feeling of desolation grew and grew.... She was so horribly lonely. Even the close, simple contact with her collie did not comfort her. This love without comprehension, that he gave her, was only another sadness. Nothing lasted. No one remained the same. There was Morris Loring.... At least he had seemed to have a real fondness for her, after he had conquered his first boyish, fantastic frenzy. Yet already he, too, had changed, forgotten. Just a nice, beautiful boy ... but she had been fond of him also.... Now he had forgotten. She was growing old. Youth draws youth. Naturally he would forget her.

The collie, hearing her sigh, got down from his chair and leaned his head against her knee with a low whine. She sat gazing at the burning logs and gently stroking the sleek, black head. It was so that Loring found her when he entered.

VIII

He had put all his will into that grip upon himself when he went forward. But now as he stood looking down at her, and saw the tears on her lashes, his heart seemed a white-hot weight that dropped him to his knees beside her. He did not dare touch her, but

he grasped the arms of her chair with both hands, his vivid young face close to hers.

"Oh, my Beautiful...." he stammered. "What are you crying for? Who has hurt you?"

It was amazingly startling to have this impassioned young Greek rush like a faun out of the winter night and hurl himself at her knees, just when she had been thinking of him as forgetful of her and hundreds of miles distant. She managed another smile, keeping her hand on Dhu's head. The collie sat stolidly between them, pressing, jealously, closer to his mistress.

"No one has hurt me.... It's nothing.... Nothing but foolishness ... contemptible foolishness...."

"You were lonely?"

"I was just silly.... Get up, dear child."

"I'm not a 'child'.... I'm a man who loves you.... And I shall not get up ... not until you tell me what is troubling you...."

"Dear Morris ... do you call this being 'good'?"

"No. I call it being what I can't help being.... Do you think I can see tears in your eyes and play good little Harry?... I can't stand your tears.... They make me wild ... quite wild. Don't play with me.... Don't laugh...."

He caught her hand suddenly, pressing it against his breast.

"Feel that...." he stammered. "Can you laugh at that?"

The violent young heart drummed against her hand

pressed down upon it by both his.

"It's an Idolater...." he went stammering on, his voice low and thick with the swift heart-beats. "Each throb worships you.... And you tell me to be 'good'.... You tell me that!"

The dog growled suddenly. It was a low, menacing rumble deep in his chest. His eyes were fixed on Sophy.

"Be quiet ... lie down, Dhu," she said, glad for an excuse of speaking normally. "Lie down!" she repeated sharply, as the dog remained motionless. He withdrew his head unwillingly from her knee, and subsided on the rug near her feet. Now his gold eyes were fixed on Loring. A rim of milky jade showed beneath them. There was suspicion and cold anger in their gaze.

Sophy was hemmed in by those quivering arms that did not touch her, but whose vibration she felt through the wood of the old chair. Loring's face was rapt and wild. He was "out of himself"—terribly close to her in his fanatic mystery of adoration.

"Why should you mind?" his words came racing breathlessly. "What I offer you isn't common or unclean.... I think of you as Catholics think of Mary...."

"My dear...." whispered Sophy. He hypnotised her with the tremendous intensity of his emotion. It poured on her from his dark, bold eyes that had a wild timidity even in their boldness.

The same inanity of mind that had assailed her that day in the October woods, under his first outburst, again made her feel at a loss. She could *not* think of

the right words to say. She drew back as far as she could from him in the deep chair. Her bosom rose and fell uncertainly. He moved her ... he confused her. She did not quite know what it was that he made her feel. The scent of horse and leather and winter fields was still fresh upon him. This scent confused her more. It was the sharp scent of vigorous manhood in her quiet room, with its warm fragrance of green wood and rose-geranium. It made her nervously aware of herself and of him.

"Dear Morris ... please get up...." she urged, making a great effort to be natural. "I can't think with you kneeling there like that.... You confuse me...."

"I don't want you to think.... I want you to *feel*.... I *want* to confuse you.... I want you to feel something of what I'm feeling.... Yes, something of it ... something at least...."

"Don't...!" she murmured.

Her brow contracted, as if with pain. Yet she tried to smile. She was quite pale. So was Loring. But he did not move. His thirsty eyes drank and drank of her face.

"Oh, you wonder...!" he whispered hurryingly. "You wonder of the world.... Rose of the World!..."

Suddenly he dropped his head, and began kissing the velvet of her gown. She felt these kisses through the velvet—swift, wild, hurried—like the alight and flight of birds. His passion seemed winged like birds. And these wings beat about her, softly reckless and confusing. All Venus's doves seemed loosed in the firelit room. The air was thick with the throb of their pinions. Outside thrummed the deep, harsh chords of

the winter wind. Outside was cold, clear space—a frost of stars—the free, unloving wind....

She bent forward, quite desperate to feel herself thus stirred. With her slender, strong hands she lifted his head by force from her knee ... tried to put him from her.... She wanted to be stern. She knew well that her greatest weakness was in dealing with love. She had always temporised. She could never quite get her own consent to be harsh with love of any kind. Even now she could not be as stern as she wished to be.

"Morris ... really ... you must not.... I can't have this...." she said brokenly.

He did not yield to her restraining touch, but leaned against her hands—seized them in his own, pressing down his face into them. She felt his lips quivering on them. Her palms quickened with those trembling lips.

Again the collie growled.

"There! You see...." she exclaimed nervously; "even Dhu is vexed with you.... Do you want me to be really angry with you?... Yes—I shall be really angry if you keep this up any longer.... I shall be angry ... Morris!"

But he crouched before her, grasping the folds of her gown in both hands. He even laughed a little, tossing back his short locks, that had been rumpled against her knee.

"*Be* angry, then...." he murmured. "*Be* angry.... What do the famishing care for anger?... Yes.... I thirst for you.... I don't hunger for you.... There's nothing so gross as hunger in my longing.... But I thirst.... I thirst.... Oh, Beautiful!... Be kind.... What is it to you

if I worship you?... Can the wind kindle the moon? You should have seen the poor, mad wind trying to kindle her, as I did, when I rode here to you this night!... He raved at her as I rave at you.... And she was just like you—oh, so like you!... Cold, white, still, superior ... far off there in a heaven of her own ... like you.... He couldn't reach her.... Couldn't warm her.... Like me with you...."

He broke off, a spasm marring the excited beauty of his face.

"Oh, don't I know I can't warm you...!" he cried. "Not if I bathed you in my heart's blood—it would slip from you like a red sunset from the moon. White Wonder ... cold Moon-Woman!... Now I know what Endymion felt.... I know—I know...."

Sophy sat gazing at him, fascinated. She was lapped in a sort of wonder. Here was Love at his miracles again. Could this be "Morry" Loring—keen sportsman, crack polo player—this frantic young Rhapsodist at her knee, talking poetry as though it were his native tongue? He seemed unreal to her. She, herself, seemed unreal. He rushed on:

"Yes, yes!... You've called me Endymion in mockery. But I *am* Endymion.... Did you know that when you mocked me?... Did you know that I am really the man that drew down the Lady Moon?..."

He laughed again. He was so amazingly beautiful as he crouched there, laughing with love in the firelight, that Sophy quivered with it. She felt dazed. She felt some one other than herself. She began to feel that there was a stranger within her—a woman she had never known. Some one wild and shy and spun of moonbeams—a sort of fairy-Sophy that this

ecstatic youth was moulding out of dream-stuff—that was coming into ensorceled life under his touch as Galatea softened from marble into flesh under the caresses of Pygmalion....

She felt as if she must break away from him—escape from the sound of his feverish, flooding words—and that bold-timidity of his eyes that so fascinated her. She tried to rise, but he hemmed her in, with his arms upon her chair, encircling yet not touching her.

He laughed very low now—it was like a sort of sobbing.

"Oh, Selene.... Selene.... Selene...." he murmured. "Let yourself be loved ... with worship ... always with worship. I will never forget that you are a goddess, too.... But you shall never be lonely again ... if you will only bend to me.... There'll never be tears in your beautiful eyes again.... And you *were* lonely—you know you were.... It's lonely work, Selene, shining alone in the roof of heaven...."

Sophy put up her hands to her temples, pressing the hair back from her face. Her dilated eyes looked dazed.

"I ... I think you're not quite yourself to-night...." she stammered. There was certainly some spell upon her. She strove against it—but weakly, like one striving to wake from an overpowering dream.

He gave that low laugh that so confused her.

"I'm *not* myself...." he said. "Haven't I told you that I am Endymion?..."

He leaned towards her. His face grew soft and timorous. She felt his hand go stealing to her hair.

One heavy lock had fallen loose. He drew it to him, buried his face in it and shivered from head to foot. Sophy sat gazing down at him. Her heart began beating strangely. The curve of the brown head bending near her breast struck her suddenly with a sharp tenderness. She touched it softly with her finger tips. At the touch of her fingers he trembled again—then looked up—that wild shyness still in his subdued eyes.... His hand slipped from her hair upon her neck. He knelt up and his quivering hand drew her gently towards him....

"This once ... only this once...." he pleaded, whispering ... "to remember all my life.... I will shut my eyes.... Selene.... You can think that I am sleeping ... as on Latmos...."

That thrall held Sophy—that and some wild, half-lawless romance in her own nature. It was as though reason forsook her. A veil woven of wind and firelight and the soft dreaminess of youthful passion floated between her and reality—shut her in from past and future—filmed about her like the pale smoke from an enchanter's fire.... She let herself be drawn towards that eager flower of the young, thirsty mouth. Nearer ... nearer.... Far, far away, a fine, chill voice said: "No. This you must not do...."

She heard it as the fainting hear their names called. An instant—then the young lips touched hers—delicately—clung trembling.... A thrill as in dreams—unreal, etherealised—ran through her.... This kiss was divine. Like nectar this kiss was to them both—long, miraculous, and mystically impassioned, as a kiss on the wild moors of elf-land....

When they came to themselves, they were leaning cheek to cheek, hand in hand, gazing into the fire

which had glowed down to molten jewels. The wind harped round the quiet house, now low, now loud. A mouse, darting like a wee, grey fish, along the wainscoting, grew ever bolder. Presently he scampered across the train of Sophy's gown—then played upon the hearth-rug. The collie twitched his ruffled legs nervously as he lay sleeping. But those two did not move. For long, long minutes they sat there motionless, cheek to cheek, hand in hand, gazing into the fire....

IX

Before Loring went away, an hour later, he put a fresh log on the fire, smiling up at her shyly, as he knelt to do so.

"I'll mend the altar fire in your temple before I go, Selene," he had murmured.

He felt strangely subdued and awed after the wonder of that kiss. The enchantment that was over them held awe for them both. There was in it something mystic—an influence blowing, as it were, from home-lands of the soul dimly remembered. Sophy felt this consciously—Loring unconsciously. But he felt things through her, since that kiss. There had been between them during that long-blossoming kiss a transfusion of spirit. She was through and through him like music—like sunlight through the fibrils of a plant, from flower to root. And this subtle fusion made him know just what to say and do to satisfy her. It was this new-lent instinct that had made him

so still after the wild magic of that kiss had set his blood and spirit singing. When she had whispered at last: "Go now ... dear...." he had risen without a protest. It was then he had knelt to put the fresh log on her fire. Afterwards he had bent and touched his lips to her hands as they lay together in her lap—then to the shining, fire-warmed tress that flowed over her shoulder. He had gone out, closing the door noiselessly as though she were in some mysterious trance, and he feared to waken her.

As in a trance himself, he had fetched Proud Aleck from the old stable. The horse had nickered when he heard him coming. In the fragrant darkness of the stable, Loring had thrown an arm over the bay's neck. "You brought me to her this night...." he whispered. He drew the horse's muzzle towards him, and pressed his lips to the broad front. He continued for some moments leaning against the great horse that quivered with impatience to be gone. He felt faint and languid. It was as if he had really been only mortal and she a goddess. His mortality seemed to fail under the bliss of this contact with immortality. It was as though sudden godhead had been bestowed on him and his flesh were consuming under it into a finer essence.

There was no pride as yet in his wonder. That beautiful humility of real love still held him. He was not even exultant that his "will" had won at last. He did not feel as though he had conquered but as though some great Winged Victory had caught him up and set him on this height, with its veil of golden mist. It was not the kingdoms of the earth that were offered him—but the kingdoms of the air ... starry places ... Diana's cloud-land ... hanging-gardens of the gods....

Loring was rapt into the ecstatic state of "conversion."... He was experiencing all the giddily rapturous throes and exquisite frenzies of what is known as "revelation"—only its cause was not divine but human love. He moved in a vision of clear light. Like Sophy, he was a stranger to himself, yet he felt that this new self was not really the stranger, but that old self which lay dark and shrivelled at the roots of being, like the husk of a seed, from which has sprung the triumphing blossom.... He rode home as on a wind of dreams. The splendid moon, now soaring in mid-heaven, seemed set there as a symbol for him, and him alone. "Selene.... Selene.... Selene...." went the hoofs of the great, red horse, like the strokes of a Rhapsodist, beating time to the music in his heart....

And Sophy, too, was all be-glamoured. She had heard the fairy-harp, she had listened to music blown from the land of Heart's Desire. Ior, the fairy chief, had kissed her eyes and lips. She was amazed, bemused—deep down in her heart there was a great fear. Yet there was joy also. Not the sane joy of everyday ... but a fragile, iridescent trembling as of a dewy gossamer spun between the lintels of the door of Dreams. She was afraid to move lest she should destroy this delicate, fine-spun joy. Beyond its veil glimmered the wings of golden dreams. She knew well how Diana must have felt after she had kissed the sleeping shepherd.

She was like one in some old-time fable, who gives a wanderer a cup of water, and, lo! after drinking, the wanderer shakes back his cloak of hodden-grey, and

it is Eros himself glowing against the twilight—she had entertained, unawares, the mightiest angel of them all. The soft, electric plumes of Love had folded down upon her. She was smothered in his sparkling wings, yet this lovely death only released her to new life. It was only her self of later years that was dying softly. She felt herself gleaming, slipping from the hard shell of years—a pearl released, a pearl bathed in seas of wonder.

Back to her earliest girlhood she was washed ... back, back to that shore where all is dream and miracle.... When she had loved Cecil, she had not been so young; she was younger now than when she had wept over her first lover's death. She was not only young—she was youth itself. She was not standing outside the door of dreams as she had fancied, but within it. That trembling, iridescent gossamer of joy shut out reality—the past, the future—shut her in with the lovely serving-maidens, dreams fulfilled.... It seemed to her that all the poetry of the world was flowering in her heart. Her breast felt full of roses ... red and white roses of love for every mood....

Her little travelling clock struck twelve. It seemed like the voice of a malicious fairy rousing her from her too lovely trance. She started up. The collie sprang up with her, and stood alert, ears cocked, eyes upon her face. She looked about her dazedly. The room was not the same. It gazed back at her with a new expression. She felt as if bodily she, too, had grown different—were looking at the old, familiar objects from a child's stature. The plants in the windows seemed larger. They were like a fairy forest. As the firelight caught the crimson and purple bells of the fuchsias, they seemed to sway—to ring forth a faint, wild music....

She put her hands to her face. This racing of her fancy was like a light fever. And now when she glanced up again, she saw the fuchsias like strange insects flying among their leaves. Their scarlet stamens were like the frail legs of wasps drooped for flight.... She went up and touched one softly, to assure herself that it was a flower. Fuchsias were never like other flowers to her after that night.

She broke one off and took it with her upstairs. Her bedroom also greeted her with a new look. The fire was almost out. She kneeled down to mend it. As the flame sprang to life again beneath her fingers, she thought of "The Witch of Atlas": ".... Men scarcely know how beautiful fire is...." She knew. She knelt there, adoring the delicate flame, purest and fiercest of elements. Yes—fire was purity itself. This lovely fire in her own heart purified her. She was a Phœnix ... the ashes of her life were only a soft, pale nest from which she had risen thus glorious. Or no—the Dark Goddess had lain her on the coals of pain ... now she was immortal. This white flame within her was immortality....

She slept fitfully but deliciously that night. Every little while she would start awake. It was as if he spoke to her, saying: "Wake, beloved—I, too, am wakeful...." It was delicious to wake thus and drift delicately backward on the tide of dreams into that haven of light, rapturous sleep. Love hummed about her like a fairy bee and stung reason to numbness. All night long, sleeping or waking, phantasy rocked her softly. The warm, firelit air seemed abeat with the wings of the white doves of Venus....

When she woke fully next morning, Sophy thought at first that she had been dreaming. Then all came back to her. She started up in bed. Fright seized her—sheer, panic-terror. What had she done and felt? What had come to her?...

Mammy Nan had kindled a roaring fire, and thrown wide the shutters. The brilliant January sun streamed over the carpet. The sky was blue and bitter, without a cloud. Naked and unashamed, the bold winter morning glared in upon her. She shrank from it, feeling small and frightened like a child stripped for a bath in the ocean which it sees for the first time.

What had come to her?... Then she recalled the delicate clinging of that young, ardent mouth, and her own blood submerged her, pulsing in one shamed wave from head to feet.... She would not think. She sprang from bed and plunged into the icy water of her morning bath that was all netted with sunbeams. She dressed without knowing that she dressed. All the time she kept saying within herself, "What has come to me?... What has come to me?"

She went to the window—stared up at the cloudless blue that seemed to swim with crystal beads as she gazed.

"My God, what has happened to me?... What is this that has happened to me?" she asked. Lacing her fingers hard together, she kept murmuring: "What is it?... My God!... what is it?"

She felt ridiculous and abased in her own sight; but the glamour was stealing over her again. "It is impossible ... utterly impossible!" she kept telling herself. Yet at the bottom of it all, shining up through darkling depths, was that fairy-gold of joy,

like the gold crown on the head of the frog in the folk tale. Recalling this old fable of her childhood, she laughed unwillingly. It was a wry laugh, indeed. "Yes," she told herself, "a frog with a gold crown—that is what this craziness amounts to.... I am ridiculous ... ridiculous...!" She looked harshly at her reflection in the mirror. "You are ridiculous," she said to it.

But there was more than her own absurdity to think of—there was Loring. She had to consider him. And at the mere thought of him, again came that frantic blush submerging her. What so ravaged her was the thought that this wild, unreal feeling could not be love. Then she had kissed him, had let him kiss her unworthily. She felt as though falling headlong down abysses in her own nature of which she had never dreamed. Had she, then, a wanton streak in her? Was she of that most contemptible breed of mature women who like to scorch themselves delicately at the fires of youth?

This so horrified her that she dropped into a chair, feeling physically faint. She sat there so long that Mammy Nan put her head in at the door and said severely: "Miss Sophy, yo' coffee's gettin' corpse-cold. Dee bell done rang twict...."

Sophy obeyed the stern voice of Mammy Nan, from the instinct of a hectored childhood. She rose at once and went meekly to drink the coffee that she did not want. She actually ate a waffle under the tyrannical gaze of her old nurse. It was like trying to swallow a bit of flannel. She rebelled suddenly, and, laying down her knife and fork, said: "I'm not hungry this morning, Mammy—I can't eat."

With this she went to her study—and found Loring

standing before the fire. How it happened, Sophy could not tell; but like a homing-pigeon she went to him, and her head was on his breast, and his arms around her without a word spoken. And as his arms went round her, she knew suddenly that she was deathly tired. She also knew quite simply that, ridiculous, impossible, fantastic as it might be, she loved him. This knowledge was so soothing after the terrible idea that had come to her a little while ago—the sick fear that her kiss had been only of the senses, no matter how superfined—that she leaned against him in a sort of rapture of repose. For the moment she was safe—afterwards the deluge. This reassurance of her finer nature made all else seem trivial for the time being. She loved him. She, the mature, bitterly experienced woman, loved this youth! Well—it was ridiculous, but it was not unworthy. The higher gods might laugh, but they could not turn from her in disgust.

"My Beautiful ... *my* Beautiful!..." Loring was murmuring, his lips against her hair.

That keen, fresh, wholesome scent of horse and leather and outer air brought the past night back to her in one blinding flare. She stood so silent that he began to laugh, low and nervously.

"I didn't sleep a wink all night, Selene.... I was with you in some queer way. Did you feel me?... Or ... did you sleep?"

"No, dear...."

His arms tightened.

"Did love keep you awake too, my Beautiful—love ... for me?"

It was a whisper.

Sophy withdrew herself from his arms. She sank into the deep chair where she had been sitting last evening, and, as then, he came and knelt beside her. His eyes went thirstily to hers, and as she met those bold, soft eyes, the scarlet leaped to her face.

"Oh! ... like a little girl...." he cried, enchanted. "You blush for me like any little girl...."

Sophy blushed deeper still. Her voice faltered with shame for her own foolishness of belated love. She really thought herself middle-aged at thirty. The four years' difference in her age and Loring's seemed to her an absurd, impassable gulf. This sense of shame braced her to reason with him.

"Morris...." she began.

He broke into that low, exultant laughter which so confused her.

"Oh, little girl!" he cried again. "She is so young this morning that she lisps.... She calls me 'Morrith.'" And indeed Sophy had lisped over his name as she sometimes lisped in moments of excitement. She was overwhelmed to feel another blush suffuse her. She bit her lip—tried to frown, looking away from him into the fire. He continued laughing. His laughter stirred the hair on her bent neck. Unwillingly she, too, began to laugh. But this laughter was very near to tears. That subtle essence of herself which she had imparted to him made him suddenly grave.

"What is it, my Wonder?" he asked softly. "I am listening...."

"Then ... dear...." she said very low, "this ... that has

happened is ... beautiful ... but ... but it is only a dream.... We ... we must wake now...."

"Bend down and see...." he whispered. "I am not dream-stuff, Beautiful. Bend down to me again ... as last evening...."

"No, my dear ... no and no...."

"Then I must reach to you...."

She felt the flutter of his lips at her mouth's edge. She drew aside, holding him from her. The words came quick and short.

"It is absurd. I am too old ... you are too young.... Heaven and earth would laugh at us.... I am a woman who has lived through horrors ... yes, horrors.... You are just at the beginning...."

"Yes ... just at the beginning—with you, my Wonderful!"

"My dear, dear boy...."

"'Boy' for your whim.... 'Man' to love you...."

"Oh, be reasonable!..."

"I wouldn't be reasonable for the throne of Cæsar ——"

"You *must* be serious.... You *must* let me talk seriously with you. I.... I shall be offended if you do not. I shall think your love is only froth."

This brought him upright, a queer gleam in his eyes.

"Well, then...." he said. It was his Marmion tone. It implied, "Come one, come all; this rock shall fly from its firm base as soon as I."

"Go on, please...." he added, as she did not at once speak.

"Then," said Sophy, looking away from him, "you must think of last night as ... as a 'Twelfth Night's' madness. Very sweet.... Yes, beautiful in its way ... but just a moment's dream.... When you ... really love some one ... you will know that it was only a dream...."

"'When I really love some one'?"

"Yes."

"You think that?"

"Yes."

"Would you mind looking at me?"

"No...."

But her eyes wavered, and the soft red ran up again into her face, as she met that young, keen look, all fierce with wounded love.

"How *dare* you say that I do not love you really?" he demanded, his voice shaking with passion. "Even Selene didn't *trample* on Endymion——"

She went pale.

"My dear...."

"How can you call me 'your dear,' and yet set your foot down like that—hard—right on my bare heart! How can you suggest that my love for you is not real?"

He flung his arm about her suddenly—caught both her hands in his.

"Listen...." he said. "Perhaps because I bring you worship, too, you think that I don't love you with man's love.... But it's because I love you so madly that I bring you worship. I wouldn't soil the soles of your shoes with what most men call love. I never believed in this kind ... this that I feel for you. But, by God! I've found it *is* real! It only kneels because it's so strong. Because it's so strong, it has reverence. Do you understand? Now give me your lips to worship. Don't waste them in words. You needn't fear my kisses ... white Moon. I wouldn't sully you with base fire."

He had drawn her to her feet. He held her crushed against him. His face was white and fine with purifying fire.

Sophy felt awe steal over her. This was no boy that held her. His love made him her equal. And he offered her what she had craved without knowing it —the fire of love tempered with adoration.

"Give me your lips, my Wonder ... my white Wonder!" he was commanding, yet there was also pleading in his voice. "Give me your lips, that I may show you *how* I love you ... not with gross hunger, but with thirst ... divine thirst...."

That golden trance crept over her, as on the night before. Her head lay drowned in its thick hair against his breast. He stooped slowly, marvelling at the rapt beauty of her white, upturned face. Like a face coming slowly towards her through deep waters, his face bent nearer. There was that fine, quivering touch upon her lips—then their mouths melted into one....

This kiss was no less marvellous than their first had

been. But it held this difference: With it she yielded herself consciously, though against her judgment.

They stood there tranced, after this long kiss was over, as they had sat hand in hand the evening before.

He said shakenly at last:

"'Too young'?... '*Too young*'—am I? God!—I feel as though I had been from everlasting...."

X

But though Sophy yielded to these first bewildering moments of sudden glamour, she was not in the least minded to enter into a long, unbroken, spellbound dalliance. Loring found himself very short of kisses indeed during the next few weeks.

Sophy, as it were, got her head above those heavy, golden waves. She gasped deep of the fresh air of reason. She would not sink down to this strange, love-lighted underworld without a final struggle for freedom, for the clear daylight of common sense. He had to listen to much plain speaking. Sometimes he sulked, sometimes fumed; usually he ended by laughing with that low laughter against which she felt so oddly helpless. There is nothing in the world more disconcerting than this low, mocking laughter of love that knows itself stronger than reason. In vain Sophy pointed out to him the difference in their ages, in their tastes (this he furiously denied). She sternly bade him listen while she read aloud from

books that were her daily food. He listened with heroism.

But one evening over Plotinus he actually nodded. They had been hunting. The geranium-scented warmth of her study, the soft crackle of the fire, her lulling contralto voice as she read aloud to him the words of the mystic whom he privately thought "a hipped old Johnny" because he was so ashamed of having a body that he wouldn't tell his birth-date ... (How Loring despised him for this denial of ruddy life!)—these things, together with the deep comfort of the old, leather armchair in which he sat, caused him to doze pleasantly. He woke with a jerk, at the sudden stopping of her voice. Her grey eyes were fixed on him over the volume of Plotinus, cool and smiling.

"You see?" she said. "What rouses my soul puts you to sleep!"

Loring had looked at her sombrely.

"I'll tell you what *I* think," he had said at last. "I think you fence yourself about with these old philosopher Johnnies because you're afraid of love. That's what I think, Beautiful."

Sophy had coloured, which always delighted him. He felt that he had won when her blood rose at his words.

She pointed out to him the complications that would arise in their life together, from the fact that Bobby would have to be educated in England.

"I couldn't possibly let him go there alone," she said. "His grandmother dislikes me, as I've told you. She'd do all in her power to wean him from me. And it's

absolutely right and necessary that he should grow up an Englishman...."

"He can grow up a Timbuctooan, for all I care," Loring had replied, unmoved. "I've always wanted to hunt in the 'Shires. We can have a country place near Melton...."

"You'd expatriate yourself?" Sophy asked severely.

"Nonsense, Diana! You're too Olympian sometimes. Good Americans can live all over the place and still feel that 'little old New York is good enough for them.'"

"There's another thing," Sophy had retorted: "I am sure that I shan't care for New York—and as ... well, as Mrs. Loring, I should have to live there...."

"Only a bit in the winter. And it would do you good, Beautiful. You like homage—you know you do. You'd be first and beautifulest there. Thank God, I'm so rotten rich!... You'll queen it, I can tell you."

"Are you so rich, Morris?"

"I am—rather. Why?"

"Because that's another thing.... I hate this over-richness of some Americans. I feel as if my throat and eyes were full of gold-dust when I'm with them. I don't mean I'm such a goose as to despise money—but I do hate this ... this sort of golden Elephantiasis that deforms so many Americans...."

Loring gazed up at her with wondering adoration.

"By George!" he said humbly, "it's downright awe-inspiring to feel that you don't care a hang for my being rich. That you only care ... what little you *do*

care ... for me, myself."

"'King Midas has the ears of an ass,'" Sophy had laughed, pulling the one next her.

He had responded only too quickly to this slight caress. She had to put both hands to her face to shield herself from his eager kisses.

"Ah, dearest—be kind.... Do.... Ah, do!" he had pleaded. But she had said, "No.... I shall be sensible—if that's being unkind.... I won't be rushed into elf-land by the hair of my head. I.... I won't be ... *honeyfuggled*...."

And they had laughed together.

Sophy finally got quite desperate with the fruitless struggle against him and against herself. She banished him ruthlessly for two weeks. He rebelled in vain. "I *must* have this time quite to myself," she told him. "I *must* think things out ... alone."

Loring found himself frantic thus exiled to the Macfarlanes, cut off from his heart's desire by six country miles as by the powers of darkness. He fled to Florida for a fortnight's tarpon-fishing. Then came her letters. He thought he should go mad over those letters. She played on him like the wind on water. Now he was all melting ripples under her delicate words—now some phrase sent his passion leaping mountain-high.... In the last letter she said: "Come back to me.... I miss you as the rose misses the honey from her heart ... as the stem misses the gathered flower.... I crave you as a sail might crave the wild wind that gives it life. Dear ... my dearest.... I know now why the 'wisdom of men is foolishness to God.'... God is Love ... my wisdom is foolishness to Love....

So I give you my foolish wisdom for a carpet under your feet. And my wise foolishness I give you for a seal upon your heart.... But myself I cannot give you, for I was yours when Love spread the foundations of the world...."

For she had found when Loring was far from her that "her heart was within him." She found the plain, wheaten bread of Philosophy dreary fare without the honey of romance. Poetry fled from her like a wild, shy bird, that would only come to one call. With his name she could lure it. She wrote page after page of love-verse as a sort of bridal offering for his return. She knew that there was madness in her mood, but it seemed a high and holy sort of frenzy—like the spiritual dementia that sends martyrs singing to the pyre. So she sung amid the flames that so exquisitely consumed her. For this was not a usual passion that she felt for Loring. She would have preferred that their love-life should be one long, ecstatic betrothal. She would have liked to give him the flower of love without its fruit. Yet his love was so different from all other loves that she had known ... it was so finely winged—so woven with adoration ... so fresh as with the dews of youth's first dawn; in her the answering love was so immaculate, veiled with imagination as for a first communion; all was so beautifully and perfectly harmonious between them, that she could not imagine discord ever following on this enchanted symphony.

And granted that their tastes were not always the same ... granted that she was older, that he seemed but a boy to her at times—must love mean oneness in all things? Was not oneness of heart and spirit enough? And was not woman immemorially older than man—the first created, but not the first

conceived?—Did not the Christian faith give even God a mother, as if Divinity itself must needs be child of the eternal feminine?

And because the great, tender mother in her cherished Loring, the shy, wild lover in her only loved him more.

XI

They kept their secret from every one until May.

The greatest pang that Sophy felt at this time (and she had not a few) was the fact that Bobby was to be left at Sweet-Waters during these months of absence. They had never been a day, much less a night, apart since he was born. Now she would leave him, in Charlotte's care, whom he dearly loved, it is true, but —she would leave him.

Charlotte could not throw off the depression caused by this fulfilment of her anxious prognostications.

"She may be happy *now*," she told her Joe; "but oh! what will she feel—say in two years—*when she wakes up*?"

The Judge admitted the possibility of Sophy's present joy suffering a diminution. He even went so far as to say that very possibly there might be some disillusionment for her in the soberer future—but he roundly approved her present joy.

"Doggone it, Charlotte!" he exclaimed, using the one

form of oath that he permitted himself. "The poor girl's seen enough misery. Why shouldn't she be happy in her own way! This Loring is a nice fellow. He's rich ... that's not to be sneezed at, let me tell you, old lady. He's good-tempered: he's a gentleman —he's heels over head in love with her...."

"And he's four ... nearly five years younger," put in Charlotte sternly.

The Judge rubbed his dusky wreath of hair the wrong way about his fine, bald poll—a sure sign that he was "up against" a knotty question.

"That's a pity, I admit," he said rather lamely. Like Charlotte, he had very old-fashioned notions about the desirability—almost the necessity—of a husband's being the elder of his wife. It shocked his fixed ideals, when brought face to face with it in this plump manner, that Sophy should be her lover's senior by four years.

Charlotte's fly-away eyebrows came down and joined.

"It's a tragedy and it's a *shame*!" said she.

"No, no ... no, no," almost coaxed the Judge. "Not a shame, Chartie—a pity if you like.... Yes ... it certainly is a pity—but...."

Charlotte's very apprehension for her sister made her bitter.

"It's just another of Sophy's tragic mistakes," said she. "I did think that awful experience had cured her of making mistakes."

Her husband looked at her rather whimsically from under the fluff of smoky black that he had forgotten

to smooth down again.

"Are *you* so doggone sure of making no more mistakes till you die, old lady?"

Charlotte jerked a snarled place from her black curls by main force. She did not even notice the acute pain, so great was her agitation over what she considered this last dire error of her sister.

"That's not the point," she said firmly. She pinned up the now carded mass with two long, silver hairpins as she had done every night for twenty years, then went into her especial dressing-closet to fetch her night-gown.

It was the evening of the fateful day on which Sophy had announced her coming marriage to Loring, and husband and wife were preparing for sleep, in the big, friendly room which they shared together. In this room were two large, old-fashioned closets, each having its window, its washstand, and its array of pegs whereon to hang the simple and more necessary pieces of wearing apparel.

As Charlotte emerged again, attired in her nainsook gown that ended in decent frills at neck and wrist, the Judge in his turn strode into his sanctuary. He was in search of one of those old-fashioned garments which Charlotte had been so reluctant to lend Loring on the occasion of his first visit.

While she waited for him to appear again, she sat down at a little table near one of the windows, and began arranging what she called her "night-basket." She was the most methodical and orderly of souls, and into this little hamper went her watch, her handkerchief, a bit of "camphor-ice" for her lips, and

a box of matches.

The moon was at its full again, and as she sat, sorting these familiar articles, she could see the white blur of Sophy's gown in one of the hammocks, and hear the soft undertone of voices, as she and her lover talked together.

"Just run along, you and Joe, Charlotte, dear," Sophy had said. "We'll come in by the time you're ready to put out the lights."

"And here," reflected Charlotte, frowning towards the hammocks, "it's eleven o'clock, and Joe and I nearly ready for bed, and she isn't even *thinking* of coming in!"

Her mood was such as in a vigorous, old-fashioned mother means a sound spanking for the offending child. And Charlotte felt that in some sort Sophy *was* her child, and dearly would she have liked to spank her.

Here Judge Macon came forth again, looking somewhat like the sheeted dead in the extreme length of his linen garment, and armed with a large, palmetto fan. He drew up a rocking-chair, and glancing out of the window towards the culprits, said just a trifle sheepishly, to his wife's acute ears:

"Let's give 'em as long as we can, old lady. Lovers on an old Virginia lawn in the moonlight! It's enough to soften the cockles of a stoic's heart."

Charlotte unbendingly smoothed out a bit of tin-foil and wrapped the piece of camphor-ice in it.

"The cockles of the heart, and the apple of the eye have always seemed absurd figures of speech to me,"

she then remarked, putting the unguent into her basket.

Judge Macon tried to take one of her hands, but she withdrew it and firmly wound up her watch before wrapping it in her handkerchief and laying it beside the camphor-ice.

"Come, old lady," wheedled her softer-natured mate, "what's the matter? Do you really foresee disaster?"

"Joe," replied Charlotte, clasping her hands over the handle of the little basket, and looking sternly at him, "can you, a man who has sat on the Virginia bench for over twenty years, seriously ask me such a question?"

"Why the *Virginia* bench, particularly, honey?" asked he, and from under his shaggy brows came a droll gleam.

But Charlotte was not to be wheedled.

"I merely mentioned your office," said she, "to recall to you that as a Judge you've had more opportunity than most to realise the rarity of happy marriages."

The Judge in his unofficial capacity whistled softly at this Addisonian language, but Charlotte went on undisturbed.

"I ask you," she continued, "*as a Judge*—what chances do you consider that those two"—she waved one hand towards the hammocks—"have of real happiness?"

Her husband rocked for a moment before replying, fanning himself with the round, yellow disk that glistened in the moonlight (Charlotte had blown out the candle for fear of midges).

At last he said seriously:

"You married me, my dear, and I am sixteen years older than you, yet I think we've been pretty happy."

"Oh, how like a *man* that is!" cried Charlotte, jumping up in her exasperation, so that the carefully packed little hamper was upset, and the two white-clad figures had to grovel for its contents on all fours in the moonlight. As Charlotte's curly head came near his during this operation, the Judge promptly kissed it, and Charlotte, much disconcerted, scrambled to her feet again, exclaiming: "Joe! how *can* you be so silly at our time of life?"

But the Judge only laughed, and pulled her down on his linen clad knees, demure frills, "night-basket" and all.

"See here, madam," he demanded, "what do you mean by saying I'm 'like a man'?"

Charlotte laughed in spite of herself.

"I meant it was like a man to take the very reverse of Sophy's case as an example," she said, putting her arm about his neck as they rocked gently together, and rubbing her cheek against his. "Don't you see? It's quite, *quite* different with us. Why *your* being *my* elder, by so many years, only makes me look up to you...."

"'Look up to me!'" echoed he, with a burst of Homeric mirth. Charlotte clapped her hand over his mouth. "Sssh!" she warned. "They'll hear you. They'll think we're laughing at them."

"Poor things," said he, sobered. "It seems mighty sad to think of two lovers being afraid of being laughed

at."

"It *is* sad," said Charlotte. "You think I'm cross about it, Joe, but I could cry about it this minute."

She dropped her head on his shoulder, and her other arm went round his neck.

"Don't," said the Judge softly. "Don't you cry, honey, whatever you do."

Charlotte from her refuge in his strong neck spoke passionately. Her warm breath tickled him almost beyond endurance, but he held her and suffered in silence with the true martyr spirit of the husband who is born and not made.

"Oh, Joe," she murmured vehemently; "you're not a woman, so you can't see it all as I see it. *Now*, perhaps, it's all right, but in a few years ... just a few years.... Oh, my poor Sophy! The grey hairs ... will come ... then wrinkles.... Little by little, little by little, there, under his eyes—his hateful *young* eyes—she will grow old. She will look like his mother when she's fifty and he's only forty-five!"

"No, no, lady-bird, really you exaggerate!" slipped in the Judge.

"This *can't* be exaggerated!" said Charlotte. "It *can't* be —— *Shakespeare* couldn't exaggerate it!"

"He's got a right smart gift that way, honey," slipped in the Judge again.

Charlotte didn't hear him. She sat up, much to his relief, and putting her hands on his shoulders looked at him solemnly.

"Joe," she said, "you're a man, so you don't know

about one of the worst tragedies in a woman's life—the tragedy of the hand-glass!"

"The *what*?" asked her husband.

"The hand-glass, Joe. That little innocent looking bit of silver-framed glass that you *think* I only use to do my hair with. Oh, some great poet ought to write an ode to a woman with her hand-glass! Talk of 'Familiars,' of 'Devils'—there's no Imp out of Hell...."

"Charlotte!" cried her astounded husband.

"I said out—of—*Hell*," repeated she firmly—"there's no Imp so cunning, so malicious, so brutal as a woman's hand-glass. First, like all devils, it begins by flattering her—*when she's young*. Then suddenly, one day, after long years of cunning flattery—suddenly—like that!..." She snapped her fingers in his still more surprised face.... "Like that!—the hateful thing tells her the truth—that she *is growing old*! Oh, just a shadow here—a line there—the first grey hair——Nothing *really*—only—from that day, on and on and on relentlessly, the message, the odious message never stops! Oh, if anything ought to be buried with a woman, like her wedding ring, it ought to be her hand-glass—for it's been just as much a part of joy and pain as the ring has!"

She stopped, out of breath, and her husband, rather subdued yet trying to make light of it, hugged her and said: "Seems to me, Sophy oughtn't to claim all the laurels. Seems to me you're a right elegant little poetess yourself!"

Charlotte extricated herself from this frankly marital embrace, and pushing the curls out of her eyes went on, too excited and in earnest to heed this funny

little compliment.

"*That's* what I see for Sophy!" she said. "The tragedy of the hand-glass—the tragedy of love in her case. For that boy can't love her soul and mind as he ought to—and what soul he's got she's given him—for the time being. He's just a walking mirror—a reflection of her. Sophy doesn't dream it—nor he—of course. But I can see it. Love does that sometimes. Oh, you needn't grin, Joe!—I watch life though I *do* live in the country the year round. Sophy's just a woman Narcissus. She's in love with her own reflection in Morris Loring. And some day she'll want to draw him from that dream-pool. Then she'll find empty wetness in her hands ... just tears...."

She broke off almost in tears herself. Suddenly she caught her husband's head to her breast:

"Oh," she cried, "I do thank God that you are bald, Joe, and sixteen years older than I am!"

"Lord love us!" exclaimed the Judge, bursting into inextinguishable mirth this time, "I reckon that's the funniest prayer of thanksgiving that ever went up to the Throne of Grace!"

XII

In the verandah of her cottage at Nahant, where she always passed the months of May and June, Mrs. Loring, Morris's mother, sat re-reading the letter in which he told her of his engagement to Mrs. Chesney.

There had been a storm the night before, and the sea made a marvellous, heroic music among the rocks. Mrs. Loring laid the open letter on her knee, and her light, bright blue, short-sighted eyes gazed wistfully towards the sound. Storms both in Nature and in human passions, when distant enough, had always possessed a strange charm for her, the charm of printed perils to minds congenitally timorous. She knew Sophy's history and had read her poems when they first came out, with that same sense of one enjoying a tempest in mid-ocean from the staunch deck of a liner. In her case temperament was the liner—though she had always felt in some inmost recess of her being, known only to herself and her Creator, that, given the circumstances, she, too, might have been a centre of tumult. And sometimes, gazing from the safe, close-curtained windows of her present personality—the result of many careful, cautiously repressed years—she wondered if the mistake makers, the convention breakers, had not the best of it after all? Repentance must be a wonderful emotion—that upheaving, ecstatic repentance that follows big sins. So unconsciously and typically New England was Grace Loring, that she could not think of splendid crime without following it up in her mind by repentance even more gorgeous.

As Mrs. Loring sat there, with her son's letter on her lap, her sister, Mrs. Charles Horton, came out of the house with a novel in her hand and joined her.

"Still brooding over Morry's letter, Grace?" Mrs. Horton asked in a brusque voice, sitting down beside her.

Mrs. Loring withdrew her vague, handsome eyes

from the sea, and looked quietly and directly at her sister.

"I'm not brooding, Eleanor," she said gently.

"Well, what then?" asked Mrs. Horton.

Mrs. Loring glanced at the letter through her *face-à-main* as though consulting it, then said in the same tranquil tone:

"I think I was rather admiring them both."

"What rubbish you talk sometimes, my dear Grace!" exclaimed her sister explosively.

Mrs. Horton was short, brune, and rather plump. She had small, chestnut-brown eyes, and rough, strong, crinkly dark hair. She was in every way the opposite of her tall, distinguished, rather hushed sister. Her manner of thinking and speaking was blunt and straightforward. Mrs. Horton had no half-tones—she was like some effective national flag, all clearly defined blocks of frank, crude colour.

"Are you going to write and remonstrate with that young fool, or are you going to sit by and see him smash his life like crockery?" she said abruptly.

Charles Horton had been a Californian and a man of exuberant vitality and speech. His wife, who had loved him and admired him for every contrast to the contained people among whom she had been brought up, had adopted something of his vigorous way of expressing himself.

"Are you?" she repeated.

It was not Mrs. Loring's way to evade things, but she was so really interested in Eleanor's point of view

that instead of answering this question she said:

"What are your reasons for inferring that Morris is ruining his life?"

Mrs. Horton tossed her book aside, and clasped her crisp, capable looking little brown hands about one knee.

"'Reasons'!" said she. "Aren't facts enough for you? Isn't a love-sick boy of twenty-six who marries a woman years older pretty well smashing things up for himself?"

"Sophy Chesney is only thirty, Eleanor."

"Oh, what a hair-splitter you are, Grace! Four years' difference on the wrong side—the woman's side, is a big chasm ... say what you will."

"There have been very happy marriages of that sort, Eleanor, and with far greater difference in age. There was Miss Thackeray's marriage with Mr. Ritchie——"

"Oh, do go on!" said Mrs. Horton, with an outward snuffing of contemptuous breath. "Give us some more specimens from literature—George Eliot and Mr. Cross for example."

Mrs. Loring put up her *face-à-main* again and looked curiously at her sister.

"Why are you so vexed, Eleanor?" she asked mildly. "After all, it's a brilliant marriage for Morris in a way —Sophy Chesney is a very distinguished woman. Had you ... er ... plans for Morris?"

Mrs. Horton blushed. She *had* thought that Morris might marry her step-daughter Belinda some day, but she had never admitted this even to herself.

Grace's random shot hit home. She retorted rather gruffly:

"Can't a woman take an interest in her own nephew, without being accused of scheming?"

"Oh ... 'scheming'.... My *dear* Eleanor!" protested her sister.

"The fact is," pursued Mrs. Horton, "I take the common-sense view of the case and you the sentimental one. Linda!... What on earth have you been doing to look so hot?"

This last sentence was addressed to her step-daughter, Belinda Horton, who came racing up the verandah steps, her blowze of red-brown hair blowing out behind her, and a tennis racquet in her hand. Belinda was a triumphantly beautiful hoyden of sixteen, despite a slight powdering of freckles and a tiny silvery scar through one raven black eyebrow, the result of trying to equal a boy cousin on the trapeze when she was nine years old. Her great, rich, challenging red-brown eyes, and her defiant yet sweet-tempered mouth, the up-curve of her round chin, the tilt of her nose, the way her head sat on her shoulders as though some artist-god had flung it there with careless mastery, like a flower—her lovely, long, still-growing body which had never known the "awkward age"—all these things made even the most collected gasp a little when Belinda first rushed upon their sight.

She now dropped upon the steps, near Mrs. Loring, pushed the sleeves of her blouse still higher on her cream-white arms, and flourishing the racquet at her step-mother, said in the rich, throaty voice of a pigeon in the sun:

"What do I *look* as if I'd been doing? Playing the organ?"

"Linda! *Don't* talk in that slangy way."

Belinda showed her teeth, beautifully white if a trifle too large, in the frankest grin.

"'Playing the organ' isn't slang, Mater."

Mrs. Horton returned her look severely.

"It's the way you say things that make them sound like slang—isn't it, Grace?" she ended, appealing to her sister.

Mrs. Loring smiled very kindly.

"It's the fashion to be slangy nowadays, Eleanor."

Belinda's eyes shot garnet sparkles at her mother. She patted Mrs. Loring's blue batiste skirt approvingly with her racquet.

"That's one for you, Mater!" she cried joyously, then to Mrs. Loring, "You're always perfectly bully to me, Aunty Grace!"

The idea of applying the term "bully" to that over-refined, softly majestic figure in its cane chair would have abashed any one less daring than Belinda. But Mrs. Loring seemed not to mind in the least. She knew that Belinda was "bad form." Belinda knew it herself. "Some people are born 'bad form,'" she used to say with her wide, lovely grin. "That's me."

In tapping her aunt's skirt with her racquet, she had dislodged Morris's letter. It slipped to the floor beside her, and lifting it to hand it back, she recognised his writing.

"Hullo!" she cried. "What's Morry writing such a screed about? He hates writing long letters like the devil."

"*Belinda!*" from Mrs. Horton.

"All right, Mater—not till next time."

Then she turned again to her aunt, frankly curious.

"What *is* he writing about, Aunt Grace? Not in a scrape, I hope—the admirable Morry!"

"He wrote to announce his engagement, Belinda," said Mrs. Loring.

Belinda sat stock still for a moment. Then she said:

"Who is it?"

"A Mrs. Chesney—a very unusual woman. She wrote a remarkable book once under her maiden name, Sophy Taliaferro."

Belinda sprung to her feet.

"Why, I've read some poems by a Sophy Taliaferro," she exclaimed. "Red-hot stuff they were, too!"

"Linda! I forbid you to speak in that way," said her mother.

"All right, Mater—but they *were* red-h—.... All right, I won't then. But, Aunt Grace, it couldn't be *that* Sophy Taliaferro—she must be a hundred!"

"No—only thirty," said Mrs. Loring, smiling again.

"My *Gawd*!" cried Belinda, pronouncing the sacred name grotesquely so as to take off the edge of her irreverence. She dropped back upon the steps, and

sat staring open-mouthed at her aunt. "He's gone nutty!" she added, closing her lips with a snap. Then she sprang up again and stamped her foot.

"You've got to save him!" she cried, tears of rage in her eyes. "It isn't fair!— She's roped him in!— Morry is just at the age to do such rotten foolishness!— Thank God, this is a Land of Divorce!——"

"Belinda!"

"Yes—thank God for it!— And I wish trial marriage was here, too!"

"Belinda!"

"Oh, stuff, Mater! Haven't you read Ellen Key—she'd make you sit up!"

Mrs. Horton got up, went to the girl, and grasped her firmly by the shoulder. She was a determined little woman when roused and Belinda recognised the expression in her eyes. She looked up at her, sulky but silent for the moment.

"Listen to me," said her step-mother. "I will not have you talking in this manner. How dare you read Ellen Key, and—and poems that I've never given you?"

Belinda's radiant grin shone out again in spite of her.

"Oh, cut it out, Mater," she said amiably. "I hooked Roderick Random and Boccaccio when I was twelve —but you needn't worry. They made me sick—what I could understand of them. Yes, Mater—I've naturally got what they call a 'clean mind'—nastiness never would attract me. But this is a new age beginning, and a new sort of girl is beginning, too, and she wants to know what's what about everything, and—I'm *her*!" she wound up defiantly.

Mrs. Loring had put up her *face-à-main*, and earnestly regarded the girl's face during this speech. She had again that sensation of watching an interesting tempest from safe decks.

"I shall send you to school in France this winter," said Mrs. Horton grimly. "If you're so bent on acquiring knowledge it shall be given to you in ordered doses."

"All right, Mater!" said Belinda. Then she flung her racquet viciously on the steps, and groaned, thrusting her hands in the thick, red-brown clusters on either side of her face:

"French schools or not, Morry is a damn fool!" said she.

Then Mrs. Horton rose in all the severity of step-motherhood.

"You shall go to bed this instant!" said she, pointing. "You shall have only soup for dinner. You shall not leave these grounds for a week. Nor play tennis—nor go sailing."

"I couldn't very well go sailing in the grounds," said Belinda, with inextinguishable pertness. But she rose, and went upstairs to bed as the maternal finger indicated, making hideous, gargoylish faces all the way, which she did not dare turn to deliver.

And once, alone in her bedroom, having slammed the door so that the cottage jarred with it, she flung herself face down upon the floor, and sobbed furiously. With one clenched hand she beat the matting near her head. She strangled with this violent sobbing. Her whole body heaved with it.

"O God ... punish him!" choked Belinda. "O God ...

help me to get even with him some day ... somehow...."

She rose after a half-hour of this frantic weeping; and, hiccoughing with spent grief, like a passionate child, went and unlocked a little drawer. She took out a photograph of Morris. Under it was written in her black, loopy handwriting, "My Hero and my Love." She gazed a moment at his face, all distorted and magnified by her tears; then she deliberately spat upon it, tore it in pieces, and ground them under her heel. "I hate you.... I hate you.... Beast!... Pig!... Liar!" choked the little fury. All at once, down she flopped, her skirt making a "cheese" about her, and gathered the desecrated morsels to her lips.

"Oh ... oh...." she moaned. "My heart is broken ... it's broken...."

Balling the fragments in her fist, and still seated on the floor, she shook her fist with the rags of love in it, at the empty air.

"I'll get even with you, Morry...." she said between her teeth, as though he were present in person. "I'll get even with you ... if I have to wait till *I'm* thirty!... Oh, *I* know you!... You dared to kiss me ... *like that*...." Her face flamed at the memory. "And then ... in less than a year ... oh!... But if you tired of *me* ... after just *one* kiss ... you'll tire of *her* ... after some hundreds.... *Then*, Mr. Morry...." Her beautiful face was quite savage—a woman's jealous face under the childish mop of hair—"then *I'll* be waiting! In two years I'll be eighteen.... I'll give you just two years ... then *my* innings begin...."

Belinda knew well that she was beautiful. She had known it supremely when she tempted Morris to kiss

her—for she had tempted him—but then she loved him wildly. She was morally a little Oriental—with all her passions at white heat though she was but a schoolgirl. She had thought that his kiss meant that he loved her in like wise. He had been sorry the moment the kiss was over. But then—she had really tempted him beyond endurance, and he had always thought she had the most kissable mouth in the world. Besides, just at that psychological moment he happened to be bored to desperation. He had been spending the two weeks at Nahant that his mother always exacted from him in the summer. It was the only thing that she ever did exact from him, but they always seemed interminable. Then had come Belinda, tempting him with her passionate, sparkling eyes, and the desireful red fruit of her mouth ... fruit cleft for kisses....

He had hurried away the next day. He was honestly ashamed of that sensual kiss laid on a school-girl's lips. She was only fifteen then. He raged at himself and at her, too. "Kitten Cleopatra," he called her in his thought. "Amorous little devil— Jove! I pity her husband...."

For he never realised for an instant that the girl was really in love with him.

XIII

When Lady Wychcote received Sophy's letter, she was breakfasting at Dynehurst, alone with Gerald. She went very red under her light, morning rouge,

then pale. After some bitter remarks, through which her son sat in silence, she said:

"I shall send for James Surtees." Mr. Surtees was the family solicitor. "I am sure that as the probable heir we have some legal control over the boy, in a case like this."

Gerald rose decidedly.

"I shouldn't use it if I had it," he said.

His mother rose, too.

"*I* should," she said curtly.

They were standing face to face. Gerald's eyes wavered first. He looked out of window over the rolling green of the Park to where the smoke from the mining town blurred the pale horizon. Then he looked back at his mother again. It was a gentle but bold look for him.

"I wouldn't if I were you, mother," he said gravely.

"No. There are many things that you leave undone, which would be done if *you* were *I*," she said in a harsh voice, turning away. "I shall write to Surtees this afternoon."

But Lady Wychcote did not find her interview with Mr. Surtees very consoling. He replied to her most pressing questions by quoting from that Guardianship of Infants Act, which seemed to her to have been passed chiefly for her annoyance. The meticulous legal phraseology of the quoted sentences so got on her nerves that it was all she could do to refrain from being rude to the solicitor. Mr. Surtees read from slips that he had brought with him in reply to her urgent letter, asking whether in such an

instance as this the Court might not be willing to appoint her as co-guardian with her grandson's mother. ".... When no guardian has been appointed by the father, or if the guardian or guardians appointed by the father is or are dead, or refuses or refuse to act, the Court may, if it shall think fit, from time to time appoint a guardian or guardians to act jointly with the mother."

"Well ... and in such a case as this?... where my grandson will grow up with an American step-father?" she had asked eagerly.

"But your ladyship told me that Mrs. Chesney agreed to have her son educated in England?"

"Yes," she admitted impatiently; "but suppose that she should change her mind?"

"I think that we should have to await that event."

"But my...." (Lady Wychcote had almost said "my good man" in her extreme irritation.) "But my dear Mr. Surtees, who can tell *what* influence this ... this American step-father may have on the child—even in a year?"

"I venture to suggest that your ladyship is over-apprehensive," said Mr. Surtees. "From my personal acquaintance with Mrs. Chesney, I feel assured that she will allow no one to influence her son in any way that could be harmful. But," he continued, "if by any unfortunate chance ... er ... difficulties of ... of this kind should occur—the Court will generally act in the way that it considers most beneficial for the interest and welfare of the infant."

"Then, in case the mother's guardianship proved to be unsatisfactory, the Court *would* interfere?"

"I think there is no doubt about that."

With this, for the present, Lady Wychcote had to be content.

In the meantime Sophy's second wedding-day was drawing near. Mrs. Loring was to come to Sweet-Waters for the marriage, but there were to be no other guests. She arrived two days before. Every one liked her. And Bobby approved of her. "I like Mr. Loring's *muvvah*...." he told Sophy. His tone implied deep reticences on the subject of Mrs. Loring's son.

That evening, as Sophy bent over his crib to kiss him good-night, he held her face down to his and said:

"Muvvah, do you love Mr. Loring more than me?"

Sophy dropped to her knees and caught him in her arms.

"No, darling! No, *no*! I love you both—not one better than the other."

Bobby clung fast to her. Then he whispered:

"S'posin' you had to choose 'right hand—lef' hand'?"

"My precious! People don't choose other people that way. You know, Bobby darling, it's with hearts like the sky and the stars. There's room for all the stars in the sky—there's room for all sorts of different loves in one heart."

Bobby reflected a moment. Then he sighed.

"I reckon my heart ain't very big," he murmured. "It couldn't hold all that. I reckon my heart's just fulled

up with *you*, muvvah. I reckon it's only got *one* star in it."

Sophy crushed him to her. She kissed him in a passion of remorse for his pathetic jealousy. Tears choked her. She held him until she thought that he had fallen asleep. As she was stealing from the room, a clear little voice called after her:

"If it *was* 'right hand—lef' hand' with *any*body an' *you* —I'd choose *you*, muvvah!"

She rushed back again, and this time she stayed with him long after he was really asleep.

They were married and gone. Charlotte stood blowing her little nose fiercely—sustained in her apprehensive grief only by Mammy Nan. The Judge had driven to the station with Mrs. Loring.

"What do you think *really*, Mammy?" she got out at last. "Do you think Miss Sophy will be happy?"

Mammy Nan, who was already taking off her gala apron and folding it neatly for some future occasion, grunted noncommittally. Then she snuffled sharply. She had been crying, too, but she scorned to blow her nose openly like "Miss Cha'lt." Finally she said in a colourless voice:

"What Miss *Sophy* mought call happy, *I* moughtn't call happy."

"How do you mean, Mammy?"

"Well'um, Miss Chalt," replied the old negress dryly, "I is alluz ben hev my 'pinion 'bout dat Sary in dee

Bible a-honin' a'ter a baby at her age. Hit sho' wuz a darin' thing tuh do. But hit 'pears like gittin' hit made *her* happy. T'ouldn't 'a' made *me* happy—no, *ma'am*!"

She pinned the folded apron firmly together with her "Sunday" brooch, taking both it and the unaccustomed collar off at once with a sigh of relief.

"Now seein' as a young huzbun' is wuss trouble dan a young baby, how I gwine prophesy 'bout Miss Sophy's happ'ness?" she concluded.

The magic spell held beautifully all through those bridal wanderings. There was a real awe at the base of Loring's love for Sophy. Her creative gift and the fact of her initiation into life's darker mysteries, had a strange and subduing charm for him. His bridegroom mood was still Endymion's. This reverence, as for a being familiar with worlds unknown to him, lent his passion for her a certain, subtle restraint which seemed to reveal Eros as the most exquisitely considerate of all the gods.

On her return Sophy went to Sweet-Waters instead of going direct to Newport. She could scarcely sleep that night on the train, for thinking how soon she would hold her boy in her arms again. But Loring was more keenly jealous of Bobby than ever. Marriage had brought this feeling to a head.

The first thing Sophy saw as the train slowed down at Sweet-Waters station was his little face, very pale, upturned to the car windows. When she sprang off and caught him in her arms, he trembled so that he could not speak for some moments.

Then he said earnestly, in a faint, beseeching voice:

"Muvvah—please don't leave me any more, for Jesus' sake. Amen."

Sophy, trembling herself, said:

"Never again, my darling. Never, never, as long as we both live."

Afterwards, when they were alone, Loring said to her:

"Don't you think you were mistaken to make the boy such a promise as that?"

He did not look at her as he said this, but at his tie which he was fastening before the glass.

"What promise?" said Sophy, not remembering for a moment.

"That you'd never leave him again. Things might happen to make it necessary."

"Nothing could happen to make it necessary. I promised truly. I wouldn't leave him again for anything on earth—not for anything...."

"Not even for me?" asked Loring. He was still looking at his tie, which refused to slip into the right knot.

"That couldn't happen, dear. We shall always be together I hope."

"You can't tell...." said Loring. His voice was stiff.

Sophy came over beside him. She stood watching the reflection of his nervous fingers in the glass for some minutes. She loved his hands. They were long and slight, the fine bone-work showing clearly—sensitive,

self-willed hands. She thought how strange it was, that all the men she had ever cared for had had fine hands. Even Cecil's, huge as they were, had been well-moulded. Cecil ... how strange to think of Cecil's hands while she watched these others.... Life was like that. The tangle of memory made one thread pull another endlessly. She felt very sad all of a sudden.

Loring did not say anything more. Presently he jerked the tie from about his neck and threw it on the floor.

"Hell!" he said heartily.

Sophy laughed, then grew grave. His white face looked so disproportionately furious to the cause of wrath. He snatched up another tie and set to work again.

After a while Sophy said in a low voice:

"Morris ... don't you like Bobby?"

"Like him?... Of course I like him.... Damn this tie!"

Sophy waited a moment.

"Morris...."

"Well?"

"What is it, dear? What has vexed you?"

"I should think you could see that for yourself," he said impatiently, raging with the second tie.

He had never been downright cross with her before. But Sophy understood. She felt almost as tenderly to him as she had to Bobby on a like occasion. But the sad feeling grew in her heart. They were jealous of each other. Jealousy was a hideous guest at life's

table. She sighed unconsciously. He darted a swift glance at her. The droop of her head touched him suddenly. He turned, catching her to him.

"Oh, Selene!" he groaned. "Don't you see? I'm just a low, mortal wretch and I'm disgustingly, damnably jealous—that's all. Beautiful— I swear it.... I quake in my very vitals when I think that you may love that boy more than me.... The child of another man—more than me." He held her fiercely.

She put up her hand to his neck as she leaned against him.

"You needn't be afraid," she said softly. "I couldn't love any one more than I love you, dear."

He had to be satisfied with this. He was afraid to ask if she loved him more than she loved her son. But this was what he wanted. This was the only thing that would satisfy him. And he was not only jealous of Bobby. As he had said once before, he was jealous of the dead man—of Bobby's father. This is perhaps the bitterest jealousy of all—the jealousy of the dead who has once been dearest to what is now our dearest.

XIV

It seemed very strange to Sophy, as unreal as this new love in another way, to find herself once more in the noisy glitter of the world after her three years of hermitage. "The crackling of thorns under a pot" it seemed to her—of big gilded thorns under a big

gilded pot. The pot bubbled merrily, boiling over with iridescent froth; its steam was heady, causing those who tended it to dance blithely like self-hypnotised Arabs about a brazier. Sophy enjoyed gorgeous foolery as much as any other, when she was in the mood. But now she was far from the mood. It was as if Endymion had insisted on presenting Selene at the court of Elis with "excursions and alarums," and gaudy pageants—as if he could not feel his goddess wholly his until the curious eyes of the courtiers approved his choice. For she had found out that it was by his desire that his mother had so insisted on this visit. Mrs. Loring had been quite unconscious of betraying motives when she said: "I wouldn't urge you, my dear, but Morry so wishes it. He thinks you've been too long in this dear, dreamy old place. Besides," she had added, smiling, "he naturally wishes the world to see his Faery Queen...."

Sophy had mentioned this to Loring.

"Don't let's go, dear.... I'm sure your mother will understand. And I really hate the idea," she had said to him.

But Loring had replied:

"You don't know my mother yet, Beautiful. She would feel awfully cut up if we didn't go to her after we came back. Don't you see?— It would look queer to others, too...."

Sophy had yielded in the end. Yet she smiled to herself, a little wistfully, reflecting on the meaning of the name Endymion, "a being that gently comes over one." Here she was—to her mind the most pitiable of trophy-ikons—a bride displayed in new attire, new

jewels and new love, to the eyes of the appraising world.

In all the conviviality poured over him as bridegroom by laughing friends, Morris was very careful not to go too far that summer. The friends grinned slyly—"Morry's on the water-wagon of love," the word went round. Some wag said that the fire-water of matrimony went flat in the second year—and "Mrs. Morry" might find her consort drinking from other stills. This would prove a shock.

"Oh, she won't mind," a woman had said easily. "Morry's so perfectly delightful when he's taken a bit too much. He's *so* amusing."

But on the first occasion of this kind Sophy had minded very much indeed. It did not happen until towards the middle of their first winter in New York. They had given a dinner and some people had stayed on afterwards until one o'clock. One of the guests, a young Bavarian, had played rousingly on the piano. The keys seemed to smoke under his long, vigorous hands. He ended with some frenzied Polish dances. Everybody was drinking and smoking—Loring drank more than he smoked. A pretty gypsy looking woman jumped up and began an impromptu dance to the wild music. Loring began to dance with her. The game of drawing-room romps became breathless.

Sophy sat amused like the rest. His head looked so oddly Greek with its short, tossing locks above the ugly cylinders of his modern dress. He should have had on a leopard's skin. As this thought came to her, some one cried: "Oh, Morry!—*Do* give us the 'Reformed Alcibiades'. Do! *do!*—I haven't seen you do it for a whole year...."

A chorus rose at once about him. He hesitated a moment—glanced at Sophy. She was smiling. "Shall I?" he said doubtfully.

"Well— I confess I'm curious to see how a 'reformed Alcibiades' *would* dance...." she said, still smiling.

Von Hoff, the young man at the piano, began a most enticing, fiery measure. It went to Loring's head. He tossed off a whiskey and soda, cried, "Here goes, then!" and ran from the room.

"Haven't you really ever seen him do it, Mrs. Loring?" said the woman who had asked for the dance.

"No— I didn't even know he could dance so cleverly ——"

"You've a treat before you, then. It's *the* most delicious thing you ever saw...."

"Strike up, slave!" came Loring's voice from the next room. Von Hoff "struck up." Loring had whispered him what to play as he ran out. It was a voluptuous, half Spanish, half Oriental measure. To its rhythm Loring danced back into the room. He had set a huge wreath of artificial roses with flying ribbons on his head. His evening trousers were rolled up, leaving his legs bare from the knee down. A pair of elaborate sandals—relics of Harvard days—encased his feet. He had taken off his coat and collar and rolled back his shirt-sleeves. A wide, white silken scarf of Sophy's formed his peplum. Under one arm was tucked a big, stuffed pheasant to represent the pet quail of Alcibiades. In his hand he held a wine-cup, inverted.

The dance began charmingly. Alcibiades was evidently refusing all invitations to drink from many invisible comrades.... The first shock of thus seeing

him comically "dressed up"—in a costume which was only saved from low absurdity by the perfect beauty of his classic head and slight figure—this first startled recoil having passed, Sophy watched his amazingly graceful poses with a tolerable pleasure. She could not really enjoy it—that her husband should prance about so attired for the amusement of their guests—but she remembered, soberly enough, that he was very young, and that her distaste was probably the result of maturer years.

Then came the real shock. The dance grew frankly ludicrous. With dextrous sleight of hand, Alcibiades made it appear as though his "quail" were angrily demanding a drink from the inverted goblet. The fowl finally conquers. The goblet is filled for him again and again. Alcibiades can no longer resist temptation, thus seeing a mere fowl take its fill. He, too, begins to drink.... The dance ends in a mad, drunken whirl, in which Alcibiades crowns the pheasant with his wreath, and they collapse together upon the floor in a maudlin heap.

The thing was really wonderfully well done. The guests were in ecstasies of laughter. But Sophy felt cold and sick. It seemed to her that he could not love her as she had thought. Else how could he turn the body that she loved into a travesty for others to laugh at? She felt as though the dignity of their mutual love were lying there on the floor, sprawled and ruffled and lifeless like the stuffed pheasant....

This feeling was not apparent in her face. Her training had been too thorough and bitter for her to let the world have even a glimpse of her chagrin. But though no one else guessed it, Loring was aware instantly of something wrong. As soon as he had

changed back to ordinary dress, and returned to the drawing-room, where people were now saying good-night—he felt this. And he, too, was chagrined. He had taken just enough liquor to make this chagrin of his savour of anger. For the first time he felt her "superiority" not as that of a goddess, but of a wife. She "disapproved" of him. To be "disapproved" of had always roused the ugly side of his nature.

"And she told me herself to go ahead," he thought irefully. "Now she's got it in for me.... I'll be curtain-lectured I suppose—get a glimpse of the seamy side of matrimony...."

He reinforced himself with another high-ball.

When the last guest had gone he went up to Sophy. She had turned to get her fan from a sofa where she had left it. It was the fan of white peacock feathers that Amaldi had once admired. She thought of him suddenly as she took it in her hand. How would he have looked had he seen that dance?— She reddened. Why did such thoughts come to one? Life was quite difficult enough without these unbidden, scathing fancies. She tried to put on a natural, easy expression. As is always the case, this gave her face a strained look—the look of one "sitting" for a photograph.

On his side, Loring's had an expression that Sophy was only too familiar with—but until now, she had never seen it on *his* face. It was the pale, black-eyed, fixed expression of a man who has taken too much to drink, without being in the least "drunk." Sophy could not tell what it was she felt at that moment. It was like the pang of a strange sickness. And again it was like a blow on an old wound. The old and new wound seemed bleeding together in her breast. She

tried to pass him with a smile.

"It's all hours of the night.... I'm simply dropping with sleep...." she said, her voice, at least, natural enough.

He planted himself in her way. His hands were deep in his pockets. His white, fixed young face was dropped a little. He looked up at her stilly from under the beautiful arch of his brows that she so loved.... They always reminded her of Marlowe's lovely expression "airy brows." Now they lowered like clouds over the bold, still eyes.

"I say, Selene," he blurted, enunciating his words very clearly. "Let's have it ... and get done with it...."

"What, Morris?"

"The wigging you've got in pickle for me.... Mixing my metaphors, too, ain't I?... There's another grievance for you.... Poetess as well as goddess will take umbrage now...."

Sophy hated being called "poetess." That Morris should call her "poetess" seemed the last touch of irony. She stood looking at him gently.

"I haven't got a 'wigging' in store for you," she said. "Why are you angry?"

"Why are *you* angry?... But, there, that's poppycock—my asking that. I know devilish well why you're angry. It's because I danced that Alcibiades thing.... Well—you told me to, didn't you?"

Sophy hesitated. Then she said frankly:

"It's true I didn't like it, Morris. But that oughtn't to vex you." Her voice trembled suddenly. "When a

woman loves a man as I love you—she can't bear to ... to see him ... like that."

"Make a fool of himself, you mean?"

Sophy went close and put her hand on his breast.

"Morris...." she said, "are you trying to quarrel ... with *me*, dear?"

Her tone was lovely as she said this. "He's so young ... so young...." she was telling herself.

But Loring's overstrung mood sensed this maternal indulgence, and it infuriated him still further.

"You've got me mixed with your dear Bobby, haven't you?" he asked sneeringly.

"Oh, Morris!"

She drew back, flushing even over her neck and arms. Anger as well as pain drove her blood.

"Well—you used just the tone you'd use to a youngster who'd been stealing jam," he said sulkily.

Sophy stood playing with the fan of white feathers. Life seemed a nightmare to her just then. This rude, sullen boy who was yet her husband made her feel as if all the gods of Malice were watching her. She could almost hear the Olympian titter go round the room. She tried to think of some way of lifting their life out of this horrid, commonplace quagmire into which it had slipped so suddenly—and it was as if their life were some huge, smooth, handleless vessel upon which she could not get a grip.

"He isn't himself—this isn't the real Morris——" her thought sanely reminded her. "This is Whiskey...."

She lifted her slight figure with a sudden movement of determination.

"Morris, dear," she said, "I'm not going to let you quarrel with me.... Good-night."

She went swiftly by him into her bedroom. He longed to catch her arms and stop her as she went by, but he did not dare. He turned on his heel and went back into the drawing-room. The butler was clearing away the tray of liqueurs and whiskey.

"Hold on a moment, Jennings," said Loring. He took another stiff drink. As often happens, this lost dram of whiskey wrought a totally different mood in him. Within five minutes his anger had merged into a wild impulse of desire. He wondered now that he could have been so curt with his Selene. He understood as in a flash of revelation why she had objected to that "rotten dance." He wanted to tell her so with devouring kisses. He waited until the servants had withdrawn, then went to her bedroom door.

"Who is it?" came her voice.

"I ... Endymion," he murmured.

He was ablaze with love and repentance and—whiskey, but he was still not in the least what could be called "drunk."

"Come in," said Sophy. Her heart failed her. Was he coming to have his quarrel out? She felt quite numb—lifeless—as though made of wood. Her maid had undressed her and plaited her long hair for the night. She was sitting before the fire in her white dressing-gown. Her eyes looked very sad to him in her quiet face. He came and threw himself on his knees beside her.

"Forgive me ... forgive me, Selene ... forgive me...." he murmured, unconsciously metrical. At any other time Sophy would have teased him for it. Now she did not even notice it. She had been thinking: "George Eliot says somewhere that 'we can endure our worst sorrows but once'.... I am enduring mine twice...."

She put her hand on the bowed head.

"Never mind, dear," she said.

He seized her bare arm in both hot hands, and his lips, still hotter, ran over it. She shivered, trying to draw it away from him. He thought that she shivered with love. He sprang to his feet, and, tall woman as she was, so great was the feverish strength of his desire, he drew her easily up from the low chair into his arms. His breath reeking of spirit poured over her half averted face. She could not bear to struggle with him. That would seem the last degradation.

"I'm tired, dear...." she whispered. "I'm deadly tired...."

And he laughed. And this low exultant laugh, that had once made such music in her ears, seemed like that silent tittering of malicious gods grown audible.

"No ... Morris ... no...." she said, bracing herself against him by her strong, slight arms. He laughed on. He began to whisper incoherently in her averted ear....

"Oh, moon-woman ... oh, virgin-goddess.... Don't I know all your sweet reluctances by heart?... Isn't that what made me mad to conquer you?... You tempted me yourself.... Listen.... I never confessed it.... Now I'll confess for penance.... Do you know what made

me first swear I'd marry you?... Your own words, Selene!... Your own words!... It was a verse of yours I read.... Oh, such a cock-sure ... Olympian verse!... Listen: Do you remember?... Here's how it went...."

He muttered her own words of passionate freedom into her averted, shrinking ear:

"I am the Wind's, and the Wind is mine!
No mortal lover shall me discover;
Freedom clear is our bridal-wine—
Oh, lordly Wind! Oh, perfect lover!..."

"There!—That's what made me set my will like steel to conquer you.... *I'll* be her 'mortal lover' I said.... And see!— You are in my arms...."

He stopped aghast. In his arms, heavily drooping, her face thrust from him against her own shoulder, she was weeping like one broken-hearted.

XV

The situation had solved itself after that. Dismayed and thunderstruck, Loring had been glad to loose his weeping goddess from his arms. It had never occurred to him that his Selene could cry frankly, with choking sobs and great tears like any other woman. It was a most discomfortable revelation. Like all men he hated tears—but these especial tears in addition to disconcerting him made him feel a blunderer, a sorry fool. They set him in a darkness of confused wonder, where he felt like a chastised child in a cupboard.

But Sophy stopped crying almost at once.

"Morris, dear," she said, "you know I told you I was deadly tired.... I really am too tired to talk to-night— I feel almost ill, I'm so weary. But to-morrow I'll say everything that's in my heart.... Go to bed now, will you, like a kind darling? I ... I'm better alone when ... when I feel like this."

Loring looked at her, then down at the hearth-rug. His lips pursed.

"You'll clear this up for me to-morrow?" he asked in a sullen voice.

"Yes, dear— I promise."

"All right, then. Sorry you feel so seedy."

He went towards the door. Before he reached it his gorge rose with wounded pride and bewildered indignation. He turned his head as he went out.

"Sorry I've been guilty of blasphemy...." he said. "Loving a goddess is rather steep work at times...."

He went out, his eyes hard and resentful.

Sophy sank into her chair again. She sat looking into the fire. She remembered how they had sat hand in hand, after their first kiss, looking into another fire only a few months ago.

But this was whiskey, she reminded herself—only whiskey. She must prove to him and herself that she was stronger than a mere appetite. But as she sat there staring at the fire, it was Cecil that she thought of, more than Loring. How terrible and fatal it seemed that, twice over, she should be the rival of such things with those she loved. For her sake Cecil

had set himself to conquer. Then death had taken him. But before he had died he had killed her highest love for him....

The next day they had a full talk together. He was in a very gentle, penitent humour. He said that he understood just how she had felt.

He was on his knees by her chair, in his favourite attitude, holding her waist with both arms.

She bent towards him. Her heart was very glad within her. She took his face between her hands and kissed him on the eyes.

"You see, dearest," she said, "I'm a very faithful wife. I'm Morris Loring's wife and I won't be made love to by"—she looked straight into the eyes that she had just kissed—"by John Barleycorn," she ended, smiling, to ease the tense moment for them both.

Loring dropped down his face into her lap. Then he looked up again. A dance came into his eyes, that had been ashamed for a moment.

"I'll.... I'll kill the adulterous beggar!" he murmured.

Sophy felt a sharp twinge at her heart. Were all men more or less alike, she wondered? Cecil Chesney himself might have made that remark and in just that way.

Things went well after that for some months. Loring's friends even wagged wise heads of grave foreboding over it. "Mrs. Morry's got him too rankly bitted," they agreed unanimously. "He'll rear and come over backwards if she don't look out...."

But Sophy was very moderate. She had no prudish objection to his drinking in reason. She didn't enjoy

seeing him in the false high spirits engendered sometimes by extra "cocktails," but she only positively objected to the amorousness occasioned by them. He had had his lesson, however.

And as the winter wore on, and Sophy became more familiar with the social life of New York, she understood better and better this side of Loring's character. She found that there were very few young men of his "set" who did not drink as a matter of course. Very often, nearly always at balls and dances, many of them would be genially "tight" by the end of the evening. This only made them extremely noisy and "larky" as a rule. She found that the women took this state of affairs with indulgent philosophy. Often they were amused by it.

As a whole the social life of New York, quite apart from this feature, did not appeal to her. Its mad speed and ostentation resulted in a sort of golden glare of monotony. Yet there were charming people, both men and women, caught protesting in the maelstrom. They protested bitterly as they went whirling round and round. Yet, when the maelstrom spewed them forth in the spring tide—for the most part, they allowed themselves to be sucked in by other whirlpools, such as Paris and London and Newport. Sophy wondered at the nervous constitutions which could stand such fevered repetition endlessly renewed. She reflected that Americans were said to be the most nervous people on earth. Yet she thought their nerves must be of thrice tempered steel to support the life that they protestingly led from year's end to year's end.

She determined that, since her lot was now cast here, she would temper her surroundings as much to her

own taste as possible. For she had found out, among other somewhat astonishing things, that Loring was socially ambitious for her. He was resolved to build an elaborate and sumptuous house in New York—what American journals call a "mansion." Sophy pleaded for ample time in which to decide on the architecture and type of this house. In the meantime they spent their spare hours in hunting for a temporary abode where they might live during the next three or four years.

The house of Loring's mother was the usual mass of gilding and marble that characterised the last quarter of the nineteenth century in New York. It was Italian. The lower floor looked like an ancient Roman Bath. On the second floor was a Renaissance fountain. The library chimney-piece was formed of an entire doorway taken from some tomb in Italy, and still bearing the Italian family's coat-of-arms.

Sophy found what she wanted at last in a delightful old corner-house in Washington Square. Every one remonstrated. The tide of fashion was rushing like an eagre "up to the Park." Sophy did not care for Central Park. She said that she was sure its Dryads were all made of cast-iron and went bumping up and down every night between the horrific bronze colossi in the main avenue. This did not seem a sufficient reason to Loring's friends for selecting such an out-of-date, deserted spot as Washington Square in which to live for the next four years.

However, when Sophy had finished furnishing and decorating the old house, Loring was charmed, and very proud of her. But the house was not completed until the following autumn.

In the meantime, Loring, without saying anything to

Sophy, had leased one of the Newport "palaces" from an absent owner for five years.

Sophy saw that the world had claimed her again. Now her mind bent itself to the task of redeeming some months of the year for her own use. She began to feel afraid. How was such a delicate visitant as Poetry to be entertained amid all this confusion of tongues and glittering paraphernalia?

"I must go to Sweet-Waters for May," she told Loring. "I'll open the house in Newport on the first of June."

"But I'm booked for those polo matches on Long Island in May," said Loring.

"I'm sorry, dear.... However, you won't miss me when you're playing polo you know.... And I do long for a May in Virginia."

"Damn Virginia!" said Loring.

Sophy laughed at him.

"You'll love me all the more when I come back to you," she coaxed. "Don't 'damn' poor Virginia."

"I do damn it.... I'm jealous of it."

"You needn't be."

She was still smiling at his sulky face.

"Yes, I do need ... you put it before me."

"Now, Morris...."

"Yes, 'Now, Morris'.... 'Now, Morris'...." (He mimicked her reproachful tone.) "It's always 'Now, Morris' when I want what belongs to me...."

"Oh! So I 'belong' to you, do I?" she teased affectionately.

"Yes! By gad, you do! You married me.... You're my wife. A wife should stay with her husband. You do belong to me."

He had his "Marmion" tone very pronouncedly.

Sophy said prettily:

"I think it would be truer to say we both 'belong.'"

"Well.... *I'm* not leaving *you*, am I?"

She reached out and took the sulky, cleft chin between her finger and thumb.

"Poor sing! Did dey 'buse it?" she said, as she addressed Dhu when he had one of his fits of collie-melancholy. But Loring jerked away his chin.

"Please don't treat me like a baby," he said stiffly. "I'm very far from feeling like one."

Sophy pondered a moment. Then she said:

"I hate to remind people of promises ... but you'll remember that you promised me I should have some time, every year, to myself——"

"You're tired of me already—is that it?"

"Now, dear—how am I to keep from treating you like a baby, when you act so exactly like one?"

"It's babyish for a man to want his wife with him, is it?"

"Isn't it rather babyish of him not to want her to take one little month to rest in and see her own people?"

"I thought my people were to be your people like the woman in the Bible?"

"So they are ... but I've seen them all winter."

"Tired of us all, eh?"

Sophy said nothing in reply to this.

"Oh, well!" he exclaimed angrily, flouncing to the door. "If the new salt has lost its savour—go to your old salt-lick——"

He bounced out, clapping the door. It was the first coarse thing he had ever said to her. She felt indignant as well as hurt. But when she reflected that his ill temper came from jealousy she was sorry for him, too.

"But I must go all the same," she reflected. "If I give in this time, I can never call my soul my own again."

She left for Virginia two days later, taking Bobby with her. She and Loring had not quite "made up" before she left. They were very polite to each other. Sophy's heart felt sore. This attitude of his was spoiling her visit home. She thought that he would surely soften before the train drew out. But he did not.

He lifted his hat as the engine began its hoarse starting cough.

"Well—so long," he said. "A happy May to you!"

Sophy felt a proud impulse to reply in kind. Then the sad influence of parting, even for so short a time, melted her. She put her head from the window.

"You'll come down to Virginia to fetch me back,

won't you, dear?" she asked.

"Don't know. Depends on how the games go," he answered curtly. "I'll——"

The chuff-chuff of the moving engine drowned the rest of the sentence.

XVI

It was on the twenty-fifth of April that Sophy went to Sweet-Waters. But in spite of all the familiar, springtide loveliness, this month of May was not what she had dreamed. She missed Loring. His curt letters wounded her. No—she could not be happy with this shadow between them.

But if she was not altogether content, Bobby was. He came and leaned against her knee as she was brushing her hair one morning. He was nearly six now, and spoke much more plainly. He was very fond of "grown up" words, which assumed quaint forms under his usage.

"Mother," he said, "couldn't we demain here with Uncle Joe and Aunt Chartie? Are we *'bliged* to go back to Mr. Loring?"

Sophy laid down her brush and put her arm around him. His seemingly unconquerable aversion for Loring was a great grief to her.

"Bobby," she answered, looking gravely into his anxious upturned face, "don't you understand? Mother is Mrs. Loring now. She *must* go back to Morris."

Bobby pondered, lowering his eyes. Then he said slowly:

"Won't your last name ever be the same as mine any more at all, mother?"

"No, darling. But names matter very little. What matters is that you're my own boy, and I'm your own mother, forever and ever."

Bobby was silent. Then it broke from him:

"I *hate* you to have his name 'stead of mine!... I.... I hate it renormously, mother!"

She held the boy close and put her cheek to his.

"Yes, dear. Mother understands how you feel about that. That's natural. But what hurts me is, that you won't be friends with Morris. You won't even call him 'Morris' and he's asked you to so often. Can't you do that much to please mother?"

Bobby got very red. He said in a rather strangled voice:

"Mother, please don't ask me to do that."

"Why, dear?"

"'Cause...." He hesitated—then said in a rush, very low:

"'Cause I don't like him 'nuff to do it."

"Oh, Bobby—that hurts mother."

"I'm sorry," he said gravely.

"Then, won't you try to feel differently—for mother's sake?"

Bobby twisted a lock of her loosened hair round and round his finger. He said presently:

"Tain't any use *tryin'* to like people, mother."

He thought another moment, then added:

"Mr. Loring don't like me an' I don't like Mr. Loring. I 'spec God fixed it that way—'cause it's fixed so tight it won't come loose."

Loring, on his side, was determined to discipline Sophy a bit. She shouldn't think that she could desert him for a whim, and he take it like a good little husband, by Jove!

He went quite wild at times with longing for her, because this absence only whetted his desire. All his desires throve for being thwarted sharply. It was only continuous, prolonged denial that wore his very thin fibred patience to the snapping point. In that case he turned to new desires. He had never in his life been really patient over but one thing, and that was his wooing of Sophy. Or no, he had been patient when stalking deer, or waiting for wild duck. It was the sporting spirit in him that made him so admirably patient on these like occasions. But there was no sporting spirit to sustain him in the rôle of husband. A wife was not game to be stalked. She was a possession to be enjoyed. Sophy must learn that as Selene she was goddess to his Endymion—but as Mrs. Morris Loring, she was, well, wife to her husband.

Loring had an astonishing power of sustaining ill temper. He could keep a grievance alive for months by merely muttering over the heads of the offense against him—as a lover can thrill himself by murmuring the beloved's name.

Not since he was a child of three, afraid to go to sleep in the dark, and obstreperously demanding that

both nurse and mother should sit holding each a hand until oblivion claimed him, had he demanded not to be forsaken without being obeyed.

Sophy returned to New York, as she had promised, on the twenty-seventh of May. He was not at the station to meet her. She wondered whether a match had detained him, or whether she would find him at the house.

She felt very helpless against this unyielding wall of sullen, consistent anger.

The butler told her that Mr. Loring had been spending the week-end with some friends on Long Island but had 'phoned that morning to say that he would return in time for dinner. He had not yet come in.

She went upstairs feeling sad and discouraged. It was very warm and oppressive in town after the open country. The scent of the hot asphalt came in through the open windows. The house looked queer and bleak, all dressed in brown holland for the summer.

The butler had filled the rooms with American Beauty roses. She disliked these roses. They always suggested to her the idea that they had been mulched with bank notes. She sat listlessly in the big, ornate room of the rented house, surrounded by yards of brown holland and acres of the artificial looking roses.

At a quarter past eight Loring came in. She heard him speak to the butler. Then he went to his own room. He came down in half an hour. Her heart swelled when she saw him.

He came over, took her hand loosely, and left a glancing kiss upon her cheek.

"You look fit.... Had a pleasant time?" he asked politely. Then in the same breath he added: "Jove! I'm hungry.... There's nothing like a good go at polo for making a chap keen on his tuck."

"Who won?" asked Sophy politely. She was dreadfully hurt; but she was proud also.

"Oh, our side.... We've been winning pretty steadily. Nipped the three last goals from under their noses."

They maintained a laboured conversation in the drawing-room until ten. Then she rose, saying that she thought as they were to leave for Newport next day, she would go to bed early. There was so much packing to see about. He rose, too, and held the door ceremoniously, while she passed out.

She went to her room with her heart aching and heavy.

Drawing aside one of the light muslin curtains, she stood at the window in her thin night-dress trying to refresh herself with a breath of outer air, even though it reeked of asphalt.

The door of her room opened and shut. She turned with a start. Morris was striding towards her, white of face and black of eyes. He wrapped her in a fierce hug. She was crushed against him so that it hurt her. His eyes were eating her face. They were hard, angry, yet burning with desire. It was almost the glare of hatred.

"I want you ... you're mine! How dare you keep me wanting you like this ... all these damnable weeks?"

Sophy stood rigid in his locked arms. That look in his eyes was awful to her.

"You hurt me, Morris ... let me go...." she said.

"No, I'll not let you go.... I'm master in this room...."

"Morris!"

"You'll take the consequences of making me hate you and love you at the same time! By God! you'll take the consequences...."

She felt very strong and cold—very fiercely cold all at once. Their eyes blazed on each other. They were like two enemies at grips rather than two lovers. Then his arms dropped. He laughed. He put up one hand over his face and went on laughing.

As soon as he released her, Sophy drew one or two long breaths. It really hurt her to breathe at first, so savagely had he crushed her to him. Then she stood watching him as he laughed. And he laughed and laughed.

Suddenly she went up to him, stole her two arms tenderly about him, drew his face with his hand still over it down to her shoulder.

"Oh, Morris ... Morris ... Morris...." she said.

He stopped laughing and began to shake.

"Endymion...." she whispered close to his ear.

He slid to his knees before her, burying his face in her gown.

They forgave each other before they slept. But deep down in Loring's heart there was resentment, albeit unrealised.

XVII

The next two weeks they spent at Nahant with Loring's mother.

The dream was fading fast—the dream, but not her love for him. That remained like clear marble from which the purple glamour cast through stained glass slowly withdraws. And this clear, white love had more and more of the maternal in it. She could not have forgiven those scenes of drink-inflamed passion had not there been in her love for him much of the indulgent tenderness with which she regarded Bobby's outbreaks. She did not realise this fully—the purple glow still lingered. Love to a poet is poetry or it is nothing. If she should ever come to read him in cold prose, love would flee forever—Pteros—the Flyer, he is called, as well as Eros....

By the nineteenth of June they were in the full swing of the Newport season.

Sophy did not play tennis herself, but she would go with Morris to the Casino in the morning. It amused her to watch all these passionately energetic young women bent on fashionable slimness, violently exercising in the torrid heat—looking like some new type of odalisque, veiled with thick brown veils half way up their noses to prevent sunburn. Madly they would dart to and fro until midday, then rush for the beach. She found it even more amusing to see these crowds of men and women disporting on the well-kept beach and in the sea that looked so well-kept also; the men, of amazingly varied shapes—bereft of all elegance by their scant attire; the women more elegant than ever, with the décolletage of charming legs, and wearing fantastic headgear that made them

look like great sea-poppies and bluets blooming on the tawny sand—or flying, as though wind-blown, in the swing.

The routine was much as she remembered it as a girl—luncheons, dinner parties with dancing to follow at the hostess's house or some other—balls, fancy-balls, theatricals at the Casino—the usual fantastic, highly-coloured, sparkling Masque of Pleasure. It was agreeable enough for a week or two—but her heart failed when she thought of the whole summer—and many summers to follow—spent in this fashion. She was glad when August drew to its close, and nearly all the women had taken the pose of being tired or even ill, and not going out any more. Then she had some delightful, real country rides again with Morris. The Island was charming to explore. The golden-rod was beginning to blow in the fields. It made her long for Sweet-Waters. But she would not vex him with such an allusion.

"It's nice to have these quiet days together, isn't it?" she said, as he tied a great bunch of golden-rod to the dees of her saddle, and another to his own.

These quiet days at Newport did not last long, however. The Kron Prinz of Blauethürme arrived suddenly one day, practically unheralded. And presto!—all the weary and ailing became restored as by magic. The descent of His Royal Highness into the stagnant social waters was like the descent of the angel into the pool of Bethesda. He did but trouble the waters with his princely foot, and straightway all sufferers were restored to abounding and healthful vigour. The erstwhile exhausted ladies went scampering about like chipmunks. And the "society" journals, that had been mournfully pecking here and

there for stray grains of interest, now fluttered triumphant with whole sheaves of "snapshots" and thrilling items.

Sophy winced to see a photograph of herself as frontispiece of a "smart" weekly. It had been taken as she crossed the lawn of the Casino with the Crown Prince. It was headed, "A Famous Beauty and a Foreign Prince." Underneath was written, "Mrs. Morris Loring walking with H. R. H. the Crown Prince of Blauethürme. Mrs. Loring is one of our most distinguished and *chic* young matrons. She entertains lavishly and brilliantly both at her unique town house in New York (said to be decorated by her own fair hands) and at her sumptuous summer palace in Newport. Mrs. Loring was formerly the wife of the Hon. Cecil Chesney, younger brother of Viscount Wychcote."

She tossed the paper to Morris with a grimace. "Look at that snobbish abomination!" she said. "*How* good Americans would love a King and Court all their own! It's a pity Washington didn't accept that crown they offered him...."

But she broke off, rather dismayed at Loring's extreme fury over the picture. She did not realise that what so enraged him was the allusion to her as "formerly the wife of the Hon. Cecil Chesney."

"Damn it!" he fumed. "How dare they take liberties with your name! You are my wife— I'll teach them to accept that fact for good and all!"

The thing rankled in him for days. Indeed Sophy had cause to remember the visit of the Crown Prince of Blauethürme in more ways than one; for there was a "stag dinner" given him towards the end of his stay at

Newport, and Loring was one of the hosts. It is hard to leave a "stag dinner" in perfect equipoise of mind and body, especially when its chief guest is a Royalty who chooses to remain until dawn, and shows a truly regal prowess with the wine-cup. Loring returned at five o'clock and demanded to enter Sophy's room. She had locked the door. She came to it when she heard his voice, but refused to open it.

"Damn it! Do you turn me from your door like a beggar?" he called angrily, rattling the knob.

"Don't talk so loud, Morris.... You'll be dreadfully sorry for losing your temper like this to-morrow.... You'll be glad I wouldn't let you in...."

He was quite frantic.

"Some fine day you'll shut me out too often, my lady!" he raged at her.

"Morris! The servants will hear you. Do go!"

"All right. But you won't always be able to whistle me to heel when you want to.... I give you that straight."

He laughed coarsely. His state showed more in his laughter than in his speaking voice.

She had never known him as bad as this. Her very soul felt sick and faint under it. She heard him muttering as he went off along the corridor to his own room. She went back to bed trembling. She thought there must be *some* way to stop it. She sat there in the chill August dawn, thinking, thinking.

XVIII

Loring's ill humour lasted into the next day. He could not remember clearly what had caused it, but he knew that he was aggrieved with Sophy for something. It came to him while he was dressing. He did not get up until two o'clock that afternoon. His man served him some black coffee in his bedroom. As he gulped it between phases of his toilet, he remembered suddenly: "Locked me out of her room, by gad!"

His face burnt. He knew perfectly well that he had deserved to be locked out, but that did not make the crime any less heinous in his eyes.

He went downstairs in a still, molten frame of mind. The feeling of physical malaise only added to his mental irritation.

As he reached the hall, Bobby was just coming in from his afternoon walk with Rosa. He loved this walk with Rosa. She allowed him to do so many more delightful, interesting things than his French governess. For instance, Mademoiselle would never in the world have permitted him to pick up the dear, dirty, lame puppy that he was now squeezing to the breast of his white coat.

Loring looked down at the clean little boy and the dirty little dog with a displeased frown. Bobby met this frown with calm defiance, but his heart began to throb with apprehension for his "sick doggie."

"Where on earth did you get that filthy beast?" asked Loring.

"I found him," said Bobby.

"Well, you can't bring him into the house. In fact, you can't keep him at all," his step-father remarked grimly. "Put him down. I'll have one of the men clear him away."

"No," said Bobby.

"Put him down at once! What do you mean by saying 'No' when I tell you to do a thing?"

"I mean 'no,'" said Bobby.

"You impudent monkey!" said Loring, as peculiarly angry as only a child can make one. "Here—give me the brute this instant."

He grasped the dog by its nape—Bobby held it tightly about the stomach. The dog naturally howled.

"Let go, you little imp!" said Loring.

He gave another tug at the dog. It yelped again.

"Leggo my doggie! Leggo—*man*!" cried Bobby furiously.

For reply, Loring wrenched the puppy from him and held it yowling out of his reach. In a second the boy had thrown himself upon Loring's free hand, and silently, like a little bull-terrier himself, had set his small, crimped teeth in it.

Loring gave a savage cry of pain and anger, and dropping the puppy, which fled under a hall-chair, grabbed the boy. He prized open the furious little jaws. The child was white and red in patches with the extremity of his wrath. Loring pinioned him, and started towards the stairs. He was met by Sophy running down them. She was very pale.

"What's the matter? What are you doing with Bobby?" she asked. She held out her arms. "Give him to me," she said.

"Excuse me," said Loring. "This is our affair ... between Bobby and me. I'm going to teach him not to bite like a little cur!"

"Give him to me, Morris," she said, almost breathless. The child was restraining himself manfully. There was a smear of blood on his mouth from Loring's bitten hand. This smear turned Sophy's heart to water. She gasped out: "Oh!... You've hurt him ... his mouth's bleeding!"

"That's not *his* blood—little devil! It's *my* blood.... Your son must resemble his sainted father very closely," he added, with sudden savagery. "Let me by. It's time he had a lesson—and I'm going to give it to him, by God!"

But Sophy had her arms round Bobby. He was held fast by the four determined arms. His little smeared mouth was pressed tight. He was as white as Sophy now.

"Morris," she was saying in a low, quick voice, "I know how to deal with him. Let him come to me...."

"No. It's time a man took him in hand. Don't make a scene here in the hall."

"Give me my son...."

"Don't make a scene, I tell you. I'm not going to let a British brat stick his teeth in me with impunity. Take your hands off. Let me go!"

"You shall never strike him—never!"

"All this is so good for the boy, ain't it?"

"Do you want me to despise you?"

"I don't care what you do, so long as I give this little beggar a trouncing."

All this time the boy neither struggled nor uttered a sound. Suddenly he spoke. The tone was as if Cecil spoke out of the grave. It startled Sophy with reminiscence. It startled Loring by its sheer, concentrated maturity of scorn and hatred.

"Mother," came the low voice, "let him beat me. Then maybe *you'll hate him, too*...."

Loring stood a second, dumfounded, then he withdrew his arms sharply.

"Well I'm damned!" exclaimed the man, staring at the child who had spoken with all the condensed feeling of a man. Then he laughed suddenly—the bitter, sneering laugh that Sophy had come to dread. He turned on his heel.

"Take your little Chesney brute," he said as he turned away. "I guess he'll prove about as much a comfort as your big Chesney did!"

He sauntered out upon the sea-lawn, whistling.

But Bobby was both punished and brought to reason by his mother. It was easy to punish him far more effectively and severely than by a whipping. Bobby had sustained spankings from his earliest infancy with true British stoicism. What his mother did was to make him give the lame puppy to the gardener's little girl and provide her with five cents weekly out of his allowance of ten cents, for the puppy's maintenance. To induce him to apologise properly to

his step-father was another matter. When Sophy told him that he must go to Loring and say that he was sorry for the dreadful thing that he had done, Bobby became mutinous.

"But I am *not* sorry," he protested. "I 'joyed biting him."

"It hurts mother to hear you say that—but that's not the question. What I *hope* my little boy is sorry for is for not having been a gentleman—for having behaved like a wild animal. Even the poor puppy behaved better than you did. *He* didn't bite like a little tiger...."

"I'd a bit bigger if I'd been a tagger," said Bobby thoughtfully. "I'd a bit his han' off, I reckon."

"That's not the question either. Aren't you sorry that you weren't a gentleman?"

Bobby pondered this. Finally he said:

"I'm very tangled inside of me, mother. I *am* sorry I didn't be a gentleman, but I am *not* sorry I bited him."

Sophy took a deep breath. She put a hand on either of her son's shoulders, and held him fixed in front of her.

"Now listen, Bobby," she said. "I won't have any more arguments. You are to go to Morris, at once, and say this: 'I am sorry I was so naughty and ungentlemanly. I beg your pardon.' Now go. Morris is out there on the lawn reading a paper. Go there and say those words straight out like a man."

Bobby gazed earnestly into her eyes, found something in their grey depths that always

conquered him in the end, and turned soberly away.

He went and stood before Loring, his hands behind his back. His face was very red. His heart filled up his chest and scorched it so that he could scarcely speak.

"Hullo, little mad-dog," said Loring, looking at him over his paper. "Haven't they muzzled you yet? Keep your distance, please."

The boy looked stolidly at him.

"I've come to pollygise," he said.

"Oh, you have, have you? Suppose I don't accept your 'pollygy'?"

"Then I'll jus' have to leave it with you," said the boy haughtily. "This is it: 'I am sorry I didn't be a gentleman. I beg your pardon'—but mother made me do it," he added all in the same breath. Then he turned and walked swiftly away. His red curls were getting a beautiful copper-beech colour as he grew older. Loring, watching his retreat, wondered if Chesney had had that colour hair. The firm little nape with its "duck-tails" of purplish-red curls filled him with detestation. Bobby was going to be a huge man, like his father. He was as tall at six as most boys of eight.

"And he gets off with an apology!" thought Loring angrily. He was as severe in his ideas of the training of children as are most men who have been badly spoilt themselves. His hands fairly ached to whip Cecil Chesney's son.

But he was mollified when he found that the boy had been punished, in what Sophy assured him was a far

more painful way than any mere whipping would have been.

XIX

Loring had got over the first novelty of having the moon descend to his crying. Selene was now a domesticated planet. They moved in the same orbit. He felt, without realising it, somewhat as a lover might feel who, while gazing entranced at the silver disk in mid-heaven, suddenly finds himself transported among the Mountains of the Moon. The lunar landscape, thus familiarly envisaged, struck him as a little bleak. There was nothing "chummy" about Sophy, he decided. He had always thought it would be great fun to drink wine freely with the woman one was in love with. A "bully" dinner after hunting, or a cosy supper after the play, with plenty of champagne to enliven it. Champagne added such zest to kisses. He felt aggrieved that Sophy did not care for this form of bliss. She said that wine "blurred" her. Such a rum expression! He thought her prudish. He told her so on one occasion.

"Look here, Goddess," he said fretfully. "You run your temple-business in the ground. You treat love-making like a religious ceremony. Hang it!— I can't feel like Cupid's high-priest all the year 'round. Love ought to be just a bully sort of spree sometimes."

Sophy had said, flushing:

"I'm sorry I seem priggish. But I'm afraid I'll never be

able to look on love as 'just a bully sort of spree.'"

Loring had flushed, too.

"Well ... a chap can't go on playing Endymion forever. I suppose there was an end even to the Moon's honeymoon!"

It was after dinner one evening during the next winter. As usual, he had been drinking freely. This always made him either amorous or irritable. As she would not endure the amorousness, irritability invariably resulted. Sophy was by this time frankly unhappy. But no one guessed it—not even Loring. She had come to feel the full weight of that family remark: "Morry has such a strong will!" She had found that this will of his was far stronger than his love for her. Yet he loved her still. At times even the old feeling of worship gave him pause for an instant. But the steady drinking—cocktails before meals, whiskey-and-soda in between meals—dulled the edge of finer sentiment. And he resented passionately the disapproval that her very silence on the subject evinced.

At first she had spoken out to him about it—with affection, honestly, as one good friend might speak to another—but when she found how useless it was, she did not "nag." And she was never "superior" in her manner towards him.

However, no one, living in the close intimacy of marriage with another, can loathe a thing as Sophy loathed this constant tippling of her husband, without the offender being aware of that unexpressed detestation.

He grew quite callous about it as time went by, but

during this second winter of their marriage it made him very ugly with her at times.

And Sophy had a bitter, ironic feeling when she faced the fact of this sordid, reduced replica of the tragedy of her first marriage. That had had the dignity of real peril, at least, but this brought her only the ignominy of acute discomfort and at times humiliation.

She suffered intensely. That he could not have understood this suffering, even had she explained it, made her sometimes a little over-proud and cold. He had his full share of the discomfort. In less exacting hands, he would have made a rather easy-going if utterly selfish husband. The climate of Olympus did not at all agree with his constitution. In the legend, it is said that Endymion, after his marriage with Selene, was cast out of Olympus by the wrathful Zeus, for making love to Hera. This lapse was probably caused by the too exacting standard that Selene held up to her earthly spouse.

But they clashed also in other ways. There was a certain strain of unconventionality in Sophy, that often outraged Loring's extreme conventionality of outlook. He had found it "swagger" and amusing that she should choose to embellish an old house in Washington Square, rather than follow the social bell-wether "up to the Park." That had been a "swell" attitude in its way. But there were certain unwritten laws of "smart" propriety, which to break, he felt, was to risk being ridiculous. He would have chosen death cheerfully at any time, rather than seem ridiculous. Sophy felt otherwise. As long as she herself did not consider what she did ridiculous, she did not think at all of the opinion of "society."

XX

But all these frictions, and changes, and readjustments of vision did not come in a steady progression. The unfolding of their inner life followed intricate spirals, returned on itself, coiled outward again. Sometimes Sophy found herself standing breathless in a glow of the old glamour, that fell on her as if through a far window in the past, reflected back from the blank wall of the present. Then she would think that perhaps the man that he had seemed in their first love-days was the real man, and this Morris only the result of their hectic, vapid life. Again, she would wonder if he had really ever been what she had dreamed him, even then. It was as if some rare spirit had "possessed" him for the time being. Or was it that love had transfigured him? She could not bridge with her reason the gulf that lay between his past and his present personality.

Then as the months passed, and he grew more and more relaxed and slovenly of spirit under the ease of possession, she came to think that he had never been Endymion at all. She had loved a wraith, a seeming. She did not realise that sometimes love works temporary miracles, even as religion does; that love also makes conversions which are very real for the moment, but that cannot stand the wear of every day.

But when the final realisation came, Sophy felt as if life were over for her. Love had seemed the only real

life; now love was over. She sat alone in her bedroom one night, thinking: "Love is over ... love is over...." She felt such anguish at this thought as drove her to her feet. She went and stood at her window, looking out at the bare trees in the Square and the cross of electric lights against the sky, made dark purple by contrast with the orange glow. She felt as if it were too much to bear—this second terrible mistake. And yet, what escape was there? It seemed to her that there was no escape. Her misery was all the more terrible because life had given her a second chance, as it were—and for a second time she had built her House of Love upon the sands. Vain regret stole over her like lava. It spread barrenness. Once more her creative gift lay strangled under the ashes of her own mistake.

She thought: "This is age—this devastated feeling. I am really old now. I am only thirty-two, but I could not feel older in spirit if I were eighty."

Her affection for him only made this death of deeper love more terrible. As in a pale shadow-play, she saw her shadow-self, repeating the rôle that she had once enacted in a more vivid drama—the rôle of wife to a man whom she had ceased to love, but towards whom she felt a compassionate affection. There is no part in the tragi-comedy of life that requires such terrific powers of acting.

And to this exigent demand was added the pang of self-ridicule. Life had given her the talisman of experience to guard her—and this was what she had done with it. She blushed hot, remembering suddenly the love-songs that she had written when he was in Florida. It was anguish to think that what she had believed with all her being was only a love-

sick fancy.

She stood thinking, her eyes on the cross of electric lights. She stared at it so long that when she looked away it shone green on the purple dusk—a cross of glow-worms.

She thought of Richard Garnett's words: "Then is Love blessed, when from the cup of the body he drinks the wine of the soul." This had been her dream of love—twice over. But from the cup of the body she had drunk only the gall of the senses. And, again and again, she went back in wondering memory to that time of beglamourment. The words of the first sonnet she had ever sent him, painted it clearly. Line by line, the sonnet came back to her:

"After long years of slowly starved desire,
Within this shell of me myself lay sped:
My life was wrought of birthdays of the dead;
I slept on graves. You came. My spirit's fire
Leapt into light and showed Despair a liar:
You came—and all Death's ashen wine blushed red.
Your eyes drank mine: I trembled—not with dread,
But like a lute-string sharply tuned higher.

"—And I am mocked by wistful dreams of old,
As winter by a bright mirage of flowers.
My vanished Spring lives in your eyes' dear blue.
My maiden faith is by your lips retold—
Long, long ago drained out my purple hours—
Lo! in your hand Love's hour-glass brimmed anew!"

Despite all her idealism, however, Sophy had that sort of dogged courage which sets its teeth and digs in the bed-rock of life for hid lessons. She did not intend to go dolefully inert like the poor wights in the Hall of Eblis, with her hand always over the

flame of pain in her heart. "Very well," she addressed Life in her thought. "You have done this to me. Now what is your meaning? I am not one of those who think your doings like the 'tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' I believe your grimmest practical jokes have an inner meaning. Why did you cheat me with love a second time? Why, when I had given up all thought of love, and won a tranquil, clear content of spirit, did you send love to trample my secret garden like a dark angel in a whirlwind?"

She came to the conclusion that life means something vaster and more splendid than a restored Eden, where one man and one woman walk together guarded in their blissful isolation by the flaming sword of selfishness. "Come forth of that!" thunders the Voice that is not one love but All Love. And so Life hales us by the hair, out of our little palaces of dreams. And we are driven naked into the desert of reality. And when we have read aright what is written in the desert sands—behold! the desert blossoms like the rose.

But this writing was not yet clear to Sophy. She toiled through the hot, clogging sands, and what was traced upon them seemed to her only the wanton hieroglyphics of the wind ... the wild wind that blew men and women hither and thither like rootless stalks. Yet she believed in this vaster and more splendid meaning that Life kept hidden, under all its dark pranks and sardonic jesting. She imagined Life, in those days, as a huge, Afrit clown, under whose motley is secreted the Seal of Solomon. If one could but survive the horrid rough-and-tumble of his sinister game, one would be able, in the end, to snatch away the magic seal at whose touch all

mysteries open.

That spring brought a new difficulty. Lady Wychcote's letters on the subject of seeing her grandson had become very pressing of late. In February she had been quite ill. Now in her convalescence she wrote more urgently than ever, saying that she felt she had a right to ask that her only grandchild should not be kept away from her any longer. She asked (her request was almost in the form of a demand) that Sophy would bring Cecil's son to England some time during that spring or summer. Sophy felt the justice of this request. She felt that she owed its fulfilment to Cecil's mother—that she really had no right to keep Bobby apart from her indefinitely.

And yet, when she thought of a visit to England and all that it involved, she winced from it in her most secret fibres.

XXI

The more Sophy thought of this visit to England, the more she shrank from it and the more obligatory she felt it to be. She dreaded it for many reasons. The meeting with Lady Wychcote would be painful in the extreme. She could imagine those hard eyes as though they were already fastened on her. And then Morris—how would Lady Wychcote behave to Morris, should they be thrown together? How, indeed, would Morris behave to Lady Wychcote? Sophy hoped ardently that he would not go with her.

She hoped it, not only on this account, but because it seemed dreadful to her that she should appear in London again, after five years of absence, as the wife of another man. She had left England in the dignity of a great tragedy; she would return to it as the wife of an American millionaire, "ages younger than she is, my dear." And Morris—how would Morris seem, thus transplanted? He had been to England before, of course; but he knew few of the people among whom her lot there had been cast. His English acquaintances were all of the ultra sporting sort.

She tried to fancy him at lunch or dinner with the Arundels. What would he make of that political and literary atmosphere?

But what filled her with the keenest dread of all, when facing the possibility of Morris's going with her, was the fact of his constant drinking. Here in America it was the custom of his class and set. But there—no. Some Englishmen were "hard drinkers," certainly—but it was the exception and not the rule.

But then again—perhaps all this anxiety on her part was quite useless. Most probably Morris would dislike the idea of spending a month in England, just when polo on Long Island was at its best. She determined to put it to him that evening. She did so as they drove home from the opera.

He lowered at first, then suddenly became amiable. Sophy's heart sank.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, laughing. "Now that I think of it, I rather like the idea. It will be bully fun showing you off to those highbrow Britishers as Mrs. Morris Loring of New York!— I've had it rubbed in on the raw often enough, that you were formerly 'the

Honourable Mrs. Cecil Chesney.'"

They sailed for England on the last day of April. Loring was in his best mood. Sophy felt as if in a queer spiritual catalepsy. It was as if Destiny had clutched her in a numbing grasp and bundled her hither and thither against her will.

Lady Wychcote was settled in her house in Carlton Gardens for the Season, and the morning after Sophy's arrival she took Bobby to see his grandmother. Her ladyship's face had aged somewhat, but her figure was as young as ever. She came forward with hand extended, and said "How d'ye do?" as though she and Sophy had parted only yesterday. Then she sat down and drew Bobby to her knees.

"So you are Robert Chesney, eh?" she asked.

The boy looked up into her face.

"Yes, grandmother," he said gravely.

"And of what are you thinking when you stare at me with such solemn eyes?" she went on, trying to smile and speak naturally. There was something in the boy's whole air and appearance so like his father that she was much shaken by it.

Bobby had one of those direct impulses of childhood that resemble inspiration.

"I was thinking that you're a quite young lady to be a grandmother," he replied politely.

This was the beginning of a real friendship between

the two, for Lady Wychcote also had an inspiration. She rose abruptly, went to her escritoire, and unlocking a little drawer, took out a small parcel wrapped in silver paper.

"Robert," she said, "I think that what I'm going to give you will please you very much." And now a very human, kindly smile flickered over her thin lips as she added: "At least, it would please me if I were a little boy. It's dangerous, it's real, and it's something a real man has used."

Bobby took it from her. His face went pale with excitement. His fingers fumbled over the wrapping in his eagerness.

"Is it ... is it ... a spear?" he managed.

"A good guess," said his grandmother; "but not *quite* right...."

Then the last layer of paper came away, and in his hands was a little Arab dagger, in a sheath crusted with coral and turquoise. He went red now—and when he drew out the blade, and saw that it was indeed real and dangerous, he had a breathless moment of utter stillness, then turned and threw himself into Lady Wychcote's arms.

"Oh, thank you ... *thank* you!" he cried. "I think you must be the most splendid grandmother in the world!"

"It was your father's, when he was a lad ... like you," she murmured rather indistinctly. As so often happens in life, the recrudescence of maternal feeling for this grandson was stronger than what she had originally felt for her own sons.

Sophy was relieved and glad over the turn that things had taken. She had feared that the two strong wills might clash in some unfortunate way, even at first.

When, later, Lady Wychcote suggested that the boy had "*rather* an American accent," and that an English tutor would, in her opinion, be "advisable," Sophy acquiesced at once and said that she intended going to Oxford to consult Cecil's old tutor, Mr. Greyson, on the subject.

That same afternoon, Gerald called at Claridge's to see Sophy and his nephew. Bobby approved of his Uncle Gerald. Not so Loring, who came in a few minutes before Lord Wychcote left.

"Great Scott! *What* a 'lemon'!" he exclaimed, as the door closed. "I guess Bobby will be a lord some day all right-o."

"Ah, please don't, Morris!" Sophy said. "Gerald is one of the best friends I've ever had."

"'Friend'!" cried Loring, going into peals of laughter. "'Friend' is good. Why, he's so gone on you that a blind man could see it. Lemon-Squash—that's what he is. He's so sweet on you he isn't just plain lemon."

And from that hour, Loring never alluded to Gerald Wychcote as anything but "Lemon-Squash."

As soon as she knew that Sophy was in England, Olive Arundel rushed to see her. She was really fond of Sophy. It made not the slightest difference that they had exchanged only four or five letters in six

years. The old friendship was taken up exactly where it had been dropped through force of circumstance. So it was with all of Sophy's other friendships. English people are like this. It is one of their most delightful traits.

But Olive was frankly curious about Loring. She was dying to see him, she said. She was *so* keen to see the man that had made Sophy forget her "twagic life with poor, dear Cecil."

Sophy flushed and laughed a little too. And she felt also like weeping. Olive brought the past to her more vividly than anything had done as yet—even her meeting with Lady Wychcote. She had changed very little. Her figure and face were both fuller, but still very lovely. She used as many gestures, as much perfume, as ever—yet she was every inch a lady—even a great lady.

Sophy asked about John Arundel and his "career."

"Oh, my *dear* Sophy!" cried his wife. "Don't mention the word '*Caweer*' to me.... You American women are *so* fortunate in not having to sit up night and day with your husbands' 'Caweers.' Why, even on our honeymoon Jack carried along those *howid* red-boxes! For *hours* he'd shut himself up alone with them.... But thanks, dear—he's getting along nicely—he and his 'Caweer.' Ouf! what a dull year this has been in Parliament! The only interesting things have taken place in foreign parts, and the House of Commons *never* takes much interest in foreign and colonial affairs, you know. It loves to get wrought up over home questions—party rows, and that sort of thing. Fancy what it's been like when all they've had to debate over—poor dears!—was Vaccination and Calf-lymph and the Benefices Bill!"

Oh, how strange it seemed to Sophy, thus to be sitting and listening to Olive's political "patter"! Before she knew it, a whole world of thought had risen about her, as at the rubbing of a magic lamp. Olive rose at last, saying:

"It's really *too* bad of your Pwince Charming not to come in while I'm here. But I'll see him at dinner to-morrow. I'm so glad, my Sweet, that you're happy at last!"

She embraced Sophy twice, kissed her impulsively, and was gone.

"*Happy at last!*"

Sophy stood where Olive had left her—moving her slim shoe slightly from side to side. She gazed at the hotel carpet which was strewn with little grey roses. She counted those that lay near her feet. First from left to right, then from right to left. As long as she counted carefully, she could not think clearly. She did not want to think clearly. She felt as though buried alive under a glittering wreck. It was the palace of her own life that had crumbled about her. She was cramped in a tiny space. Air came to her through chinks in the shattered fabric. Food was passed to her through these interstices. But she must crouch very still in one position till she died....

XXII

The first part of her stay in England was more endurable, however, than she had thought possible.

Loring was rather subdued by the "highbrows," though he carried it off in private to her with an air of indulgent toleration for the "fool ceremoniousness" of an "effete" civilisation. The greater number of her friends and acquaintances he characterised as "lemons." He said there was not a "shred of snap or go in the whole bunch of them," that they made him long to "yowl" and fire off pistols in Piccadilly. One exception he made, however, in favour of the Premier. "Fine old boy," he said. "Can't exactly call *him* a lemon ... but he leans that way. I guess I'll have to class him as a citron—a rarer product of the lemon variety, you know."

It is not only the husband who feels a sense of responsibility in marriage. This feeling of being responsible for Loring as the man whom she had chosen for her mate out of all the world, after such a dire first marriage, kept Sophy taut with apprehension. Every time that they went out together she was in nervous dread lest he should "bust loose," as he sometimes threatened, and take some undue liberty of speech with one of the "highbrows" that so oppressed him. One thing, however, gave her great comfort: It was that he was careful not to drink too freely. The "pomp and circumstance" that bored him to extinction had at least the good effect of restraining him in this respect, and his male-pride could not but glow pleasantly at the way in which he found his wife considered. And he was immensely gratified—until one day it occurred to him that he was being assigned the rôle of "Mrs. Loring's husband." Then in a burst of inner resentment he determined to shake himself free of the singular spell which great names and personages had cast over his usual spirits, and "be himself." His mood became aggressively

American. "Old Glory" seemed to fill his blood with stars. He had had enough of doing in Britain as the Britons did. He began to take whiskey-and-soda between meals, just as in New York. When they dined out, he had a cocktail at the hotel before leaving. But though Sophy saw this with a quailing heart, he did not go beyond bounds, as at home, only the return to customary uses made his spirits soar and rendered him rather garrulous at times. Still, Loring was no fool. The fount of talk thus loosened had a certain crude and pungent novelty that diverted the soberer English very much. He found his new rôle vastly diverting himself. He thought it "bully fun" to "poke up the highbrows." But Sophy writhed, for she saw clearly what did not even glimmer on his consciousness—the fact that the "highbrows" oftener laughed at than with him. She tried on one occasion to make him realise this without offending him. But she need not have troubled as to how he would regard her suggestion. He took it with lordly superiority.

"Bless you, Goddess! ... you don't know your own little old British world a bit! 'Laugh at me'? Why not? I mean 'em to. I bust panes in their old window-sash of conventions and let in God's outer air! I'm the cyclone-blast from Columbia's fresh and verdant shore! They like it, you squeamish dear—they like it! I beard the British lion in his den and he purrs!"

Sophy had said, laughing helplessly:

"I'm afraid that when a lion 'purrs' it's really a sort of growling."

"Never you fear! Just you leave it to me, Old Thing!" Loring had replied easily.

This bit of slang endearment which he had picked up of late grated on Sophy, until it was almost impossible for her to keep from flashing out at him when he used it. She said nothing, however, reflecting that the reason she so detested it was probably because she was too "old" to enjoy being called "old" in fun.

It was during Ascot week which they spent with the Arundels at their place on the River that Loring surpassed himself in his game of "poking up the highbrows." It was at luncheon. There were about twenty people present—some very important Personages among them. Loring was feeling especially "full of beans." A famous beauty had coaxed him into making "American drinks" for the whole party before luncheon. She thought them "ripping"! She was a very sporting beauty, and Loring was enjoying himself, what with the races and one thing and another, more than he had believed it possible to enjoy one's self in England away from the 'Shires in the hunting season. The American cocktails had a *succès de curiosité*. Loring, himself, took two. At luncheon he was in high feather. The beauty egged him on. He began to give thumb-nail sketches of the characters of those present. Sophy's sensations were indescribable. Not a "highbrow" did her husband spare. In pithy, American slang he set forth, amid the laughter even of the victims themselves, what he considered their chief characteristics. Nimbly piling Ossa on Pelion, he capped the whole with Vesuvius, by pointing a finger at a stern, iron-clad, reserved and venerable member of the Opposition, and announcing: "You do the benevolent patriarch act to a T; but deep down—gad!—you're *foxy*!"

The "benevolent patriarch" himself, after a gleam of

surprise such as might have stirred the countenance of Moses, had a gentile youth suddenly made a *pied de nez* at him, gazed inscrutably. The table rocked with suppressed and somewhat scared laughter. Sophy felt bathed in flame. She knew that Majesty itself would not have adopted a jesting tone with the Being whom Loring had just called "foxy." That this Superior Being in all probability *was* "foxy" did not at all mend matters.

She had stayed on for Ascot week because Loring had wished it. She now determined to return to America as soon as possible. She had never suffered in just this way before. She found it almost as excruciating as the death of love had been. She marvelled at the endless variety of pain.

That night Olive came to her bedroom for a private chat. She had slipped on a dressing-gown and brought her cigarette-case with her, so Sophy knew that she had "things on her mind" which she meant to unburden.

She lounged in an armchair and smoked while Sophy's maid finished brushing her hair. When the girl had left the room, Olive looked at her with affectionate but keen curiosity, and said abruptly:

"Sophy, you must forgive me, because I'm so *vewy* fond of you—but ... are you *weally* as happy as I want you to be?"

Sophy returned her look quietly.

"Who is *really* happy?" she said.

"Well ... *I* am ... at times," replied Olive.

Sophy couldn't help smiling. She knew that this "at

times" meant when Olive was deep in some love-affair.

"Is this one of the times, dear?" she asked lightly, hoping to change the subject.

Olive nodded, making little rings of smoke with the lips that were still so smooth and fresh—though she had a big girl of sixteen.

"It's because I'm so happy myself that I want *you* to be happy, too, darling," she murmured.

"It takes such different things to make different people happy, Olive, dear."

"Oh, love makes *evwybody* happy—while it lasts!"

"Yes—while it lasts."

Olive crushed out her cigarette thoughtfully. Then she said in a musing voice:

"Isn't it *atwocious* of it not to last?"

Sophy had to laugh out for all her sore heart.

"Very atrocious," she admitted.

"Just suppose one could *contwol* love," Olive continued, still in that musing voice. "What a divine place the world would be! *Evwy*body would be happy *all* the time, then. Nobody would be bored—nobody would divorce—nobody would be disagweeable."

"Nobody would need a God or a philosophy," supplemented Sophy.

"But as it is, they are *most* necessary," said Olive seriously. "Which is it with you, Sophy?"

"Both," replied Sophy. She was not smiling now.

"With me," said Olive, "it's first one and then the other. I'm afraid I've a very *fwiv*olous nature, Sophy. I *can't* seem to keep to one thing, *all* the time. But you, now...."

She gazed again at Sophy with that affectionate, meditative curiosity.

"You seem made for a *gwande passion*, Sophy. And yet...." She hesitated; then went on quickly: "Now *do* forgive me ... but, somehow, I don't feel as if you'd found it ... even now."

This "even now" sent the blood to Sophy's face. She sat very still, looking at the monogram on one of the brushes with which she had been playing as Olive talked.

"Are you vexed, darling? You mustn't be vexed. It's only because I'm so *twuly* fond of you. Now Mr. Loring is awfully nice, and immensely good-looking, and ... and all that. But...." She hesitated again, then went on as before: "The *twuth* is, Sophy—that he's *much* more the sort of man I might fancy, than your sort. He's ... he's ... you see, he *stwikes* me as too *fwivolous* for you, you *sewious* darling!"

Sophy said, in a flat, tired voice:

"Don't you mean he's too—young for me, Olive?"

"Oh, no! *No*, darling! Fancy! How wi*dic*ulous!" Her tone was the acme of sincerity. "I never had such an absurd thought for one moment! I only meant that he's ... well ... a bit larky for any one like you. And ... and ... he's so ... so twe*men*dously Amewican ... and you aren't, you know...."

"Yes," said Sophy wearily. She wished with all her might that Olive would go away. She was very fond of her, but she didn't like even those kindly little fingers fumbling at the latch of her heart. She wanted to be alone—in the dark.

"Were you *des*perwately in love with him, Sophy?"

This "*were* you" hurt almost as much as the "even now" had done. Was her state of mind so apparent, then, that even affectionate but flighty Olive had divined it?

She got up, and went round the room as though in search of something. As she moved about, she said casually:

"Dear Olive, do you think I would have married again if I hadn't been very much in love?"

"No. Of course not," replied the other absently. She had not at all said what she had come to say. Suddenly she too rose, and went over to Sophy. She flipped an arm about her shoulders.

"Darling," she said. "You are so *wowwied*.... I can't bear it!... I know perfectly well what's wowwying you.... The fact is Jack and I talked it over before I came in here just now.... I'm going to be perfectly *fwank*.... May I?"

"Yes ... do ... please," said Sophy. She was pale now. She had felt something of what was coming as soon as Olive mentioned John Arundel. "Go on, Olive ... please do. I beg you to," she urged, as the other still hesitated.

"Well, then, my sweet—would you like Jack to speak to Mr. Loring—oh, *vewy* tactfully, of course! ... but

just make him understand, you know, that one doesn't ... that it isn't ... *cus*tomawy ... for people to joke ... er ... in that way ... with ... er ... personages like Mr...."

But Sophy broke in on her. She felt that she could not bear the sound of the overwhelming name whose owner Loring had called "foxy" to his august countenance.

"Yes, yes ... do!" she said hurriedly. "I'll take it as an act of the greatest kindness and friendship on Jack's part. Tell him so from me. You see, Morris is so young and so ... so 'American,' as you said." She forced a smile. "The bump of reverence isn't much cultivated in my native land, you know...."

"I know," said Olive soothingly. "But we *weally* make allowances for that, you know. It isn't *at all* as if an Englishman had called that old gwandeur 'foxy.' You see, Amewicans think so *vewy* differently from what we do." She was rattling on in her affectionate desire to mitigate Sophy's mortification by showing her a comprehending sympathy. "Why, I knew the most *charming* young Amewican girl once ... and she told me, as a *gweat* joke, that when she was pwesented to the Pwincess Louise, she said: 'Hello!'... Now, you see, she *weally* thought that was funny—and what Amewicans call 'smart.' You see, it's just the different point of view, darling. And we *all* understand *that*. I'm sure that Mr...."

"Never mind, Olive," Sophy broke in again. "If Jack will make Morris understand ... that such things aren't done ... I'll be very grateful. More grateful than I can say."

Olive was more thoughtful than ever as she returned to her own room. She stood in a brown study for some moments when she reached it, then went and tapped on the door of her husband's dressing-room.

It was nearly one o'clock, and, attired in his pyjamas, he was swinging a light pair of Indian clubs before going to bed. He put them down as his wife entered and said:

"How did it come off? Awkward thing to do—eh? Was she huffy?"

"'Huffy'!... She was a *Sewaph*!... Oh, Jack"—she dropped limply upon a chair-arm—"it's *twagic*!"

"I felt tragic enough at luncheon, that's certain," replied he grimly. "But what's tragic now?... If Sophy wasn't offended by your suggestion? You really made it, I suppose?"

"Yes. I did," said Olive curtly. "But I'm not thinking of *that* any longer—I'm thinking of Sophy. I'd *so* hoped she was happy *this* time!... But she isn't ... she isn't...."

"How could she be ... married to a young bounder like that?" asked Arundel.

Olive shook her head.

"No, Jack. He's *not* a bounder ... that's what's so puzzling. There's *something* w'ong with him—but he's *weally* not a bounder...."

"Well, no ... perhaps not," admitted he grudgingly.

"But there's certainly something damned 'wrong' with him."

"Yes. And Sophy knows it as well as we do ... only

she has to *pwetend* not to. Now isn't that *twagic*?"

"Yes. Hard lines ... poor girl!..." said Arundel. He had always been very fond of Sophy. "First she gets a Bedlamite like Chesney—then this ... this lurid Yankee."

Olive began giggling in spite of her genuine concern. "Lurid Yankee" seemed to her so exquisitely fitting an epithet. But she stopped as suddenly as she had begun.

"What *is* w'ong with him, Jack?" she took it up, deeply pondering once more. "You're a man ... you ought to be able to say at once."

Arundel pondered also.

"Perhaps it's a form of National swagger," he ventured at last. "That sort of way they have of implying 'I'm as good as a king, and better, damn your eyes!' It's odd to me that an American of this type will condescend to bend his knees in prayer. They'd call up the Lord over a telephone wire if they could."

"Maybe it's the way they're brought up, Jack."

"Oh, they aren't 'brought up'!"

"Well, then ... maybe it's that."

Olive's heart was sore for her friend. She was as loyal in her friendships as she was fickle in her loves. She lay long awake as she had predicted, thinking it all over.

"Sophy ought to have made a *gweat* match, with her gifts and charm and beauty," she reflected sadly. "And she goes and mawwies that *howidly* handsome

boy."

Just as she was drowsing off, however, a consoling thought occurred to her:

"But he must have made *divine* love!" she reflected, smiling. And this smile lay prettily on her lips as she slept. To be "made divine love to" was, in Olive's creed, compensation for most of the ills of life.

XXIII

John Arundel was quite as "tactful" in speaking to Loring as he had assured his wife that he would be. He merely took advantage of the first opening and said in a by-the-way-my-dear-chap tone that a certain guest then at Everstone was accustomed to a rather exaggerated homage, and might, he feared, take umbrage if too often jested with. He said that lions, especially aged lions, were not noted for their sense of humour. He alluded to the fact that no less an one than Huxley had once ventured to be playful in replying to the Personage in question, and had received only a thunderous roar in return. That, in fact, the Personage had never pardoned the Scientist for venturing to use irony in this discussion. It was all said in the most casual way, and interspersed with amusing examples of the Personage's unyielding sense of his own not-to-be-trifled-with dignity. But Loring was very quick at taking veiled meanings. He himself had feared that he had gone just a bit too far on that occasion. Now he was sure of it. He gave no sign, but a mortified resentment smouldered in him.

He detested John Arundel. He would have liked to blurt some rudeness and leave his house on the instant. This civil, middle-aged Englishman reading him a lesson on behaviour in the guise of anecdotes that characterised the peculiarities of the celebrity whom he, Loring, had made too free with, filled him with fierce indignation. His helpless wrath was trebled by the fact that John Arundel was in the right, and managing a difficult thing with consummate good-breeding. He had not been so angry in just such a way since, when a boy of ten, his youngest uncle had boxed his ears for speaking impertinently to his grandmother.

Pride kept him from mentioning the matter to Sophy, however. He only said the next time that he saw her alone that he "guessed he'd had about enough of the Lemon-groves of England, and would she please get a move on for 'Home, sweet home.'"

Sophy knew from this speech that John Arundel had uttered the "word" suggested by Olive. She also knew, from the harsh slang in which Loring addressed her, that he was deeply incensed. He always used this sort of language when irritated. But she gave no more sign of her real feeling to him than he had given of his to Arundel. What was the use? She was only too glad, too relieved, to be returning to America at short notice. England seemed strange and distorted to her, viewed through the mental atmosphere in which she now moved, like a familiar landscape changed by the alchemy of an evil dream.

Sophy found a letter from Mrs. Loring awaiting her in New York. The poor lady was at Nahant suffering

from an acute attack of arthritis, with a trained nurse in attendance.

As always, Loring was very restless and ill-at-ease in the presence of sickness. He darted gingerly in and out of the sick-room twice a day, like a nervous terrier investigating a thorny hedge-row. Mrs. Loring was sweetly grateful for these flitting visits.

"Morry is always so dear and unselfish about telling me good morning and good night when I am ill!" she said to Sophy. "He has always had a horror of illness since his earliest childhood."

Sophy looked at her with wonder, and with a pitying regret. She recalled Spencer's chapter on "Egoism versus Altruism." She thought how well it would have been for Mrs. Loring and Morris, had his mother marked, learned, and inwardly digested that chapter.

Mrs. Loring said that her chief regret at being ill just at present, however, was that Eleanor and Belinda were arriving from France to-morrow. "You see, this was to be Belinda's 'coming-out' season at Newport, and I'm afraid Eleanor won't go to open the house without me. She is very much attached to me," the poor lady ended, with restrained pride. "I'm afraid she won't consent to leave me until I'm well again."

"I should think not!" exclaimed Sophy warmly. "And I shan't leave you, either, until you're far better than you are now."

"Thanks, my dear. That is very, very sweet of you. But," she added anxiously, "don't let Morry get an idea that I think I've any claim on you. You know what was said: 'Forsaking father and mother'—I

wouldn't have my boy think that I would take his wife away from him, even for a day, for my selfish pleasure."

"Oh, *dear* Mrs. Loring!" cried Sophy. Both affection and exasperation were in her voice. She put her cheek down against the long, feverish hands. She wanted to shake and to "cuddle" the suffering lady at one and the same time.

"You're a very sweet woman, my dear," said Grace Loring faintly. "I assure you, I appreciate it that Morry has such a wife as you. He was always so difficult. If only Eleanor would be sensible and take Belinda to Newport. The child will be so disappointed! I confess this worries me very much."

"But, dear Mrs. Loring, why should you worry? Even if Mrs. Horton won't be a selfish pig and leave you here to suffer all by yourself? It's so perfectly simple. Belinda can come to us."

"Would you?... Really?..."

Mrs. Loring had ventured to hope for this solution once—but the fear that "Morry" might find it annoying had made her repress it. She now added quickly:

"But you would have to find out—tactfully, my dear—indirectly, as it were—whether Morry would object in any way."

"Why should Morris object, if I don't?" asked Sophy, a little brusquely.

"Ah, my dear ... men are very peculiar!" sighed Mrs. Loring, in reply to this question. This phrase summed up her entire view of sexual questions. Men were

"very peculiar." All her married life had been spent in adapting herself to the "peculiarities," first of her husband, then of her son.

Sophy felt that all argument would be quite useless.

"I don't think Morris will mind at all," she said, in another voice. "It's always gay and pleasant having a beautiful débutante in one's house. It will make me really feel the 'young matron' that our journals call me. Have you any photos of Belinda since last year? She was very handsome then. She must be still prettier now."

"Eleanor sent me one taken of them together, about two weeks ago. It's there—in my writing-table. The left-hand upper drawer...."

Sophy found the photograph, and took it to the window. Mrs. Horton was seated, with Belinda standing just behind her. The photo showed how tall the girl was—as tall as herself, Sophy thought she must be. And it gave also the buoyant pose of her head, and fine athletic shoulders. But no photograph could even indicate Belinda's extraordinary colouring or the vivid mobility of her expression—and her beauty was largely a matter of colouring and expression. Still, Sophy thought her very handsome indeed.

When she told Morris that evening about her idea of having Belinda stop with them in Newport, he looked startled at first, then glum. The fact was, the memory of that kiss of two years ago "upset" him (as he would have expressed it) whenever it was recalled to his mind. He had always thought Belinda "a bit cracked." One never knew what she was going to say or do next. The prospect of Belinda established upon

his hearthstone did not at all appeal to him.

"Oh, Lord! Why the devil did my mother have to choose the Newport season for a spell of rheumatics?" he said crossly.

Sophy looked at him with real curiosity in her eyes. Then a desire which she had long felt and often repressed got the better of her.

"Morris," she said, "has it ever occurred to you that you are very selfish to your mother?"

"*I*?.... *Selfish* ... to my *mother*?"

"Yes."

"'*Selfish*'?"

"Yes, really."

Loring exhaled a long breath.

"Well, I like that!" he remarked at last. "You do have the queerest notions, Goddess. It seems to me I've done nothing for years but hike down here to this rotten old place, just when I wanted to be doing something else ... merely to please my mother—and now you calmly suggest that I'm selfish to her!"

"And how long do you stay?"

"Why, you know as well as I do. A fortnight. A great deal longer than I *like* staying, I can assure you!"

"Two weeks out of every year...." said Sophy musingly. "It is a good deal of time to spare a mother...."

Her eyes were dancing. She could not help it. He looked such a picture of injured innocence.

Loring was utterly unabashed.

"It's really rather a shame of you, Sophy, to say I'm selfish to my mother. You'd better not let *her* hear you say it— I'll give you *that* tip!"

"Don't worry. She'll never, never hear me say it. She'd be just as astounded and outraged as you are, I'm sure—even more so."

Loring had to let it go at that. He contented himself with growling sulkily:

"What all this has got to do with that little half-tamed leopardess being quartered on us at Newport, I'm blessed if *I* can see...."

"Only that it would please your mother immensely and take a great load off her mind."

"Suppose you don't like the girl when you see her? She's as wild as a hawk—or was two years ago."

"A leopardess and a hawk—that sounds interesting. I don't mind anything but bad-temper."

"Oh, she's good-tempered enough when she's not riled. But a girl like Belinda's a devilish responsibility. I don't take kindly to the notion, I'm free to confess."

"Don't *you* like her?"

"Ye-es," he admitted grudgingly. "It's only that she's such a handful."

"Well—we can but try it," said Sophy thoughtfully. She gave him one of her warm, friendly smiles. "There's really nothing else for us to do, Morris," she said. "Mrs. Horton can always be sent for if we can't

manage her. But perhaps she'll like me. Perhaps she won't be wilful and wrong-headed at all. You see, eighteen is very different from sixteen."

Morris made a remark that was psychologically profounder than he knew.

"The Belinda sort never get 'different'; they only get more so...." he said. "But I see your mind's made up.... Go ahead.... I only hope we shan't both regret it."

XXIV

Belinda and her mother arrived at Nahant late in the afternoon of next day. Sophy had tea waiting for them. When she had greeted Mrs. Horton, and that lady moved aside to make way for her step-daughter, Sophy flinched a little just as one does when sunlight is flashed suddenly in one's eyes from a mirror. There was really a glare of beauty from Belinda. Her skin and eyes seemed to give out light rather than to reflect it.

She was dressed in silky, red-brown linen. Under the wide, turnover collar of her white blouse was a loosely-knotted tie of purple. A purple toque pressed her autumn-tinted hair against her jet-black eyebrows. Her skin was like nacre, her lips like petunia petals.

Looking at her, Sophy felt sure that if souls could have colour, Belinda's soul was a brilliant purple, like stained glass—like the tie that rose and fell with her

splendid young breast as a moth sways with a flower.

Belinda gave her hand to Sophy in silence. Her eyes were as busy with Sophy as Sophy's with her. Belinda had peculiar eyes. They could be as dense and impenetrable under her thick, white lids, as glossy red-brown nuts shining from between the white lining of their hulls. Again, they could throw out garnet sparkles and become limpid as wine. They had their dense, horse-chestnut gloss as they regarded Sophy.

"What an extraordinary-looking girl!" Sophy thought.

Belinda was thinking:

"Yes ... she's beautiful ... but I bet she's an icicle when Morry's blazing...."

Why she thought this, she could not have said. But she felt sure of it. And it comforted her. She was so convinced of her "right" to Morris that she regarded Sophy, not exactly as a wilful thief, but as a receiver of stolen goods. Morris had stolen himself from her (Belinda), in a manner of speaking, and Sophy had accepted this gift which he had no right to make. Belinda was fair-minded. It was not Sophy's fault, because though she had received stolen goods she had received them unwittingly. Morris was the culprit. Belinda had long solaced herself with the thought of how delightful would be the task of meting him his just punishment. Now she looked at Sophy and wondered. She was wondering how this strain of coldness that she felt in her rival affected Morry. And she clenched herself against Sophy's beauty; for she did not belittle it, though she thought it cold. But she had no real fear of it. Was she not eighteen and this woman thirty-two—or nearly

thirty-two? Belinda felt youth to her hand like a bright sword. For two years she had been muttering as she fell asleep, and as she waked: "Morry shall divorce her and marry me." That kiss had sealed her his, and made him hers. She was unusual in that she was lawless in method, but worked to law-abiding ends.

She had not the least idea of throwing her cap over the windmill for Morry. She meant to keep house with him in the windmill and pay all proper taxes on the grist it ground for them. It would be hard to find a more determined character than Belinda. She had the sort of will that decides to accomplish an object without bothering in the least about ways and means. She had, as it were, the religion of the Will. She would be inspired, she felt sure, in just the right way at just the right moment. She had the faith that not only counts on removing mountains into the sea, but depends on the sea's extinguishing them if they chance to be volcanoes and their peaks left unsubmerged.

She thought of her own passionate love for Morris as a sea into which many mountains might be cast and overwhelmed. There would come the destined moment—the tidal wave would rush gloriously inland. All would be swept clear—a bare, clean space whereon she would build their palace of delights.

Belinda was one of the women-children who are born knowing things. She came of Lilith rather than of Eve. She had no low curiosities, because from the beginning she seemed to have been aware of everything. A wise Brahman looking on her would have seen the latest incarnation of some fearless Courtesan, destined in this particular existence to

aspire to the domestication of her lawlessness. For some past deed of mercy on her part, the Lords of Karma had decreed that in this life respectability should be the modest guiding-star of her wayward feet. For though Belinda would always be in spirit her lover's mistress, she had no faintest idea of being other than his wife in the eyes of the world.

So she looked at Sophy, and wondered how much she really loved Morry. She was sorry for her, in a way, but this emotion of indulgent compassion did not render her a whit less implacable.

And Sophy, observing her closely, tried to analyse the strange effect that the girl had upon her. She felt a powerful force emanating from the whole scintillant young figure—yet she felt as strongly that, for her at least, Belinda had not "charm."

But then Belinda did not have charm for other women. She was essentially, from her cradle, the type of "man's woman" in one of its completest forms. Not the Griselda type, but the type that led Antony to set sail after the fleet of Egypt.

Loring had been right when he called Belinda a "kitten Cleopatra."

She was one of nature's perfectly amoral and shameless triumphs—*la femme courtisane* flung out as rounded and complete as a golden bubble on the wind of destiny.

The three women sat down together, and Sophy poured tea. Loring was out motoring, but Sophy said that she expected him any minute. He had meant to be back by the time they should arrive.

Belinda was quite composed at the idea of meeting

Morris again. She had schooled herself for this meeting. An admirable phlegm was hers, as she sat stirring in the six lumps of sugar that she always put in her tea or coffee; she loved sweets like a harem woman. Wisdom had come to her with her eighteen years. She knew now that her "wisdom was to sit still"—that this is the highest wisdom of a woman in love with a man who is not in love with her. She was sure that she had subtler means of "touching" Morris than by any outward show of feeling. That forceful emanation which flowed like a thrice-rarefied scent from the girl's personality, and which even Sophy had been aware of, was like the infinitely volatilised aroma by which the female of the Emperor Moth calls the males to her. Belinda thought it was her will. But it was the will of Nature working through her.

Mrs. Horton and Sophy talked about the crossing and Grace's arthritis. Belinda sat silent. She could be both silent and still at times with beautiful completeness. Bobby came in. Harold Grey, his English tutor, came with him. Sophy saw him blink as his eyes caught the shine of Belinda. "I hope there won't be any nonsense there," Sophy reflected, her mind already bent to the *chaperon's* habit. She thought she saw now why Morris was so apprehensive about having the care of Belinda during her first season. Bobby made polite bows to the ladies, and shook hands with them. Then he went and stood at his mother's knee. Harold Grey was introduced and subsided modestly into the middle distance, but upon a chair from whence he could observe Belinda's shining profile in a mirror.

Bobby, meantime, gazed so earnestly at the girl that she spoke to him about it. She did not care for

children. But Bobby had a certain strong masculinity even at seven that caught her attention.

"Well, young man," said she. "What's wrong with me —eh?"

"Nothing,", said Bobby succinctly.

"Then, why are you staring at me with such round eyes?"

"'Cause, if you don't mind, I like to."

Belinda gave her lovely grin which disclosed both rows of teeth. She had "grown up to her teeth," as Mrs. Horton put it. And she knew how to smile as well as grin. She had practised every variety of smile before her mirror. But on Bobby she turned the full brightness of her old hoyden grin. He grinned back, delighted.

"I say, youngster, you're beginning young, ain't you?" she asked. "Come here and tell me why you 'like it.'"

Bobby went, nothing loath. He was not at all a shy child, though he was very reserved as a rule.

Sophy could not have said why she was surprised and rather disappointed at the evident fancy which he had taken to Belinda Horton. She did not divine that even the seven-year-old man vibrated to the spell of Belinda's surcharged femininity.

Bobby lounged against the girl's knee and stared up into her face out of sober, dark-grey eyes.

"Well?" said Belinda, taking his chin in her strong fingers and shaking it slightly. "*Why* do you like it?"

"'Cause you're beautiful," said he boldly.

Belinda laughed, ran her hand the "wrong way" over his face, and picking up a lump of sugar, pressed it between his willing lips.

"There!" she said. "If you were older, 'twould be a kiss—but I believe little boys don't think kisses as sweet as sugar."

"I think *yours* would be," he returned promptly, having tucked away the lump of sugar in his cheek.

"Bobby!" called his mother. "Don't be forward...."

"Oh, don't snub him ... please," Belinda said. "He's not 'forward'—but he's going to be a dreadful flirt. My! young man, but you're going to lead the girls a dance when you know how—ain't you?"

"I know how to dance now," said Bobby.

"You do, hey? Well, you shall dance with me some time. Would you like that?"

"Ra-*ther*!"

Sophy, however, didn't at all like this unusual, bold-eyed Bobby who was lolling against a stranger's knee as though they had been intimate for years, and "giving her as good as she sent." She cast a meaning glance at young Grey, who had just finished his cup of tea. He rose obediently, though he felt the deepest sympathy with Bobby.

"Time for your boxing lesson, Bobby," he said.

Bobby pressed closer to Belinda. He looked at his mother.

"Couldn't I stay a *little* longer, mother?" he pleaded. "'Cause Cousin Belinda's just come?"

Sophy didn't want to appear a prig. She glanced again at Harold Grey.

"You must ask Mr. Grey," she said.

"Mr. Grey" was between two fires. He said somewhat lamely:

"I'm sure Miss Horton will excuse you, Bobby. He has his boxing lesson and his history to prepare for to-morrow," he added, in explanation.

Belinda smiled this time—it was a discreet smile, but disclosed a dimple in the cheek next "Mr. Grey."

"Hard lines, Bobby!" she murmured. "I think I *must* be nicer than boxing and history!"

"I should *think* so!" he cried with fervour. "Mr. Grey knows it, too...."

Harold Grey blushed. Belinda laughed delightedly. Sophy rose and took Bobby by the hand. She was laughing, too, but quite firm.

"Come, Bobby," she said. "You can see your Cousin Belinda as much as you like to-morrow."

Bobby, thus admonished, resisted no longer. He made his most formal bow to the company and marched off with his tutor. Belinda rather resented being thus deprived of her youthful admirer.

She looked smilingly at Sophy.

"My! but you've got him in good training, haven't you?" she said lazily. "Have you got Morry trained like that, too?"

Mrs. Horton made a nervous movement.

Sophy took it tranquilly.

"You must judge for yourself," she replied, also smiling. To herself she said: "This girl has a vulgar mind ... and I'm afraid she's taken a dislike to me."

Loring entered a moment later. He, too, blinked when he saw Belinda. It was not so much her beauty that made him blink as her full-fledged "young-ladyhood." He had not realised that the tucking up of her brilliant mane and the letting down of her skirts would produce so complete a transformation.

He came forward rather consciously, kissed his aunt perfunctorily, and said:

"Hello, Linda!"

"Hello, Morry!" she returned, lying back in her armchair and looking serenely up at him. But into her lazy eyes there had come a glint of garnet. The talk was general for a few moments. Then Loring said that he wanted a cup of tea. He rang, and Biggs brought fresh tea-things.

"I'll make it for you," said Belinda. She glanced at Sophy. "If *you* don't mind?" she said.

"Of course not. Thanks!" said Sophy.

Belinda busied herself with the tea service. She had well-shaped, very white, very deft hands. The White Cat in the fairy tale must have had hands like Belinda's—just so velvety and agile.

Morris watched them curiously. It was odd—but Belinda's hands had "grown up," too. He remembered them tanned and scratched—regular "paws." Now they were white-cat paws, soft as velvet even to look at.

"How funny!" he said suddenly.

Belinda lifted an eyebrow.

"What's 'funny'?"

"Your sitting there so demurely making tea for me."

"Why shouldn't I sit demurely and make tea for you?"

"Oh, I don't know! You see ... I remember you shinning up trees and ... and that sort of thing."

This speech rather halted at the end.

Belinda thought correctly that the memory of that kiss had interfered with the memory of her tree-climbing. Her spirit purred within her.

"I daresay I could 'shin up' a tree quite well nowadays," she remarked. "It doesn't at all prevent one from making good tea."

As she spoke, she nipped a lump of sugar in two between her strong little fingers, and dropped one half into the cup she was preparing for him.

"I say!" exclaimed Morris. "How you do remember things!"

Then he flushed.

"Oh, yes ... I remember things," said Belinda easily.

She poured cream into the cup and pushed it towards him.

"There...." she said. "If you haven't changed ... entirely ... that's the way you like it."

Sophy and Mrs. Horton were deeply absorbed. Sophy had just told Belinda's mother about the plan of

having Belinda stop with her at Newport. Mrs. Horton was delighted. They were now discussing the question of dates. Sophy thought that perhaps she had better arrange a coming-out ball for Belinda before the girl appeared in society. In that case, she had better go first to Newport, and Belinda could join her in, say, ten days. Mrs. Horton called over to her daughter, happily excited: "Linda, you are certainly the luckiest girl! Just listen to what Sophy's going to do for you...."

And she explained with enthusiasm.

For some reason, Belinda, who did not colour easily, grew suddenly red. Then she tossed back her head and looked at Sophy.

"It's *awfully* good of you...." she said. "I think it's most *awfully* kind of you...." she repeated. Her voice had real feeling in it, and yet, queerly enough, Sophy sensed that this feeling included resentment also. The girl was certainly a very peculiar character. Was it that she did not like receiving favours which she could not return? She looked a haughty creature. Yes —doubtless that was it.

"It will be a great pleasure for me to have you," Sophy said. "I shall love bringing out the beauty of the season."

She said it nicely without a hint of patronage. But now this odd girl grew quite pale.

"Thanks! That's awfully kind of you," she murmured again. What had turned her pale was the thought that Sophy should take pleasure in her own undoing. She was quite relentless, but she had the sort of qualm that might have stirred a very young Nemesis,

when precipitating the first tragedy on her appointed path.

After this, the talk again became general for a few moments; then Sophy took Mrs. Horton to see her sister, and the others went to dress for dinner.

XXV

At dinner-time Loring had another shock. This was the sight of Belinda in evening dress. It was the full glare of her beauty that now smote him, together with the sense of her having become suddenly some one else. This was another person altogether—a new Linda. And yet Belinda had sought to temper the effect of her first appearance thus attired. She had a superstitious feeling that her coming-out ball at Newport was to mark an important crisis in her life. Her gown for that occasion had been carefully selected in Paris (by her—not by her mother). That is, she had selected the gown as the one in which she meant to burst upon Loring in the full splendour of her new womanhood. The ball would furnish this opportunity.

She was sorry to have to lessen that cherished effect, even by this one appearance in demi-toilette. So she had chosen the soberest gown in her wardrobe. It was of dark purple chiffon. The long, *mousquetaire* sleeves veiled her glinting arms. Her white breast was also veiled. But nothing could subdue the flame of her ruddy coronal of hair. An oval mole, black as her eyebrows, lay in the hollow of her white throat—

one of those outrageously perfect imperfections with which Nature loves sometimes to seal her masterpieces. This mole was the final touch on the heady lure of Belinda's beauty.

Loring's eyes were drawn to it unwillingly again and again. He marvelled that he did not remember it. He even wondered if that "little devil!" had not painted it herself upon the snow of her throat.

And whenever he looked at the soft, jet-black mole on the white throat, that kiss of two years ago flamed in his blood as it had not flamed at the time of its bestowal. But he was decent enough to be ashamed of this feeling. He answered Belinda rather briefly on the few occasions that she spoke to him. Somehow he did not trust her. Somehow (though this he did not acknowledge to himself) he dreaded her. And he glanced from her to Sophy—telling himself how much more really beautiful Sophy was in her soft grey and pearls than Belinda in her pansy purple and rococo necklace of amethysts and strass. But for the first time, against his will, Sophy's beauty struck him as cold. And yet it was not cold, though, within it, Sophy herself felt chill and numb. She, too, was obsessed by Belinda. It was not so much the girl's flaring good looks that obsessed her, but the thrilling, imperial youth of her. Sophy felt as a wilting, cut rose might feel, looking from its crystal vase upon a vigorous sister-blossom still rooted in the warm earth. It was a wretched sensation. Sophy hated herself for feeling it, and yet each time that she glanced at Belinda it swept over her afresh.

The dinner was rather flat. Only Mrs. Horton was in really good spirits. She was quite elated and happy over the idea of Belinda's going to stop with Sophy at

Newport. Her "coming out" would be much "smarter" and more brilliant under Sophy's chaperonage than under poor, dear Grace's.

Belinda, for her part, was rather depressed by Sophy's appearance in the grey gown that filmed like smoke about her beautiful bare shoulders. Belinda had not taken in quite how lovely her rival was when she had first seen her that afternoon in plain white linen. And just as her youth troubled Sophy, so the mystery of experience in Sophy's dark-grey eyes troubled Belinda. She had a moment—one bitter, stinging moment—of feeling not *quite* so cock-sure about the future.

And Harold Grey, nervously eating far more than he wanted in his effort not to look too often at Belinda, was thinking how sure he was that his mother would pronounce her "not quite a lady," and yet how much more she attracted him than any of the most genuine "ladies" that he had ever seen. "Don't be an abandoned ass," he kept telling himself. "You're an infant's tutor with a fat salary paid you to keep your place. Now keep it—confound you!"

Loring knew that his mother had some old-fashioned prejudice against having champagne served every day for dinner, and as a rule he submitted, though grumblingly, while he was at Nahant. But to-night he felt that he must have the cheering beverage at all costs. Besides, his mother was ill in bed upstairs. Old Biggs looked like a disapproving, Methodistic owl when the order was given. It violated his principles as Mrs. Loring's butler of twenty years' standing, to serve champagne to a family party of five.

"I'm afraid it will hurt your mother's feelings, Morris," Sophy ventured, as Biggs left the room with

a very rigid gait.

"Pooh! Why need she know? Such a silly notion, at any rate! And we ought to drink Linda's health—after her two years in foreign parts. You like champagne, don't you, Linda?"

"You bet!" said Belinda. She flashed both rows of teeth in pleased anticipation.

"Linda!" expostulated her mother, just as in old days. She turned appealingly to Sophy:

"Now I ask you *what* was the use of my sending her to an expensive Pension school in Paris for two years, if she comes back talking like this?"

"Oh, for God's sake, let her be natural, Aunt Nelly!" put in Loring. "If you only knew how refreshing it is to hear one's own lingo after six weeks or so of England!"

"Didn't you like England, Morry?" asked Belinda.

Loring grinned in the direction of Harold Grey.

"Mr. Grey's presence keeps me from answering with entire candour," he said, a veiled sneer in his voice. He disliked the presence of Bobby's tutor in his household extremely. Harold Grey was an acute young man. He realised this dislike on Loring's part, and returned it with vigour but discretion. He thought Bobby's step-father "just a bit of a cad." He now said composedly:

"Pray don't consider me."

But Loring replied: "Oh, there's plenty of time ahead! I'll give you my sentiments in private, Linda."

Belinda glanced from him to Sophy.

"But *you* like it, *don't* you?" she asked.

"Yes. I love England," Sophy answered quietly.

Harold Grey had a "cult" for his pupil's mother. He thought her very wonderful in every way. Now, when she said in that deep, sweet voice of hers that she "loved England," he felt that she was really to be worshipped. And he wondered for the many hundredth time, *how* she could have married that "gaudy cub." Dependence of position made Harold even harder on his employer than Lady Wychcote had been. But then he shrewdly guessed that it was really the wife and not the husband who employed him. He was already aware of the antagonism that existed between Loring and Bobby. "Breakers ahead there, I should say," he told himself.

At Sophy's reply to Belinda, Loring cast an irritated glance at her and said:

"Oh, Sophy's an out-and-out Anglo-maniac—quite rabid on the subject, in fact. You can't take *her* opinion. You wait till *I* talk to you, Linda!"

Neither the look nor the tone escaped Belinda. She also saw that Sophy winced from them—that colour stole into her face and that her lips tightened a little. Here was a useful sidelight. So Morry was as hotly American as ever! That was good. Then Sophy must jar on him at times; for Belinda had decided that she was not very American, not even very Southern. Belinda thanked her stars that she herself was so aggressively a daughter of Columbia.

"See how severe Sophy looks at my daring to jest on such a sacred subject," Loring continued. "By Gad!

Sometimes I believe she wishes that we'd remained a Colony of Great Britain!"

("Blithering brute!... Can't you see she's only annoyed because you're jawing this way before *me*?" thought Harold Grey wrathfully.)

But the truth was, that Loring had never forgiven Sophy for the off-hand lesson read him by John Arundel. He half suspected that she had "put him up to it, by gad!" That visit to England had left a big bruise on his *amour propre*. And he "took it out" on Sophy now and then in some such way.

The champagne was served. Belinda's health was drunk. She finished that glass and began another.

"Be careful, Linda," cautioned her step-mother. "You're not used to wine, you know."

All Belinda's dimples began to play like a throng of elves.

"Oh, *Mater*!" she cried. She leaned forward and squeezed Mrs. Horton's dry, brown hand in her velvety white one. "You're too innocent and guileless to run loose in this wicked old world by yourself ... you really are!"

"What do you mean by that extraordinary speech, Linda?"

"Why ... as if the girls at the Pension didn't get bottles of fizz smuggled in to them, any old time! Why, whenever we had a spread on the sly, *some*body's cousin, or brother, or mash slipped us a quart or so of champagne...."

Mrs. Horton looked really aghast. Loring roared. Harold Grey couldn't take his eyes off those

twinkling dimples, but in his heart he said: "By Jove! She's a larky little baggage!"

Sophy was the only one who took it calmly. She had decided all of a sudden that there was a good deal of "bluff" about Belinda—that she was of the type that enjoys "shocking people." She said with a smile:

"I don't think you need look so horrified, Eleanor. I believe that Belinda is taking what she'd call 'a rise' out of us."

Belinda only laughed, but she was vexed that Sophy should have seen through her. She had not given her credit for such astuteness. The fact was, that she had never had so much as a sip of champagne while at Madame de Bruneton's excellent Pension. But she found this family meal very dull, she hated seeing Loring in the bosom of domesticity.

However, she won more by her impish tarradiddle than she had looked for. Morris turned to her with something of the old devilment in his eyes and said:

"By Jove, Linda, I hope it's not all bluff! I hope you *are* a good-enough little sport to enjoy a glass of wine. Good cheer loves company as well as Misery."

Belinda took it in like lightning. Sophy was one of the prigs who do not care to drink even in reason. Poor Morry!

She smiled at him, letting her eyes turn full on his for the first time.

"Of course I enjoy it!" she said. "I *love* the funny little 'razzle-dazzle' feeling it gives me! But the greatest part of the fun is drinking it *with* some one.... Some one you like, of course."

"By George, you're a little brick, Linda! Have some more...."

"No," said Belinda, still smiling, and putting her hand over her glass. "'Enough's' *heaps* better than a feast.... I like to sparkle, but I don't want to boil over...."

"Oh, Belinda! *Belinda!*" said her step-mother.

Sophy came to the rescue.

"An old negro said the best thing I've ever heard about the way that champagne makes one feel," she remarked lightly. "I gave him a glass one Christmas at Sweet-Waters. He'd never tasted champagne before, and I asked him if he liked it. He said: 'Laws, Miss Sophy—dat I does! I feels like I'se done hit dee funny-bones all over me!'"

While every one was laughing at this, she rose. Harold Grey excused himself to "write letters." "Good riddance!" Loring muttered to Belinda, as Harold disappeared and they followed Sophy and Mrs. Horton towards the drawing-room.

Loring was in his usual after-dinner state—not tipsy, but over-excited. He flashed a side-glance of appraisal. "You've bloomed into an out-and-out beauty, Linda. But I don't suppose you need me to tell you that."

"I think I rather do, Morry."

"Oh, cut it, Linda! Don't try the 'maiden-modesty' act on me.... You know as well as I do that you're a dazzler."

They had lingered by the front door, instead of going on into the drawing-room. A full moon was rising. As Belinda stood in the open doorway, one side of her

face and figure was silver, and one golden from the hall lamps. She looked like a wonderful figure of mingled fires. In the strange illumination of her face, her eyes burned dark and full. She and Loring leaned against the opposite door-jambs, gazing at each other.

"I can't get over your being 'grown up,'" Morris said a little thickly, as she did not reply to his last remark.

"Yes ... I'm 'grown up,'" she said softly. She kept looking at him. Then she looked at the sea, then she looked back at him again. "It's nice ... being a woman," she added, still in that very soft voice.

"'Nice'?" asked Loring, with a short laugh. "You find it 'nice'?"

"*Very* nice," said Belinda.

She smiled suddenly. Her teeth glistened with a strange silvery lustre in the moonlight.

"Why?... Don't you?" she asked, her voice slightly shaken as by withheld laughter. It was going to be easier, after all, than she had thought. She did not realise that Bacchus had as much to do with it as Venus. She only knew that Morris was vibrating to her nearness, that his blood was trembling in him.

As he did not answer, she put out her hand and laid it lightly on his breast.

"Don't you?" she said again.

"Don't I what?" he asked rather crossly.

That hand was like a white flame to his drink-stirred blood.

"Oh, Morry!... What a fraud you are!..."

She laughed smotheredly like Lorelei through some soft, warm wave. "What an awful fraud you are, Morry!... You pay me compliments and all the time you're thinking what a nuisance it's going to be, having me at Newport this season!"

Loring looked at her oddly. Then he looked down at the white hand which still lay against his breast.

"Take your hand away, Linda!" he said curtly.

She took it away and turned it about before her in the moonlight, gazing at it consideringly.

"Poor little old hand!" she breathed pityingly. "You've offended the king...."

She held it up between them, again laughing.

"Must I cut it off?" she asked teasingly. "Will you cut it off for me and 'cast it into the fire'?"

Loring said nothing. He leaned there looking at her darkly. He hated her and desired her. It was the old emotion, under whose stress he had once kissed her, magnified tenfold.

She straightened suddenly and was close to him.

"Why are you so horrid to me, Morry?" she said, in a vehement whisper. "What have I done to vex you? I think it's cruel of you ... my first evening at home ... my first 'grown-up' evening with you...."

He saw her lips trembling. It made him quite breathless to see those full, rich lips trembling so near his.

"I don't mean to be horrid," he said constrainedly.

"But you are ... you *are*!..." she insisted. Her voice hummed with passion like a 'cello string. "You *are*!..." she repeated. "What have I done that you should order me not to touch you—as though my hand were poisonous?"

"I ... I'm nervous this evening...." he said lamely. He knew that he should have turned and gone forthwith into the drawing-room. He simply couldn't. The Purple Emperor aroma—the Belinda magic—held him thralled. Belinda wanted to fall forward on his breast and have her laugh out in the dark warmth of his embrace. But the time was not yet. Some day they would laugh together with love's wild, kiss-broken laughter over this comic interview. But not now.

"Are you sorry you were so horrid?" she murmured.

"Oh, yes ... naturally!..."

She had her velvety finger-tips against his mouth in a flash.

"Then kiss it ... beg its pardon!" she said.

Loring snatched down her hand and ground it between his.

"Linda! You little devil!... You little *devil*!..." he said.

He pushed her from him, then swung her to him violently. He loosed her hand and gripped her hard by both shoulders. This grip was brutal and painful. She found it delicious to be hurt by him. That was her type.

"Let me tell you ... let me tell you," he gasped, and this gasping voice also filled her with joy, "you'll play with fire once too often, my dear ... just once too

often.... Burns don't make becoming scars.... Now leave me alone!"

He flung her off in good earnest this time, and strode away to the library. His pulses were racing—his blood pounding. He was scared. He did not mean to be false to Sophy for a worldful of Belindas. Not that his love for Sophy was what it had been. The old ardour was clean gone. He found her cold. He felt cold to her. Yet something in him clung blindly to what had been—to the revealed self in him that Sophy had once called forth.

XXVI

According to agreement, Belinda arrived in Newport two weeks later, the day before the ball. When she came downstairs next evening, dressed for the occasion, Sophy thought that she had never seen so palpitantly gorgeous a creature. It was not her gown that was gorgeous, but the beauty that it illumined like sunlight catching a cloud. Belinda had told her step-mother that the regular dress of débutantes was "not her style." "I should look perfectly absurd in white or blue with rosebuds," she had said, with acumen. So she had selected a costume of shaded apricot chiffon. The rich, fruit-coloured stuff made her breast and arms look white as peeled almonds.

An old necklace of brilliants and topaz lay like flecks of sunlight on her milky throat. Belinda never wore modern jewelry. She had an astonishing gift for decking her own rather extravagant beauty in

precisely the right way. A twist of golden tissue was threaded in and out through her burnished hair, and held in place by a clot of topazes. These jewels hid one ear, and their brilliant hardness cut against her cheek. It is impossible to describe the strange allurement of the glowing, yellow gems, thus pressed against the soft damask of the young cheek. An Eastern woman gets this effect by wearing heavy bangles that dent the flesh of the upper arm. Sophy could not explain why this cluster of topaz over Belinda's ear seemed to savour of perverseness—of an adroit and cunning perverseness. It was certainly charming—yet it repelled her. She reminded herself listlessly that Belinda's whole personality rather repelled her. It was a matter of temperamental aversion—for she felt sure that she also repelled Belinda.

Perhaps for this reason they were particularly civil to each other. And Sophy had certainly been kindness itself about this ball and the girl's visit to her. She had even chosen her gown for the evening with reference to Belinda's. She was all in black and silver. She looked pale—not her best. Those warm, dusky stains were too marked under her eyes. She felt at ebb-tide. But Belinda was like a great, joyous, sunlit, inrushing wave.

"You are very beautiful in that gown, Belinda," Sophy said. "You look like sunlight."

"And you look like moonlight—on lilies," said Belinda, who could say very pretty things when she chose. Yet as she said it she was thinking how glad she was that she herself was red-rose rather than lily! How typically a splendid tiger-lily she seemed in her orange gown, she could not have imagined. The

black mole on her throat was just like the mark on a tiger-lily leaf.

When Loring joined them, he said:

"What the deuce! You look like a mandarin orange in all that yellow, Linda!..." But his eyes said something else. Belinda was quite satisfied. When he added fretfully: "Why d'you stick that lump of jewels over one ear, like that? This isn't Turkey or Hindustan...." she was more pleased than ever. She knew that the hard glitter against her soft cheek allured him, and that his pettishness only meant that he didn't wish to be allured. But his reasoned wishes didn't matter in the least to her. It was the unreasoning, uncontrollable wish at the depths of his nature that she meant to call forth. "Love" she named this Wish. The pride of the eye and the lust of life seemed the true glories of being to Belinda. Her creed was simple. To love, to enjoy, to laugh with all the strength of one's body—these were the exhilarating ends of existence.

The ball went merrily. Belinda had the success that might easily have been predicted. In contrast with her, the other young girls seemed like pale-hued flowers on some tapestry at whose centre glows a rich blossom worked in gold. She danced and danced without getting dishevelled or red, or pale. She looked the embodied Joy of Living, as she swayed tirelessly, a faint, secret smile just parting her lips, her head thrown slightly back. And the young men with whom she danced seemed also washed out and inadequate beside her—very insufficient twigs to support the radiant, full-blown blossom of her beauty.

But as the evening wore on, though she still smiled, a

little flame of anger and disappointment began to burn her heart. Morry was evidently hard-set against her. Not once had he asked her to dance. It was very shabby of him. It was cowardly. She knew very well that he was afraid of her. She loved his fear of her, but she hated this dull, "proper," tame resistance that wouldn't dare even one dance with her. Then suddenly her spirits leaped. There would be the Cotillion. He would *have* to dance with her some time during the Cotillion! Her opportunity came with the "Mirror figure." She sat on a little gilded chair in the middle of the ballroom, one gold-shot foot thrust out. She was more than ever like Lorelei, as she sat there with the little silver mirror in her hand, coolly touching her tossed hair into place, while she waited for the swains to kneel foolishly before her.

Sophy, who had not danced this evening, stood near a doorway watching her. To her, the girl in her apricot draperies, looking at herself in the silver glass with such perfect *disinvolture,* seemed suddenly like a beautiful Falsehood who had stolen Truth's mirror and was trying to see what it revealed. For somehow, as she had watched her during the evening, the intuitive conviction had come to her that Belinda was very false. And yet Belinda was perfectly true—to herself. What to Sophy would have seemed falseness, would have seemed to Belinda "being true to herself." She really thought it "being true to herself" to take Morris for herself, if she could, by any means within the limits of conventional propriety and at any cost to any one—but herself and, within reason, him.

Young men by the score came and knelt at the golden shoes of Belinda. She sent them all away, with the most charming effrontery. Then Sophy saw

Loring approach. He looked pale and sulky.

She watched the two curiously. It seemed as if Belinda were going to flout Morris also. But all at once she laughed, and pressed the mirror against his upturned face. It was an odd gesture—almost like a caress. Sophy thought that it displeased her because of something in it that she could only characterise as "bad form." The next moment, she saw Morris pull the girl rather roughly up into his arms, and waltz off with her.

A woman standing near by said spontaneously: "What a beautiful couple they make!"

Yes. Sophy saw that, too. They were really quite wonderful floating about to the sensuous rhythm in each other's arms. And all at once the thought flashed to her: "How well they suit each other in every way!" She stood gazing after them—singling them out from the whirling throng. And her thought returned to her, enlarged, more distinct: "He ought to have married her ... not me." The more she watched them, the more this thought possessed her. Belinda would not have bored him with ideals. Belinda would not have been bored herself by the "social stunt" as exacted in New York and Newport. Belinda would have found that visit to England "bully fun." She would have joined with him in "poking up the highbrows." Nor would Belinda have objected to wine-bred love—of this, somehow, Sophy felt particularly sure. Yes; in all things they would have been fittingly mated. In age, in taste, in habits, in temperament.

Just here Loring himself passed by her on his way out of the room. The waltz was over. He walked rapidly like a man towards some object. His face was

white and set and his eyes black. Sophy could not know that he was drunk, not with wine but with Belinda. She slipped out into the hall after him. Only some servants were standing about—not near them. She detained him an instant, her hand on his arm. "Morris—don't be vexed...." she said very low. "But don't take any more—just this evening. Your cousin's first ball...."

He flung off her hand. His face worked. "For God's sake, go your way," he said, in a violent whisper, "and let me go mine! I'm tired of squatting on the steps of the temple. Let up on me, for God's sake! *I* don't interfere with *you*!..."

He was gone. And obeying a very natural if reprehensible impulse, he drank a glass more of champagne than he had intended to before Sophy spoke.

She turned and went quietly back towards the ballroom. To-morrow she would think things out more clearly. Certainly they could not continue as they were now. She had not meant to "nag." Yet she had nagged. Sophy had rare largenesses in her. She was neither as hurt nor as angered by Loring's words as most women would have been. She had reached that very chill room in Love's House, where it is easy to put one's self in another's place.

"But I can't go on like this ... not *all* my life," she thought wearily. Yet she saw no way out. The thought of divorce never occurred to her. She hated divorce as she hated other vulgarities. Yet, illogically enough, this view of the matter was only applied to her own case. She heartily and thoroughly approved of it for others. She even thought that marriage should be a civil contract, dissolvable by the mutual

consent of both parties, or by the resolution even of one.

A woman of whom she was rather fond—Helen Van Raalt—spoke to her suddenly, touching her shoulder from behind.

"Sophy, dear, I'm *dreadfully* sorry to be so late! I had to take May to Fanny's party first, you know. And we've only *just* got away. And I've brought an old friend of yours along with me—my cousin—Marco Amaldi...."

XXVII

Sophy found herself with her hand in Amaldi's. She wanted to laugh nervously. She could think of nothing clearly for a moment.

Amaldi noticed how pale she was. She did not seem less beautiful than he remembered her, but his heart winced, for he thought that she looked ill.

He had the advantage of Sophy in this sudden meeting, because he had been prepared for it. However, "preparation" in such a case is something as if a man imprisoned for years in a dark dungeon should "prepare" to see the sunlight. As much as he might school himself, he would be sure to quake to his inmost core when once again it flooded him.

Amaldi had tried hard to forget. If he had not forgotten he had at least succeeded in dulling the edge of his feeling for her. But it was by time and

work that he had chiefly commanded his love.

He flung himself into all sorts of agricultural and civic reforms and enterprises. Political life, as an end in itself, did not appeal to him, but he thought with Cavour in regard to the "need which every worthy man feels of making himself useful to the society of which he is a part."

Then had come the news of Sophy's marriage to Loring. Amaldi had had another bitter recrudescence of feeling over that. He was filled with a contemptuous anger against himself for what seemed to him a poor-spirited fidelity. He was nothing, had never been anything to this woman who spread devastation through his life. He had always despised the love that starves on in faithful submission. He would on every occasion have altered where he alteration found, and bent with the remover to remove—only he discovered that it was not in his power to do so. This emotion which had seized him without his volition or consent, proved stronger than his will. Even though he succeeded in curbing it, though it lay in chains, as it were, in the profundity of his being—yet it stirred and threatened at the idea of any other love. It was like a jealous, ill-governed prisoner who will not share his cell.

This one, supreme flame had burned out in Amaldi all capacity for loving any other woman.

As the years passed, however, a calmer temper rose in him. Reflecting on those early days of his love for Sophy, he realised that he had demanded much while offering little—that he had been unreasonable in expecting her to love him under the circumstances. Why, indeed, he asked himself one day, four years after he had parted from her so

stormily—why truly should she have loved him? His whole effort at that time had been to repress himself. He had never been truly himself when with her, so much of his will had been absorbed in trying to restrain his passion. He had been silent, reserved, conventional. Yet he had expected her to return a feeling, whose depth and intensity she could not possibly have realised. Now for the second time she was the wife of another man....

No reasoning, no philosophy, no lapse of time could save Amaldi from crisping in the furnace of this thought.

But when, two years afterwards, his agricultural interests made a journey to America seem necessary, he faced the probability of meeting her again with tolerable coolness. He was nearing forty and he considered life a discipline to be endured with hardihood. His character had deepened and strengthened.

The Marchesa, in daily contact with him, found a dear companion, though his habit of long silences seemed to increase with growing years. To his inmost self she never attained. She did not know whether any chord of his former passion for Sophy still vibrated. He never alluded to her.

The situation in regard to his wife was just the same. When the Marchesa looked at her son's fine, sensitive dark face, grown stronger for controlled pain, and realised that in all likelihood no compensation would ever come to him, she felt that incomparable bitterness with which we watch the suffering of one for whom we would gladly die.

She might die for Marco ten times over, yet he would

never really live. "Two women have seen to that," she told herself bitterly. Yet in her more rational moods she did not blame Sophy. She had known her too intimately to blame her. No—that Marco had loved her was not Sophy's fault. There had been in his love for her that inevitability which characterises true passion as well as true poetry.

And Sophy, standing now with her hand in Amaldi's after all these years, had at first no thoughts that could properly be called thoughts,—the memory of the three windows in the room where she had first met him—of how it had seemed to mean something, and yet had meant nothing, like all else in her life....

Then with a shock that "brought her to," as it were, she recalled how she and Amaldi had parted from each other six years ago, and the colour welled into her face.

He knew what she was thinking of. He, too, was thinking of it.

Mrs. Van Raalt was chattering again. "Just think what an odd thing Marco's been doing in America!... He's been all over the West studying the system of agriculture. Isn't that the funniest way for an Italian to spend his time in America?"

"But you've been in America before, haven't you?" said Sophy mechanically.

She was thinking what an air of race Amaldi had, and how quiet and strong he looked standing there against the whirling, parti-coloured background of the ball. Somehow she did not remember in him this

powerful look of manhood. Then she realised—he *was* more a man. Those six intervening years had given him this new look.

"Oh, yes," he said, answering her question. "Twice. Once when I was a boy—once about nine years ago. My mother gave me many messages for you, Signora —'*tanti auguri*'...."

The Italian words swept Sophy back, and she paled again. This and the mention of his mother brought so vividly the memory of Cecil's death.

"Please give her my love ... when you write...." she said, her voice a little shaken. (Helen Van Raalt had turned away with some one.) "I shall never forget her kindness to me...." she added. As if she felt her words too formal, she repeated: "I shall never, never forget all her kindness to me...."

"She will be very happy to get such a message from you," said Amaldi. He, too, felt his tone to be formal. Yet what could there be between them but formalities! His heart shook in his breast. He had been mad, quite mad—a vain fool, to risk seeing her again. He had even thought that to see her thus, married for the second time, and happily, would allay the uneasy ache with which he always thought of her. He realised, in these very first moments, that it was the contrary which had happened. That half-numbed ache had sprung into a throb of acute pain at the first sight of her face. And how delicate she looked! Then leaped the question: Was she only ill ... or was she unhappy?

This thought of her possible unhappiness had not before occurred to Amaldi. That a woman with such bitter experience to guide her should make a second

mistake in a question so vital as marriage had not seemed possible. Now as he observed her it seemed quite possible ... even probable. It took his breath. He felt that he must look strange and so began to speak casually. After a few moments Sophy said: "I must introduce you to some of these pretty girls.... They will be thinking me very negligent."

He followed her submissively. He had come to this débutante ball just for the opportunity of seeing her. Now he must pay the penalty.

Sophy led him first to Belinda.

"Belinda, this is my friend, the Marchese Amaldi," she said. "This is the heroine of the ball, Marchese ... Miss Horton, my...." she almost stumbled—"my husband's cousin," it came out bravely.

Belinda thought that Amaldi looked "a great swell." She set herself at once to enthrall him. Amaldi lent himself idly to the old, old game. Belinda had at times the stupidity of all cock-sureness. She went to bed that night firmly convinced that Amaldi was her future slave.

She said something of the sort jestingly to Sophy. Sophy looked at her gravely, then she coloured a little and said:

"I must tell you Belinda that the Marchese Amaldi is married. He is separated from his wife—but in Italy there is no divorce."

"Pooh!" said Belinda airily. "I don't want to be his marchioness.... I only want to see how a stately dago like that makes love...."

Sophy had not replied. And Belinda, safe in her

bedroom, taking off her jewels with little pussy-cat yawns of replete pleasure, had thought:

"He must have been in love with *her* once ... when she was younger. Just common or garden jealousy—her telling me that!"

Then she looked at a little red mark on her white arm, and forgot all about Amaldi and Sophy. She lifted her arm and rubbed her cheek softly to and fro over the mark. It had been left there by a violent kiss.

"Oh, Morry ... Morry...." she purred, caressing her own arm where he had caressed it, full of voluptuous reminiscence. "As if I care whether all the dagoes in the world have as many wives as Bluebeard!— My Jove ... my *darling*!"

And she kissed and kissed the little red seal of love on her arm that was white like peeled almonds.

XXVIII

Amaldi had gone to that ball braced for two ordeals —the meeting with Sophy and the meeting with the man whom she had married. He was introduced to Loring a few moments before he left. Belinda introduced him. Loring had come up as they sat together on the terrace. A light just overhead shone directly on his face.

Amaldi had winced from the beauty of that face, as he had winced from Sophy's look of fragility. He had

not the superficial scorn for male beauty which is felt by the average Anglo-Saxon. He did not fall into the common error of thinking that women are indifferent to beauty in men. On the contrary, he knew that some women are as much affected by it as men are by the beauty of women.

He looked at the perfect Greek type of Loring's face, enhanced by the intense pallor that over-stimulation always lent it, and he knew (being a Latin) the terrific spell that such a face can cast over the imagination.

At that moment, so strong is the fleshly man in even the most highly evolved being, he could have wished that she had loved a monster for his soul, rather than this stripling for his beauty. The power of vivid visualisation is one of a Latin's chief tortures when unrequited love mocks him. Amaldi could see the beauty of Sophy and Loring in each other's arms as plainly as though they had stood enlaced before him.

He had said good-night rather abruptly.

As he walked off along the terrace, Belinda had asked scampishly of Loring:

"Well, Morry, what d'you think of my dago mash?"

"I don't think of him," had been the surly retort.

"Well, I do. *I* think he's a peach. He's simply stunning to look at anyhow. So dark and sort of holding his breath at one. A marquis, too, let me tell you. Don't you think I'd make a nice marchioness?"

"For God's sake, don't play the fool with me, Linda."

She pouted.

"You won't *let* me play the fool with you! That's why I'm going to see if I can with my handsome dago."

Loring's reply to this had been to seize her by one arm and jerk her to her feet before him.

"My bracelet! You hurt me...." she had murmured. He released her arm, and she stood nursing it against her breast, thrusting out her red lips over it, saying, "There! there!" to it as if it had been a baby.

"I don't believe I hurt it an atom.... Let me see," he had demanded. She made him furious—furious with desire and detestation. He loathed her roguery and wiles, yet they mastered him just as drink did.

"Let me see," he said again, putting out his hand towards her arm.

She yielded it to him with a languid movement, so that it hung a warm, white weight in his grasp.

"There...." she said, pressing her forefinger into the soft flesh.

It was then that he had set that violent kiss upon it. His lips clung, drew at the delicate, supple texture. The girl leaned against him half swooning with the delight of his hot lips upon the coolness of her bare arm.

She didn't care in the least when, coming to himself again, he flung away her arm as though it had been a bit of trash.

"Go to bed," he had said roughly between his teeth. "Go to bed and say your prayers ... you need 'em...."

She had stood laughing softly, as he strode off after Amaldi, towards the house. She didn't mind his

rudenesses because she knew of old that reaction was sure to follow. He was too good-tempered and easy-going in his normal state to keep up this savage mood with her. He was only cross like this when he'd "had too much." And the more brutal he was at such times, the more apt he was to make up for it by being "nice" afterwards. She had had some experience of these moods in him even as a schoolgirl.

In fact, the next day Loring, rather ashamed of the hazy memory that he retained of that scene on the terrace, was very "nice" to her indeed. He proposed a ride together. This was the beginning of delightful rides alone with him.

Sophy had given up both riding and dancing for the past two or three weeks. The truth was that she had not felt very well of late. The constant, hopeless sense of defeat, of a wearing situation from which she could see no means of extricating herself, had begun to affect her body. This sensation of physical weariness was new to her. Always, until now, her strong, elastic physique had resisted triumphantly. But nowadays she felt jaded. Everything seemed an effort. Her grey eyes, which Amaldi remembered so brilliantly eager, had that subdued, waiting look which comes from either physical or mental suffering constantly endured. Which of these causes brought that look into her eyes, he felt that he must know. He could not bear it that her eyes should have that look in them. What was wrong? Was it her health or was it that a second time she had made the mistake most terrible of all to a woman such as she was? In that case....

Amaldi faced himself squarely. There was no

escaping the truth of what he had brought upon himself by his own act. It had needed but that one sight of her, that one touch of her hand to rouse in him the old love, as much stronger for the lapse of years as was his manhood. And now ... what? There was no danger of his repeating his mistake of six years ago. A great love always, sooner or later, brings humility—the proud humility expressed in the fine old Latin phrase of the Romish ritual—"whom to serve is to be a King." To serve her in her need, Amaldi felt, would confer kinghood of spirit.

"If she is unhappy ... if love has failed her this second time ... if she has no love left to give me ... even in years to come ... why, then, at least I can be her friend...." thought Amaldi.

He had reached this "Station" in the Via Crucis of love. He looked back, wondering, on the man he had been as contrasted with the man he now was. Had any one told him at thirty that he would some day feel towards a woman as he now felt towards Sophy, he would have smiled. Yet, within a decade he had come to know by experience that the intense, sublimated passion of the *Vita Nuova* is no exaggeration.

Those who maintain that Beatrice was for Dante merely a symbol of Divine and Abstract love, cannot realise the miraculous power of metamorphosis inherent in a supreme, human love withheld from its natural expression.

Love of this kind is clairvoyant and clairaudient. Though he could not yet discern causes clearly, Amaldi could both see and hear the shadowy presences that followed Sophy in those days. The one stared with the eyes of a virgin at her broken cestus,

the other plained softly: "Vanity of vanities ... all is vanity." Why this was, he did not know, but that it was, he knew certainly. He set himself to watch, with the watchfulness of the "*Loyal serviteur.*"

Within the next day or two he called about tea-time as Sophy had asked him to. He found her having tea on the sea-lawn with Bobby and his tutor. Bobby made friends with him at once.

Then shortly Loring and Belinda came in from a ride. It amused Amaldi that Belinda appropriated him at once. This Attitude of hers suited him very well. He could see Sophy often in this way, while being considered "*le flirt*" of Miss Horton. He would also have opportunities of observing Loring in his own home. This, just at present, was what he most desired. He wished to find out what sort of man was behind the persona of that beautiful mask. Now as he responded with discretion to Belinda's rather familiar chaffing, he thought that Loring's glance was slightly hostile. He sat sipping a cup of tea in silence, looking at them every now and then over its brim.

Belinda thought it "bully fun" to flirt with Amaldi "under Morry's very nose." What a dog in the manger Morry was! He hadn't the courage to claim her himself, yet he glowered and sulked because another man responded to her bewitchment.

Sophy wondered what impression Amaldi was really receiving. She could not help thinking that the fencing between them was much as if Belinda wielded a bludgeon and Amaldi a rapier. And as this thought came to her, she winced, remembering that horrible time when she had seen Amaldi himself use a stick as a sword.

It was Loring's attitude throughout the scene that chiefly impressed Amaldi. "It is not possible...." he kept saying to himself. "No ... it's impossible...."

But the more he noticed those sullen, lowering glances of Loring in their direction, the more he felt that what he declared "impossible" was a fact.

Was that, then, the secret of Sophy's tired, subdued eyes? Did she still love that handsome, sulky boy, while he turned from her to this obvious young seductress? Amaldi felt hot with pain and anger at the mere surmise. Yet the situation was most likely. And if it were so, Belinda was "playing him off" to rouse the other's jealousy. "Little minx!" thought Amaldi in English. It made him furious to think that she might be using him in this way in the very presence of the woman he adored.

He went away some moments later with a troubled spirit. What could friendship avail here? He had not realised that part of his high mood had come from the conjecture that Sophy no longer loved the man she had married. What had he or "friendship" to do in a *galère* already weighted to the water-line with love and jealousy? Hope is so inevitably one with love, even the love that has decided on the stony path of "friendship." He had hoped ... what had he hoped? Down the long vista of years—what was it that he had glimpsed at the far end, as one glimpses sunlight at the end of a long, dark tunnel? He sat far into the night thinking—brooding.

But day brought counsel. He decided that he had jumped to premature conclusions. He determined to pursue the course that he had at first planned. At least, in this way, he would arrive at the truth. Now he only fumbled with conjecture. The first thing must

be to win Sophy to a feeling of confidence in their renewed relations.

And very exquisitely, by fine indirection, he put her at her ease with him—conveyed the impression that time had done its work-a-day task of sobering passionate emotion into tranquil esteem.

Life had dealt rather harshly with them both. They had both grasped Illusion—flower of Maya—and been stung by the serpent coiled beneath. But a friendship such as this was not illusion. It wore no veils—its speech was plain and sober—it went clad in honest homespun. Had not Amaldi himself once told her that he was not a sentimentalist? This honest, daylight feeling that had now sprung up between them had in it no sentimentality. She did not want sentiment. She wanted this that Amaldi gave her—communion and stimulus, clear and bracing as a day of her Virginian autumn. It was so long—so unbelievably long—since she had talked pleasantly with a man who was interested in the things that she found interesting. And they would sit often, over the tea-table on the sea-lawn, before the others came in from driving or riding, exchanging ideas on philosophy and religion and poetry and art. She asked Amaldi about his everyday life. He replied smiling that he had become as ardent an agriculturist as Cavour had once been. Sophy did not know about this phase in the great statesman's career. She was deeply interested. It came out that Amaldi had been asked to give some lectures on the "Risorgimento" that coming winter at Columbia University. The idea rather pleased him, he said. He thought of taking Cavour as his chief subject.

Sophy kindled at the idea. It made her own problems

and disappointments seem insignificant to think of the gigantic odds with which that great being contended all his life, and to selfless ends.

"How worth while it all was—his struggle and his Victory!" she cried.

Her eyes dilated—grew brilliant as he remembered them in other days.

"Yes," said Amaldi, "he really merged his private self in the self of humanity. Buddha was not more a Buddhist in that respect than Cavour was."

"And you will stay here this winter, and tell America something of him?"

"I think so ... yes."

It solved for him the riddle of being longer near her without causing comment.

"Ah," said Sophy, "that will be something to look forward to."

She was utterly unaware of how much this sentence and the tone in which she said it revealed to Amaldi.

There was, then, an emptiness in her life. But the more that Amaldi realised the sort of existence she now led, the more he felt convinced that even love could not have compensated her for such surroundings. He knew her latest book of poems almost by heart. Their exaltation of spirit had made him feel when he read them that he had offered his hot, human love to one of those women who are by nature Vestals.

He, too, had been stirred by that cry, "I am the Wind's, and the Wind is mine." But with him it had

been the cold thrill of appeased jealousy. "No mortal lover" would possess what had been denied him. There was a bleak joy in this thought. Then had come the news of her second marriage.

But in this marriage he now felt that both the poet and the woman suffered.

XXIX

Amaldi had not yet seen Loring unduly affected by drink. The latter was on his guard just at that time. His fear of Belinda made him afraid also of wine. Wine was the Delilah that delivered him bound hand and foot to her Philistine sister, Belinda.

Sophy noticed this restraint and a faint hope sprang in her heart. She felt a sort of sad, maternal yearning over Morris—sad, because the part of mother-wife was but a melancholy one to take, after having played Selene to his Endymion. She would have got near him if she could. But he slammed the door of his heart in her face. What we have ceased to worship we resent, when it is still a part of our daily existence.

Loring resented Sophy's "superiority" as much as he had once adored it. He blamed it upon her that Belinda was for him "*l'échanson de l'amour*," the "*janua diaboli*" of the ancient church. If a wife repulsed her husband, then she need not wonder when he went elsewhere. It was plainly her fault. Wives should be mirrors—they should reflect moods

—all moods. The woman who locked out her lawful husband, for such a high-flown reason as that he had taken a "bit too much," deserved to have him blown away from her on the four winds of desire. What was marriage for, if not to bind wives to their duties?

But while Loring had grown *blasé* in his passion for Sophy, his vanity in the "ownership" of her was still keen. And also, in the depths of him, he loved her, though with a flat, habituated sort of affection. All zest had gone out of it. This was why her refusals angered without piquing him. This was why he feared Belinda. His nature craved ever new toys, and Belinda was a gorgeously tempting toy. Yet he knew well that she was pinchbeck compared with Sophy. He had no idea of exchanging the real thing for the imitation.

He did not mean to give Sophy any serious cause for resentment. Indeed he was a little in dread of both women. He could not guess exactly what either would do if too much exasperated. His feeling for Sophy was a good deal that of the Collector for a unique jewel which he cannot wear, but which gives him a standing with other Collectors. His feeling for Belinda, that of an epicure who longs for a dainty that he knows will disagree with him. But he was rather fond of Belinda in spite of hating her cordially at times. He found her a congenial pal. He liked her dare-deviltry when it was not directed against himself. His will and Belinda's at this time represented the impenetrable wall and the irresistible ball of the old hypothesis.

And now the little demon chose to madden him by "carrying on" with that "dago."... Loring was horribly jealous of Amaldi.

He and Belinda were both very careful when in Sophy's presence. Quick as she usually was in "feeling" things, the common little drama passed unnoticed by her; so much of it was played "off stage," in the wings. And her nature was singularly free from suspicion.

Undoubtedly also, the *amour propre* natural to a beautiful woman who has been much loved, blinded her. It simply did not occur to her that Morris could be in love with Belinda. And to Amaldi it never occurred that Sophy could be blind to what in his eyes was so plainly evident. He only marvelled at her self-control, and raged futilely at the humiliation to which she was subjected. It cut him to the quick that she should care for a cad who "made love" in secret to a wanton girl under her very roof.

Now, however, Mrs. Horton had come to Newport for a few days. Surely she, as the girl's mother, would take steps in the matter, which Sophy's pride had prevented her from taking.

But to Amaldi's intense amazement, Belinda's mother seemed quite unaware of anything unusual. It was on the third day after her arrival that a most extraordinary scene took place. The afternoon was misty. Tea was served indoors instead of on the lawn. As usual Belinda and Loring came in from a long ride together.

Belinda still kept up an intermittent coquetry with Amaldi, though he did not meet her with the complaisance of those first days. Italians particularly object to being used as cat's-paws, even by a pretty woman. And in this instance Amaldi's natural aversion from serving such a purpose was increased by his resentment on behalf of Sophy.

Belinda was very wroth with Morris this afternoon. He had chosen to tell her, just now, with the brutality of self-defense driven to its limits, that Sophy's "little finger was worth a shipload of her" (Belinda). She determined to punish him. She dropped into a low chair near Amaldi, and leaned forward, chin in hand, her lambent, impish eyes on his.

"*Come sta*, Amaldi?" she said. "I haven't seen you for a month of Sundays. You're really much better looking than I remembered."

"Accept my humble gratitude," replied Amaldi with ironic exaggeration.

She blinked her eyes slowly, pondering this remark. She thought his dryness the result of her neglect of him for the past week. Poor dear! He was jealous of Morry. Well, now Morry should be jealous of him.

"What's on that ring?" she asked suddenly. "I hate men to wear rings as a rule—but that dark blue is ripping on your hand. I suppose you know you've got dandy hands?"

"You overwhelm me," said Amaldi as before.

"Not much I don't! I know your jeering way.... But I think you'd be rather interesting to overwhelm all the same ... to really overwhelm, I mean."

"But I assure you that is my state at present."

"Pooh!" said Belinda, laughing. She drew her chair a little closer. "Come, you haven't told me what's on your ring."

"My *stemma*—the coat-of-arms of my family."

He did not offer to show her the ring. She bent nearer, gazing at it.

"What's the motto?" she asked, her face close to his hand.

"'*Che prendo—tengo*,'" said Amaldi.

"And what does it mean?'"

"'What I take—I keep.'"

"I believe you!" she exclaimed boldly. She flashed her eyes to his. "You look as if you'd know how to keep what you chose to take. You've got such a very 'Don't-monkey-with-the-buzz-saw' air about you. It rather fascinates me...."

"You raise me to vertiginous heights," said Amaldi in the same tone.

"Oh, come off!" retorted Belinda with her joyous grin.

Sophy was talking with Mrs. Horton and paid no attention to this murmured dialogue, but Loring's eyes were fixed angrily upon them, as he sat smoking on one of the cushioned window-sills.

All at once Belinda put out her hand and touched the sapphire that Amaldi wore—then held up her finger.

"Lend it to me...." she said. "I've fallen in love with it."

Amaldi flushed. The ring had been his mother's. She had put it on his finger herself the day that he was twenty.

"Well?" laughed Belinda. "What are you afraid of? I'm not proposing to you.... I shan't steal it...."

There was no other course left him. Amaldi drew off the ring in silence and held it towards her. He did not offer to put it on her finger.

"'Fraid-cat!" she mocked. She snatched it from him and slipped it on herself. The ring that had fitted Amaldi's little finger fitted her third finger perfectly.

She gazed delighted at the carved sapphire against her white, velvety skin. Then she jumped up and danced away, holding up her hand before her, and chanting:

"'What I take—I keep!' 'What I take—I keep!'— You'll whistle long and loud before you get this beauty back, Amaldi!"

Amaldi was rather pale, but smiling. He said nothing. Mrs. Horton called sharply:

"What on earth are you about, Linda?— What are you making such a noise for?"

"Oh, nothing ... just a little game I've been playing with Amaldi."

"Well do be quieter ... you're really *too* noisy."

She went back to her talk with Sophy. But though Sophy listened, her eyes followed Belinda.

Loring got down from his seat on the window-sill, and sauntered forward. He met Belinda in the middle of the room.

"Go and give that ring back," he said in a low voice.

"Not much!" laughed Belinda.

"Yes, you will."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"You'll make me, I suppose?"

"Yes— I will."

"Pouf! Just try it...."

She pirouetted insolently, and he caught her by one arm. Then began a most astonishing scuffle. Belinda escaped, and rushed to the farthest end of the room. Morris bounded after her—caught her again. She turned and twisted in his grasp. Her red-brown mane came down; she struck at him, tried to bite his hand where it gripped her.

Amaldi sat like an image watching this, to him, appalling game of romps. His face was as expressionless as a Chinaman's. He thought he had never looked on a cruder exhibition of sex-provocation. He thought his ears deceived him when he heard Mrs. Horton exclaim:

"Did you ever see such a pair of children! Linda! Morry! You'll break something... *Do* behave! Can't you make Morry behave, Sophy?... Oh, dear! What do you *mean* by behaving like this, Linda?"

Amaldi thought this question most unnecessary. He thought Belinda's meaning only too painfully lucid. He was astounded to hear Sophy's sweet, natural laughter.

"Morris!" she called. "Belinda! You really shouldn't romp like this before Amaldi. He'll think you're demented...."

("'Demented!'" thought Amaldi.)

For the first time it dawned on him that perhaps Sophy did not take in the situation after all. Then he glanced at Belinda, panting, flushed, bacchante-like, in the grip of the white-faced, angry-eyed man who was trying to drag the ring from her finger. No! It was impossible. The others *must* see a thing so flagrant, so palpable. But Mrs. Horton continued to exclaim helplessly at intervals:

"Oh, what *children*! What *babies*!"

While Sophy merely sat resigned, waiting for the hurricane to subside.

Loring conquered, of course. He strode up to Amaldi and dropped the ring into his hand, while Belinda sank down on a distant sofa, gasping out:

"You're a *brute*, Morry!... I *hate* you!"

Loring gave a short laugh, and strolled out of the room.

Amaldi also took his leave in a frame of mind that may be described as bewildered.

XXX

But this occasion, which had led Amaldi to suspect that Sophy did not realise the state of things between her husband and Belinda, was the cause of her first awakening to something unusual in their relationship. It was not their boisterous romping which had done this. Sophy was too used to the

fondness of Young America for indulging in this sort of "high-jinks" to notice particularly the rough-and-tumble of Belinda's passage with Loring.

She had been troubled by the disgust which she felt underneath Amaldi's quiet manner. She winced from what she divined to be his point of view—the point of view of a cultured Athenian watching the holiday pranks of barbarians. This mortified and disturbed her. But she had only regretted the bad taste of the scuffle; it had not revealed to her anything deeper. No—it was Loring's curt laugh as he turned away from Belinda's cry of "I *hate* you!"—it was something in Belinda's voice and look as she gave this cry that had startled Sophy. In the girl's voice and look there had been such concentrated, vibrating passion; in Loring's laugh she had heard an echo of the love-laughs of her own wooing. There was a certain note of secure mockery in it—a threat as of something controlled—a suppressed secret triumph, that brought the past giddily upon her.

She had glanced quickly from him to Belinda. The girl's face was quivering—but not with anger. Certainly not with anger. For though she frowned, her red mouth tilted upward. Her downcast eyelids fluttered as though she, too, were veiling some suppressed, triumphant secret. There was more than her usual almost insolent cock-sureness in the way that she twisted up her ruddy mane again, holding the amber hairpins between her strong, glistening teeth as she did so, and looking down in that veiled, secretive way. It was the air of the diverted pussy-cat who says: "All right, my nimble mouse—enjoy your seeming freedom. When I tire of the game, I know how to stop your friskings."

Sophy did not read the exact meaning of this air of Belinda, but she saw plainly that it indicated a certain secret understanding between her and Morris.

From this time she could not help observing Morris and Belinda "with a difference." If it were merely a flirtation between them it was in execrable taste. She could not help (being human and having loved him so well) resenting the idea that he should flirt, even in the most superficial way, with the girl that she herself had brought into their home. But supposing that it was more serious—supposing that this self-willed, violent madcap had a real feeling for Morris—supposing that in his present mood of anger against her (Sophy) he were to revenge himself by trifling with Belinda?

Sophy could scarcely bring herself to believe him capable of this—yet there was the possibility. Morris could be very reckless, especially when driven by resentment. It did not yet occur to Sophy that the feeling between the two might be mutual.

Her woman's instinct was to guard the girl temporarily in her care, from the freakishness of her own wayward, violent nature. She thought with dismay of Loring's constant drinking. What might he not say and do under the double stress of wine and Belinda's provocative beauty?

And in the week that followed she saw much that made her uneasy, yet nothing which she could actually fix upon. Certainly nothing that could give her an excuse for speaking to Belinda. For she had decided that she would speak to the girl if it became necessary, rather than to Morris. She recoiled, in all her being, from speaking to him on such a subject. Besides, she felt that it would only enrage him

further. But Belinda might listen. She might appreciate it, that Sophy should go direct to her, instead of to her mother.

And still nothing had happened that made Sophy feel justified in taking such a course, though *something* there undoubtedly was—something not just right, not just clear—a tension, a vibration. It humiliated her to be thus on the alert. She felt like a spy. Yet she felt also that it was clearly her duty to be watchful if only for the sake of Belinda.

She knew that Morris was in a very exasperated, cruel mood. He nursed against her the most passionate grievance. She felt that given the occasion he might go to excessive lengths in his angry desire to punish her. She knew how vindictive his present temper was, because although he had been drinking much less of late, he had not sought a reconciliation with her. But she did not make any advances to him. She had told him one night at Nahant that she would never again live with him as his wife, unless he could show her beyond doubt that he loved her more than drink. He had stared at her, literally dumb with fury. Then he had flung out of the room, slamming the door behind him. They had never spoken on the subject since.

One evening, towards the end of the week, Sophy stayed at home by herself. She looked forward with relief to these quiet hours. She felt a craving for solitude and music—to sing out some of the pain that was oppressing her. She dined early and went to what was called "the little music-room." This room she had had done over for her especial use. The walls were tranquil and rather bare, of a soft cream colour. A frieze in subdued tones after a design by Leonardo

ran about it. There was only one painting, a lovely Luini angel with a viol. The dark, polished floor reflected jars of blue Hortensias. Two church candles on silver "prickets" lighted the piano. The windows, flush with the sea-lawn, were opened wide. Through them floated soft, cloud-tempered moonlight and the deep breaths of the sea.

The room and the hour fitted her mood to perfection. She sat down at the piano and began thinking aloud, as it were, in what Chesney had called her "imperial purple voice."

First Russian folk music came to her. She, too, was isolated on the *steppe* of her own nature. The desolate words went voluming out upon the night, in that hushed, dusky gold of the great contralto:

"Lord, hear us!... Lord God, hear us!
We are in bondage:
Like the Volga, in its chains of ice,
We are bound in the bitter ice of sorrow.
Be to us as the springtide that melts the ice,
Arise! Shine! For we sit in darkness
And in the shadow of death.
Lord, hear us! Lord God, hear us!"

She looked up as she ended, to see Amaldi standing in one of the open windows.

"May I come in?" he said. "I shan't be disturbing you?"

She smiled, holding out her hand.

"No. Do come in, Amaldi. You're just the one person who won't disturb me. I'm music-thirsty to-night. Now you shall play for me."

"But not until you've sung more—please," he said quickly.

"Very well. I'll sing to you, then you'll play for me. It seems strange that I've never heard you play. But there were always so many people about. I can't enjoy music—really, in a crowd."

She sang on for half an hour, first more Russian music, then old Italian. He sat where he could see her face but did not seem to look at her. Glancing at him now and then, she knew that the immobility of his dark profile meant intense feeling, not any lack of it. When she would have stopped at last, he begged for one more song. "Something very simple—that you especially care for," he urged.

She thought a moment. Then she said:

"If I can remember the music I'll sing you a Scotch song called *Ettrick*. I loved it so that I made the music for it myself. But it's been a long, long time since I've sung it——"

Her hands wandered among the keys, gathering a harmony here, a note or two of the melody. It was as if she were gathering flowers of sound with her slow, caressing fingers. She found the right opening chords at last, ventured them softly, then struck full. It was a royal burst of sound—those chords and her violet voice together: out leaped the glad exultant words:

"When we first rade down Ettrick,
Our bridles were ringing, our hearts were dancing,
The waters were singing, the sun was glancing.
An' blithely our voices rang out thegither,
As we brushed the dew frae the blooming heather,
When we first rade down Ettrick."

She paused, drew in a deep breath like sighing. The next chords fell sad and heavy as earth upon the dead.

"When we next rade down Ettrick,
The day was dying, the wild birds calling,
The wind was sighing, the leaves were falling,
An' silent an' weary, but closer thegither,
We urged our steeds thro' the faded heather,
When we next rade down Ettrick."

Then came wild dissonance, and a minor like the wailing of the wind—then once more the heavy, disconsolate chords, dirge-like, apathetic. Her voice sounded like a voice wafting back across the river of death in those last lines of all—so spent and inconsolable it was:

"For we never again were to ride thegither
In sun or storm on the mountain heather."

Amaldi sat very still, but his heart raced. Wonder filled him—wonder and exultation and great pain. She was so marvellous to him—her beauty of flesh and of spirit—now this added beauty of music. And this soul of music in her was one with his. They were one in this at least. He felt that if chance had been less cruel they might have been one in all things. It seemed hateful and stupid, that the gross senselessness of circumstance should have set them so far apart. When she ceased singing he sprang to his feet, went close to her.

"You are wonderful ... you are wonderful...." he said shakenly. They were both rather pale. She sat looking up at him in silence. Then she said in a low voice:

"It is a joy to sing to one who understands as you do."

He repeated as if unable to find more fitting words:

"You are a wonderful, wonderful woman. There is no one like you. No one ... no one...."

"Dear Amaldi ... thank you," she said, much moved; and a little confused by his impetuousness she rose from the piano, reminding him of his promise to play for her. He submitted reluctantly. It seemed a pity, he protested, to play after such singing. And now he flushed with the inner tension of his thought, then paled again—for he was sure now, quite sure, that love had failed her a second time; her own love as well as another's. The passion in her voice had been the passion of renunciation.

He began with an *étude* of Bach. It was the nun in her mood that he played to.

As an instrument the piano resembles a woman who speaks many languages quite well. She speaks to aliens in their different tongues and people think "what a clever linguist!" But sometime there comes one who understands her own native language. To him her soul goes forth; he draws from her true eloquence, the heart's warmth. Glittering facility is put aside. Soft, sonorous, velvet-voiced the erstwhile brilliant chatterer becomes a poet singing forth the riches of her secret self.

With the first tones drawn by Amaldi from the familiar that Sophy thought she knew so well, she caught in a quick breath and leaned forward. Was that the voice of her own excellent Steinway, that deep, liquid, ringing sound that seemed to flow from

the white keys without concussion? She sat almost in tears for the perfect sound, the infinite plaint of the music, as of a soul crying, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The change to ineffable exultation—the triumph of the great, crystal-white major chords that seemed to shout, "Death is conquered!"

"Go on," she whispered when he paused. "Go on ... play me something of your own this time...."

Amaldi glanced at her, then away again. A strange look had flashed into his eyes as they rested on hers. It stirred her oddly. There had been something half-mystic, half passionate in that fleeting look. She wondered what it was he had thought of as that expression quickened his eyes.

"Do you remember those lines in *Die Nord See*?" he asked the next moment.

"Dort am hochgewölbten Fenster
Steht eine schöne kranke Frau
Zart durchsichtig und marmorblass
Und sie spielt die Harfe und singt,
Und der Wind durchwühlt ihre langen Locken
Und trägt ihr dunkles Lied
Ueber das weite, stürmende Meer."

"Yes. They always cast a sort of spell over me. But what made you think of them just now, Amaldi?"

"Because they cast a spell over me, too. In fact they haunted me till I put the story of that 'lovely, ill woman' into music. I'll play that for you."

Sophy could not restrain an impulse of curiosity.

"Tell me first ... will you—what you thought her

story was?"

Amaldi kept his eyes on the keyboard and spoke rather low and rapidly.

"I fancied," he said, "that love had made her a prisoner in that castle. Then love had died. But love's ghost haunted the empty halls. I dreamed that her sickness was a sickness of the heart and soul ... the regret for love ... the fear of the ghost of love."

He began the opening movement as he finished speaking, a wild, monotonous, plangent cadence, like the rhythmic beat of surf on a rocky coast.

There is in the life of every artist, of every sensitive and lover, a supreme inspirational hour, wherein expression seems simple as breathing, and inevitable as birth and death. Amaldi, who was really great in music, played that night as never until then, as it was never given him to play again. Grief and love, these are the mighty angels that urge genius to its fullest utterance.

As the music poured over Sophy its splendid and tumultuous mystery, she felt like one chained upon a rock that the high tide overwhelms ... drowning, suffocating in that passionate welter of sound. The composition was in itself a masterpiece, but her knowledge of what it was intended to express lent it a terrible lucidity. That woman in her prison-castle, alone with the ghost of love—was she herself. It was her secret malady—her soul's mortal sickness that he was revealing in that dæmonic candour of superb harmony.

She put up one hand over her eyes, as she sat gathered in upon herself. She felt as if some barrier

were too completely down between them, as if, in some well-nigh insufferable way he touched the open wound in her heart.

"He knows ... he knows...." she kept thinking. "He is telling me in this way that he knows...."

And she could not be sure whether she shrank from his knowing, or whether it was a relief to her.

There flashed silence. The exquisite, intolerable music ceased, went out like flame. The dead silence was like a darkness.

Then Sophy forced herself to speak.

"You are very great, Amaldi," she said uncertainly, her hand still over her eyes. "You ... you should give all your life to music."

He answered in a voice as strange as his look had been just now:

"All my life is not mine to give to music."

She could not think of any fitting response to this. Silence fell again. She broke it nervously by asking him to play more for her, "something not quite so despairing." She smiled as she said this, but Amaldi thought: "She knows now that I know." This gave him a feeling of curious satisfaction and relief. It seemed, somehow, the beginning of something, the beginning of a new phase in their relations. Hope had stirred in him. The future seemed to him vague yet promising like an uncharted sea.

He played for her an hour longer, all the music that she loved best.

They said good-night gravely, avoiding each other's

eyes.

XXXI

It was about this time that Belinda came to a momentous resolution. She said to herself: "I've made Morry feel that he wants me. Now I've got to show him *how much* he wants me. I'll just clear out and let him see what it feels like to miss me."

The process of "clearing out" was accomplished by the acceptance of an invitation to cruise for a week with an aunt of May Van Raalt. There was to be a gay party of young people aboard. It was the most natural thing in the world for Belinda to wish to go.

When, however, she told Morris, during their afternoon ride, that Sophy had consented to this outing, he seemed to regard it as not only a highly absurd idea but as a personal affront. In fact he was so outrageously ill-tempered about it that Belinda was in inner ecstasies at the sureness of her "inspiration." "If he's like this before I even start, what *will* he be like by the time I come back?" she thought gleefully.

She set off on the day appointed, in high spirits, all the higher because Morris had refused to shake hands at parting and called her a "shallow gad-about."

But he was shortly to rest in amazement before the fact of how excessively he cared. Everything seemed strangely flat without her. He missed her provocative teasing ... the singing of his blood at her look and touch. The constant, thrilling struggle with

temptation. One certainly "lived" every atom of the time that one spent near Linda. She kept existence at high-pressure. One could almost *see* the little "nigger squat on the safety-valve" of her pleasure-craft, by George! But then, too, she was such bully fun to ride with and romp with. Nothing highbrow about Linda. All the same he wasn't going to let her make a fool of him. But, by George! she was the sort one missed—confound her!——

The day after Belinda's departure he was again in the full swing of his old tippling habit. To do without the stimulants both of drink and Belinda he found beyond him. But even this remedy proved vain. The flatness left by her absence was not to be dispelled so easily. The thought of her dogged him night and day.

With Sophy his intercourse was very restricted. On the occasions that the conventional exigencies of their life brought them together he treated her with an aloof and ceremonious politeness. But this manner was not now so much the result of displeasure as of a growing indifference.

The thought of Belinda was such an obsessing flame that all other facts of his existence had become like shadows, Sophy among them. He craved the girl's return so fiercely that he had no coolness of imagination left with which to regard anything but that desired and immediate future. What was to be the result of their reckless, hot-blooded drawing each to each did not seem to him to matter much just then. All that mattered was that this hateful, gnawing emptiness should be filled. He was not used to that hungry cramp of "wanting." Even his want for Sophy—which had for a time given him the wholesome discipline of the seemingly unattainable

—had been only too soon assuaged. In some way, somehow ... he was lordly in his vagueness ... this horrid vacuum created by Belinda must be filled by her.

He rushed into the day's pleasures like one hag-ridden. His play at polo was maniacal rather than brilliant.

Belinda came back one afternoon towards twilight. She was on tiptoe with delicious anticipation and curiosity. There was in her mood, also, an exasperated craving, for in disciplining Morris she had subjected her own heart to the rod.

The butler said that "Mrs. Loring was out, but Mr. Loring had just come in." Where was Mr. Grey? Mr. Grey was having tea in his private study with Master Bobby. Belinda's heart sent up a glad little tongue of flame. The coast was clear, then. She pulled off her gloves carelessly. No. She wouldn't have any tea. Did Simms know where Mr. Loring was? Simms thought that Mr. Loring was in the library. He would go and see.

"Never mind," Belinda said indifferently. "I want a book to take upstairs anyway. Just see after my trunks, Simms. They'll be here in a few minutes...."

She went lightly towards the library, through the long drawing-room that opened into it. Her soft, quick steps in her yachting shoes made no sound. She stopped mid-way the long room and leaned forward from her supple waist, peering between the folds of tapestry that veiled the communicating doorway. Yes. He was there. The lights had not yet been turned on. He was slouched in an armchair smoking moodily. Whiskey and soda stood on a tray

beside him.

Belinda thought she knew well what he was brooding on as he lounged there in the deep chair, with the cigarette burning out in his dropped hand. If she had really known all that he was thinking, her triumph would have been complete.

She stole up behind him—leaned over. Close to his ear, so that her warm, musky breath flowed with the words, she murmured: "Have you missed me?"

Ah ... it was worth that week and many more away from him—this crushing clasp of all herself against him. She had not known he was so beautifully strong. It assuaged the fever of her breast to be so bruised. And that kiss—that endless kiss—she had dreamed of kisses such as this through a hundred wakeful nights....

Sophy had returned within ten minutes of Belinda's coming. She, too, had asked Simms where Mr. Loring was, and to her also Simms had replied that Mr. Loring was in the library, he believed—that Miss Horton had just arrived and joined him there.

Sophy, too, had gone down the long room towards the library. It was barely dusk. She could see into the further apartment as plainly as Belinda had done. What she saw was the girl in Loring's arms, and his head just lifting from that prolonged kiss. She stopped, transfixed, her breath inheld.

"You imp ... you witch...." Loring was muttering unsteadily.

"But a '*white* witch'?" cooed the girl.

Sophy heard him laugh low—that exultant, soft

laugh which had once so charmed and disturbed her in the days of their love. "No, by God! ... a red witch ... colour of blood ... colour of my heart ... flame-colour ... little devil's colour...."

The passion-broken words fell about Sophy like drifting sparks, as she hurried away from them in an anguish of panic lest she should be glimpsed by one or the other of those oblivious, hot lovers.

When she reached her bedroom she was breathless mentally and physically. Reality had fallen upon her like some clumsy, overtaking Titaness. Its great bulk, heavy and hot and panting, weighed her down. She felt that she must drag herself from under that dense weight, or suffocate. She turned the key in the lock—went and stood by the open window—took off her hat, her cloak, her gloves, mechanically, with quiet deliberation. Her movements were all quiet and deliberate. She was saying to herself, "Let me think.... Let me think ..." as though some one were keeping back thought from her.

It is one thing to suspect—to surmise. It is quite another to see with bodily vision. Seeing is believing, they say, yet Sophy felt herself, her inmost self, refusing to believe what she had seen—and heard. This was just at first, before she succeeded in freeing herself from that leaden smothering sense of stupefaction.

Within ten minutes her mind was working with lightning speed and clarity. Now in contrast to her former state, she had a sense of being giddily light and uplifted above the situation. It was as if her part in it did not count at all, as if she were nowhere. Or as if being somewhere, she was conscious on another plane. She had the mental poise of a Sylphide,

surveying from the cool balcony of a cloud the doings of two Salamanders in their grotto of flames. This feeling also passed quickly. She found herself realising that she was Sophy Loring—just simply and painfully a woman who had seen her husband holding another woman in his arms.

As she faced this realisation, all of pride in her rose to announce, "I do not care." But no sooner had one part of her said this, than another part cried out that she did care—intensely, vehemently. She struggled to clear her mood. She asked herself harshly whether she had any love left for Morris. The reply came with mortifying promptness. Whether she loved him or not, she passionately resented another woman's loving him and being loved by him. She felt humiliated by the crass, primitive fibres that this wound had exposed in the substance of her nature. Was she then capable of a blind, instinctive, mean jealousy, when there was no real love left to excuse it? She did not know that the jealousy for what has been is sometimes even more bitter if less keen than that for what actually exists. She was jealous for all the beautiful, unsullied past that this present act of his defaced beyond retrieval. But then there was also the angry fire of wounded pride—of hurt womanly vanity in her flame of resentment against Belinda. She knew this. It humiliated her to the core. Then her feeling veered again. She experienced a throe of such scorn for Loring as sickened her. This in turn reacted into a sort of wild, impersonal regret for the whole thing—for all concerned in it—Morris, the girl, herself. It was Othello's cry of unspeakable, confused anguish that echoed in her heart: "But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago—the pity of it, Iago!"...

She rose suddenly with a quick, determined

movement and looked at her watch. Seven o'clock. She and Loring were dining out at half-past eight. She must have time to think, to reflect. There must not be a sign of what she knew in face or voice or manner, until she had thoroughly determined how to act. She must go to this dinner as if nothing had happened. She must meet Belinda as she had parted from her. She was deeply thankful that she and the girl were not in the habit of exchanging kisses. Sophy had strength of will, but not enough to have allowed her to kiss Belinda or receive her kiss that evening. And as she thought of the girl's brilliant, sensual mouth, and of that other mouth to which it had lately clung—she blushed hot, then cold—for that icy tingle through all her blood was like a cold and bitter blush.

She spent unusual thought in selecting her toilette for that evening. She desired to look the antithesis of Belinda, so she chose a gown of dead white embroidered in crystal. She wished to sign herself to herself, as no longer belonging to Morris—so she wore with it a circlet of little diamond flames, one of Gerald's gifts to her.

But little by little her mood of lofty disdain passed finally into still, hot anger. This flashed its fire into her eyes and cheeks. As Louise set the diadem of frosty-flames in place, she remarked with conviction:

"*Madame n'a pas été aussi en beauté depuis longtemps....*"

Sophy had the strangest sense of triumph in defeat, of dark exultation as she went slowly downstairs towards the drawing-room—the age-old exultation of the deposed queen who feels that her beauty is greater than that of her supplanter.

XXXII

Belinda and Loring were already in the drawing-room when she entered. Belinda stood by a table fingering a vase of Hortensias. She broke one off just then and twirled it nervously. Loring was lighting a cigarette. It seemed troublesome to light. His hand shook a little.

Sophy paused just within the door, drawing on her gloves, her eyes on Belinda. The pale, mauve-blue flower against the girl's flame-coloured gown made an odd, decadent note. She was all in red chiffon—a silver girdle about her waist—poppies with silver hearts over one ear. "'Colour of blood ... colour of my heart...." Sophy thought, and it was hard to keep her lip from curling to the sneer in her thought.

She spoke while still busied with her gloves. She said that she hoped Belinda's trip had been pleasant. Belinda said, Thanks, that it had been "bully." Sophy then glanced at the clock. It was only a quarter to eight.

"How very punctual we all are to-night...." she said.

Loring said, as if surprised: "By Jove! Yes ... so we are."

He, too, looked earnestly at the clock. A self-conscious laugh followed his words.

Belinda remarked that as her dinner was at eight *she* wasn't so very early. "I ought to be going now...." she concluded.

Sophy finished fastening her gloves and came forward. One of the side lights caught her full as she

did so, and her white figure sprang out against the shadows of the room beyond with the glitter of snow-spray in sunlight.

She saw Loring glance at her, then look away. Belinda, her chin a little down, gazed steadily. Sophy came still nearer. She had been so pale and listless of late that the delicate, soft fire of her cheeks, and the dark, bright fire of her eyes was doubly striking. The little tongues of flame that lit her hair dazzled with iridescence. Her gown, the jewels in her hair, the light in her dark eyes—all were quivering, glinting. But she herself was very still. This intense, composed stillness of hers seemed to make the others restless. They fidgeted—Belinda with the blue flowers, Loring with another cigarette.

Suddenly Belinda said spasmodically:

"You *are* gorgeous to-night, ain't you?"

"You like my gown?" asked Sophy, smiling.

"Ripping," said Belinda.

"I rather like it myself," said Sophy. "I hope you like it, too, Morris?"

"Awfully smart ... you look awfully well...." he murmured.

Belinda left off fingering the flowers.

"I really ought to be going," she said.

"Yes. It's about time for you to go now," assented Sophy.

Her tone was quite even, yet at something in it those two winced.

Sophy had a cruel moment.

"Do you know," she said, "you and Morris both seem rather overstrung to me. What's the matter? You haven't been quarrelling again already, have you?"

Neither answered. Sophy repeated it. "Have you?" she said again.

"No," said Loring.

Belinda had taken up her wrap from a chair and was going towards the door.

"I think the carriage *must* be there...." she said in a high, artificially anxious voice as she went. She almost ran into the arms of Simms, who had come to announce the brougham.

Sophy stood smiling and looking after her. Then, still smiling, she turned to Loring. It was a peculiar smile.

"Will *you* tell me what has happened, Morris?" she said, and he thought her tone also very peculiar.

"'Happened'?... Why, nothing," he stammered.

He was appalled to hear himself stammering. He wondered with panic what his expression was like. It was in fact so puerile in its look of nervous guilt that Sophy was wrung with sudden shame for them both —for the man who looked at her with that weak, apprehensive smirk that sat so oddly on his pale face —for herself who had stooped to bring it there. She turned away, saying: "We'd better be going, too, I think."

There was a biting acid of pain at work on her heart now. To have seen that look on his face—to have brought it there! She, who had once been "Selene" to

him.

Loring stood gazing after her as she walked from him into the hall. Her beauty struck him as startling. But it struck him as the beauty of the Snow Queen struck Rudi. It left a sliver of ice in his heart. He was rather scared by something in her whole look and air. He wondered if Linda had noticed it. He'd have to talk things out with Linda to-morrow—take her for a long walk—off on the rocks somewhere. Things must be got into shape somehow. He had a spasm of sheer terror when he thought that Sophy might suspect something. Yet he couldn't give up Belinda. Yet he did not want to give up Sophy. Here again was the impenetrable wall and the irresistible ball. He had not yet realised that he alone was not the arbiter of their three destinies. He thought that it still remained with him to say what the future should or should not be for himself, for Belinda, for Sophy.

A dance followed the dinner to which they went that night. And Sophy danced for the first time in several weeks.

As soon as Amaldi saw her, with that tense, bright fever of beauty upon her, he knew that she was at some crisis. Something of this look she had had that night in London when he first met her. What was it? What had brought this strange, "fatal" look to her? Love and apprehension strung him to the utmost pitch. For he had seen agony under her bright cloak of exaltation. He feared now that he must have been mistaken. That her love for Loring still survived.... That this crisis at which she was came probably from the sudden discovery of how matters stood between her husband and Belinda Horton.

To Sophy that night was horrible. She did not even try to sleep. She rushed to and fro among throngs of turbulent thoughts, like a lost child in a Carnival—like one seeking a friend among frenzied revellers. Now she would think that she had found it—the thought that would befriend her. Then the mask would slip, and she would see the evil leer of revenge, or hatred, or personal malice, or self-centred wrath—not once the kind face of a thought worthy of her. But towards morning it came to her of its own will. She lay afterwards with closed eyes, spent and lifeless. That mental travail had been terrible. Now her good thought lay weakly on her heart like a babe outworn also by the fierce struggle of birth. It seemed scarcely to live. She had conceived it and brought it forth, but it was as though there were no strength in it. She lay there saying: "God ... help ... help...." as she had said so long ago, in that other dreadful time at Dynehurst. And as then, little by little, she became aware as it were of a vast Presence, and from this Presence there seemed to flow the help for which she had cried.

Belinda and Loring met very early in the lower hall as though by appointment. Neither had they slept well, but while Loring looked pale and rather haggard, the girl's face was fresh and beautifully ruddy with sea-water and defiant passion. She had come up from her morning dip in the sea, all tingling with love like Anadyomene.

They had fruit and coffee together, then went for that "long walk to the rocks." When they were safely out of reach of prying eyes, Belinda turned,

expecting a repetition of yesterday's wild embrace.

But Loring sat with his arms about his knees. He looked harassed and rather glum. He was staring at the sea. Belinda kept her eyes on him. She had one of her admirable silences. She half knew what was coming, but she wanted Morry to "begin it."

"Linda," he said at last, still scowling at the milky-blue of the sea, "I rather think we're up against it—you and I...."

Belinda's eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"What's 'it,' Morry?" she asked.

He gave a jarring little laugh.

"'It' is ... Sophy."

"Mh!" said Belinda.

"Did it strike you last evening," he went on, "that she was ... well ... er ... that she was a bit on to things?"

"Yes ... it did."

"Well ... er ... have you any notion why she was like that ... all at once ... so suddenly?"

Belinda dropped a pebble into a little pool in the rocks just below her. She leaned over looking after it. Then she dropped in another. She was smiling secretly. Morris turned his head, as she did not answer. This smile nettled him somehow.

"Well...? Speak up, can't you?" he said sharply.

Belinda dusted her fingers daintily on her handkerchief, then laced them behind her head. This gesture drew the thin silk of her blouse tight over her

round breasts. The little hollow behind her waist as she leaned against the dark rock was just large enough for a man's arm. She looked down sideways at him from under her thick, white lids and the garnet sparkles came into her eyes.

She passed it to him coolly.

"Yesterday ... when we were in the library together," she said, "I ... heard a chair move ... in the next room...."

"What?" cried Loring.

He sat erect. His face went scarlet, then white.

"*What?*" he said again.

Belinda nodded.

"Just that ... a chair ... scraped, you know, as if some one had brushed against it ... in a hurry."

Loring had his lip between his teeth. His eyes looked black as when he had been drinking heavily.

"You think ... it was ... Sophy?" he said at last.

"Yes," said Belinda.

"Great God!" groaned Loring.

Belinda's face changed. She took down her arms, and bent forward.

"Look here, Morry," said she in a low, concentrated voice. "*You've got to play square with me.*"

Loring gave her a decidedly unloverlike glare.

"Oh, confound you, Linda," he growled, "don't turn heroics on me at this hour of the morning. I tell you

we're in a hell of a mess."

"*I'm* not," said Belinda.

Loring couldn't help a grin.

"You're not, hey? Well, I like your colossal cheek," he said.

Belinda shot out her hand, and grasped him firmly by the arm with her white, soft fingers in which the little bones were strong as steel.

"You look at me, Morry," she commanded. "You look me right in the eyes."

He did so, unwillingly.

"Well?" he said.

"I want you to understand," said Belinda, "that when you took me in your arms yesterday and kissed me ... like that ... *you took me for good*."

"Oh, go to the devil, Linda! I tell you I'm not in the mood for high-mucky-muck talk."

"I don't care what mood you're in, and my talk's plain English," said Belinda. "You played with me two years ago, but you can't play with me now. I belong to the man who kissed me as you kissed me yesterday, and *that man belongs to me*."

"Oh, for God's sake, cut it out!" said Morris, with exasperation. "Who do you think you're talking to?..."

"The man that belongs to me," retorted Belinda fiercely, gritting her white teeth at him. "The man that belongs to me ... that has always belonged to me ... ever since that first time he kissed me ... two years ago—when I was only a child...."

"I don't believe you ever *were* a child," put in Loring moodily. "I'll bet you cast some unholy spell in your cradle...."

"Well ... whatever I was or wasn't— I'm a woman *now*," said Belinda. "A woman who loves—who's been loved back—who'll die ... who'll *kill* before she sees that love wrenched from her."

All blazing, she threw herself suddenly upon his breast. Her soft mouth offered itself—like a flower—fluttered its honeyed, crimson petals close to his. Tears of rage and love magnified her ardent eyes. The pulse of her reckless young breast against his was like the pulse of the sea against the rock. Loring was no rock. He hesitated—was lost—kissed her greedily. Grew mad with those intemperate kisses intemperately returned. Drank and drank of the honeyed, flower-scented mouth.

"We 'belong' ... oh, Morry! say we belong...." Belinda kept sobbing without tears, the quick dry sobs of passion. "*I* belong to *you* body and soul ... *you* belong to *me* body and soul ... don't you? don't you ... body and soul?..."

"Well ... chiefly body," said Loring thickly, with that short, unpleasant laugh.

XXXIII

They were very quiet for some time after that storm of kisses had spent itself. Morris leaned back languidly in a smooth hollow of the rocks. Belinda

leaned against him. Her head was on his breast, her arm clinging close about him under his coat. The buckle of his waistcoat cut into her arm, but she loved the bite of the little piece of metal that was warm with his body. It amused and thrilled her both, to feel the everyday intimacy of his clothing in this sharp pressure of the buckle that nipped her soft forearm. And she loved the feeling of his strong, lean waist breathing in the living girdle of her arm. She lay in a daze of happiness, not thinking of the past or future, or even of the present clearly. She was *being* fully—she had no need of thought.

Morris's voice roused her with a start.

"See here, Linda," he was saying. "This is all very fine — I'd be an ungrateful beggar to complain if we'd only the present to consider. But we've jolly well got to consider a good deal else."

"Oh, it'll all come straight of itself, Morry," she murmured drowsily. "*Don't* bother ... not now at any rate...."

"'*Now*' is just what's got to be bothered about, you reckless witch.... We'll have the house about our ears if we go on like this...."

"I don't care *what* comes about my ears.... Your heart's under my ear now—that's all I care about...."

"Linda! You really *are* a reckless devilkin, aren't you?"

"Well ... isn't it nice to have me reckless about you?"

Loring gave his short laugh.

"Oh, it's 'nice' enough, I grant you. But nice things have a rather cussed way of ending nastily, my dear."

"*This* won't——"

"Come, Linda. Show a little gumption. You say you think Sophy probably ... er ... was probably in the next room ... yesterday. Well, granting that, do you think things are going calmly on the way we like 'em?"

"Of course you'll have to have a plain talk with her," said Belinda, her voice taking a practical note.

Morris gave her a little shake as she lay within his arm. She laughed softly.

"My God! but you're a cool proposition," he said, half laughing, too, half exasperated again.

"I'm not cool to *you*," wooed Belinda.

"No, you're not," he answered shortly. "And that's just the devil of it for both of us!"

"Do you *want* me to be cool?" teased Belinda.

"No, I don't. And that's the devil again."

"Well, what *do* you want?"

He might have replied truthfully that what he wanted was for Lawlessness and Law to kiss each other and abide in a beautiful serenity together. But he had not formulated his own state of mind clearly enough to put it thus. The worst part of his distress was that it was so "muddled." The Son of Sirach could have explained it sternly to him. "Woe to the sinner that goeth two ways," would have been his comment.

"See here, Linda," said Loring again. "You talk confoundedly chipper about my 'having a plain talk'

with Sophy. Have you thought what this plain talk may lead to?"

"Divorce," said Belinda calmly.

Loring sprang up so violently that she was tilted from his side. He clutched her just in time to keep her from rolling on to the pebbles.

"Look here," he said, very white. "I've been rather a cad to make love to you as I've done ... but I'm not an out and out scoundrel."

Belinda faced him, as white as he, brow and hands clenched.

"You *will* be," she said through her locked teeth, "if you don't divorce and marry me."

"My God...." breathed Loring, actually bewildered by her utter disregard of all principle. "Where'd you come from?... *What* are you?..." He went close and caught her fiercely by both arms. "*What* are you, you little, lawless wildfire?" he repeated.

"I'm your heart's desire ... your heart's desire...." she crooned, half mocking, half cajoling.

He dropped her arms and turned away. The touch of her had set him in a fever again. Nothing would come clearly to him. He raged against her in his heart, but the tide of his blood set resistlessly towards her. He stood with his back to her, biting his knuckles, glowering out at the bright sea.

Belinda waited, with her little secret smile. She loved the aching of her arms where his fierce grip had bruised her. She was very sure of him. She waited for him to come back as patiently as a fisherman waits for the up-rush of a pike that is sulking under the

boat. Belinda rocked gently in the boat of her own love, and waited with smiling patience for her sulky lover to rejoin her.

But when Loring did finally turn to her again, his mood was not at all the lover's. He spoke with hard, deliberate precision, biting off the words at her, as it were.

"If you expect me to insult a woman like Sophy and ruin her life to please you, you're rather thoroughly mistaken," he said.

Belinda eyed him curiously. Then she made a great mistake. Instinct had kept her from making it before. Now self-will smothered instinct. She was so bent on making Morris see this question as she saw it, and without further loss of time, that she had recourse to an heroic method.

"Are you *really* as blind as you seem to be, Morry?" she asked.

"'Blind'?" said Loring, rather taken aback.

"Exactly—stone blind."

He said with stiffness:

"I don't catch your meaning."

"Well ... do you *really* think that Sophy will mind divorcing?"

Loring stared at her blankly. Then he flushed.

"Are you insinuating that she doesn't care for me?" he demanded.

Belinda eyed him again in that sly, incredulous way. Then she said:

"And do you mean to tell me that you haven't noticed a thing of what's going on between her and the dago?"

"What the devil are you after?" he cried angrily. "I'll thank you not to hint things about Sophy. She's as high above you as the stars—that's what!"

"Oh—a kite's high above me, too," said Belinda airily. "What I'm 'hinting' as you call it is only what any one with eyes in his head couldn't help seeing."

"Come ... speak out!" said Loring roughly.

Belinda gave a sharp sigh, as of disgusted patience.

"Why any *baby* can see that she and Amaldi are in love with each other," she flung at him. "Now why do you gape at me like that? I dare say it began years ago—in Italy, where she saw so much of him...."

Loring could not articulate.

"*Amaldi!*" he stammered at last. "Why, the fellow's sweet on *you*!"

"Pooh!" said Belinda. "He only flirted about with me a bit to make her jealous...."

"To make ... *Sophy* ... jealous?"

Loring was talking like a sleep-walker, slowly, with thick utterance.

Belinda began to feel a little uneasy at the very potent effect of her disclosure. This was a queer, new Morris staring at her. She might have been a phonograph that contained some record important to him, for all the consciousness of her personality in his blank stare. He looked at her a good deal as a

man looks at the nearest object when coming to after a severe blow on the head. This stare of his irritated Belinda and rather scared her at the same time. Had she gone too far? What was there in it so shocking for Morry, since he loved *her*, Belinda? She had thought that he would jump at the easy solution of their problem that it afforded.

She went up to him, and laid her hand on his breast.

"Wake up, Morry...." she said. "Why in the world should you take it like this? You look positively doped...."

Morris caught her hand in a grip that was too painful, even for Belinda's amorous temperament. She gave an angry little miaul of pain.

"Linda ... you little fiend!..." he was saying hoarsely. "You've made this up.... I know you ... all the tricks of the trade.... What d'you mean by it, eh? What do you mean by slandering my wife?..." He shook her to and fro. "Eh?... Tell me that.... What d'you mean?... How d'you dare?... Eh?... Tell me that...."

Belinda gave him back his savage looks full measure.

"You're a fool...." she sobbed, raging. "You're just a common or garden fool, Morry! I can't help that, can I? Let me go!... It's not my fault if you're a fool ... a fool ... a fool...."

He flung her from him so that she stumbled. He saw red ... black ... red again. He felt choking—murderous. Mere sensual love runs like this, from desire to hate and back again, to and fro, "swifter than a weaver's shuttle." At the present moment he had only hate for Belinda. She herself had lashed awake his jealousy for another woman by her

miscalculated cunning. Sophy was his—*his*. How dare she so much as look at another man? And this little devil dared to say that she loved.... He was really transfigured by rage. Even Belinda the dauntless shrank from him. She had unstopped a very small vessel of malice and out of it had arisen a black smoke obscuring all her golden heaven of love, and congealing before her into this fierce, wry-faced Afrit of a man. She had never seen the male in the grip of real jealousy before—the man-tiger sensing the defection of his mate. It horrified her, infuriated her, filled her with a curiously helpless sense of dismay.

He turned suddenly and strode away from her. Then she found her voice again.

"Morry!" she called. "Morry!"

He paid not the slightest heed. She ran after him, caught him up, panting.

"*Don't* go off half-cocked like this," she gasped, running at his side, for he was literally running himself now over the rough shingle. "I never meant to hint anything really *wrong* you know."

She might have been the waves that babbled along the shore.

"What are you going to do?... Don't do anything now.... You'll be sorry...."

He ran on. She kept up with him. They looked quite splendid, running shoulder to shoulder through the fresh morning air, against the background of glinting water.

"Morry ... *answer* me...."

She was less to him than the air; he had to breathe the air—he had no need for Belinda just then, in any way. But when they had reached the levels where other people passed to and fro, he turned on her. He really looked dangerous. All the brute was up in him—all in him that a man at Polo had once called "howling cad." This cad now howled at Belinda. She cowered under it.

"I guess even *you* know when a man's had enough of you," he flung in her white face. She dropped back as though she had been spat upon. He strode on, exulting to be rid of her.

XXXIV

As he reached the house, he met Amaldi coming from it. It was only eleven o'clock in the morning, an odd hour to call, but Amaldi had not been to call, he had only stopped by for a moment to leave some music that he had promised Sophy. He was most anxious to have news of her after his anxiety about her last evening. So he took this excuse to stop in.

The butler said that Mrs. Loring had breakfasted but had not come down yet. It was only when the man told him that Sophy had breakfasted that Amaldi realised how anxious he really had been. Then he turned away and was face to face with Loring.

The young man gave him the barest, surly nod. His expression was singularly hateful. Amaldi could not quite make it out. Loring had always been perfectly

negative in his manner to him, except when goaded to a passing jealousy by Belinda. On those occasions he had usually flung out of the room. Now Amaldi felt hatred in the fleeting insolence of the look that brushed across his face as Loring passed. Was this unaccountable, moody being going to take sudden umbrage at his friendship with Sophy? He went on his way heavy of heart, anxious and disquieted again.

Loring was met by Simms with a message. Mrs. Loring would like to see Mr. Loring as soon as he came in. Mrs. Loring was upstairs in her writing-room.

So she had not seen that "damned dago"! His anger dropped slightly. Perhaps it was only some of Belinda's deviltry after all. He went quickly towards the stairway, then slowed down a bit. It had just come over him what was probably Sophy's reason for desiring this interview. What if she had really been in the next room as Belinda thought? What if she had seen and heard? And if she taxed him with it how should he act? What should he answer? His thoughts whirled like the thoughts of one coming out of chloroform.

He went doggedly on, after two pauses, and knocked at the door of Sophy's study.

"Come in, Morris," she said at once.

He entered and, closing the door, remained near it an instant, looking at her. Then he came slowly forward.

She had been writing. She put aside her portfolio as he came in. Her figure in its white muslin gown lay

sunk in the green hollow of her chair, very listless. All the feverish light of the past evening had faded from her face. Her eyes looked soft, grey and tired in their deep shadows. They rested on his face with a sad depth of maternity that he could not at all fathom. He was uneasy under this look, yet it had no reproach in it. It was the look most terrible to Love. Hatred does not wither him like that look. It comes from the heart that, comprehending all, has forgiven all. To forgive all, one must detach oneself, become impersonal. Sophy was now regarding Loring from this standpoint of absolute detachment. Even the maternity in her look and feeling was impersonal—the abstract sense of motherhood with which Eve, leaning from the ramparts of her regained Paradise, might regard mankind. Loring was not a man to Sophy that morning—he was mankind—a symbol. She, the woman, symbolised the Mother.

It was this in her look that made Loring ill at ease, vaguely apprehensive. But it was a look, to his mind, so out of keeping with what he had feared might be the reason of her sending for him, that he decided with intense relief that his conjecture must have been a mistaken one.

"Hope you're not feeling very seedy," he said constrainedly. "You look a bit done, you know."

"Yes— I'm tired. Won't you sit in that other chair? It's more comfortable."

He shifted to the other chair, feeling more and more ill at ease. As she did not speak at once, he said nervously:

"You sent for me, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said. "I was only thinking how to begin."

Then she looked into his eyes with a clear, direct look.

"Morris," she said. "I am ashamed of something I did last night. I don't make any excuse—but I'm very, very much ashamed.... It was the way that I spoke to you and Belinda, when I came down to the drawing-room—just before we went out to dinner...."

"Now, really, Sophy——" he began. He thought she was at some of her "highbrow" subtleties. "I assure you that neither of us...."

Sophy broke in hastily.

"Wait, Morris.... I haven't done. I'm ashamed because I pretended not to know—how things were between you two—and I did know."

As she said these words she flushed as deeply as Loring did in hearing them. But she kept right on—she forced her eyes to remain on his.

"I was in the next room ... yesterday. I ... I ... saw...."

"For God's sake! ... don't!" exclaimed Loring, jumping up. He was white now.

Sophy took away her eyes from that white face. For all her impersonality of mood, that white, aghast face of his hurt her cruelly. The shame on it hurt her. It made her feel desperately ashamed, too.

He went to the window and stood looking out, his back towards her. And in the very lines of his back there was shame. And this shame wrung her, struck to her inmost self. Oh, how humiliating it all was! ... for them both! How she felt as though they were

groping towards each other through mire.

She caught at all her force of will.

"It's no use, Morris...." she said very low. "We *must* talk frankly.... I hate it as much as you do.... Oh, I hate it.... I loathe it!" she ended with an irrepressible cry from her sick heart.

He turned at that, his head down.

"Why must we?" he said thickly.

"Because it's *got* to be clear ... it's *got* to be straight between us," she returned passionately. Her breast was heaving. She put up her arm across it as though to hold it quiet by force. She had felt so calm, had been so sure of her calmness. Now her heart was bounding as though it would leap from her body. He turned again to the window, and she sat silent until something of calmness had come back to her.

"Don't stand so far away," she then said hurriedly, and half under her breath. "Come nearer. I ... I am not ... angry. I don't want to speak loud.... Some one might hear."

He came nearer. He could not find any words. He had no thoughts which words would have expressed. But Sophy was regaining control of herself. Some of the oft-rehearsed sentences were coming back to her. Now they were more or less in order. She uttered one, speaking clearly, in a rather expressionless voice.

"Morris...." she said, "how much do you care for Belinda?"

He stared gloomily at the carpet.

"I rather think I hate her," he said.

Scorn choked Sophy. She could not speak again, either, for a moment. Then she said:

"The person you have got to consider chiefly in all this is Belinda."

Now he stared at her.

"*Belinda?*" he stammered.

Sophy's face and voice grew hot. It seemed as though even Fate's bludgeonings couldn't drub impulse out of her. She wrestled now with this impulse for a moment. It got the better of her.

"For shame!" she cried. "Oh ... for shame! for *shame*! A young girl ... in your own house ... you treat her like that ... your own kinswoman.... Oh, yes! I know.... But by bringing-up she is your kinswoman.... You do this ... you do this...." She was stammering with the heavy heart-beats that again suffocated her. "And then ... to *me* ... you speak.... Oh, let me breathe!" she cried, and stood up as if throwing off some intolerable weight.

Loring stood changing from red to white, from white to red. His eyes shone sullenly. His head was lowered in that way she knew. He looked up at her defiantly from under the beautiful arch of the brows that she had once loved. "Well?... And what course has your superiority mapped out for me?" he sneered finally.

She said in a cold voice:

"I have 'mapped out' nothing. But there seems only one way to me.... To be quite truthful about it all. Then ... to act truly."

He gave his ugly little laugh.

"Perhaps you'll favour me with your ideas on 'acting truly'?"

"I will. You love this girl...."

"Damn it! I've told you I hate her!" he broke out violently.

She tried hard to keep the contempt out of her voice. "You can hardly expect me to accept that, Morris," she said gravely.

"Why not? You're so precious anxious for the truth. That's the truth. Now you say you won't 'accept' it...."

Sophy sank wearily into her chair again. She found that it made her giddy to stand. Her hands were damp and cold. She felt physically ill. She covered her eyes for a moment, and in the momentary darkness her truest self whispered to her.

She uncovered her face and looked at him with that first gentle, quiet, to him inexplicable, look.

"Morris," she said softly, "don't you see? I want to be your friend—really your friend in all this. I ... I understand how it has happened. Yes ... better than you do perhaps. We ... we have drifted apart. Oh, don't think I'm reproaching you——" she interrupted herself proudly. "If you'll look back ... to ... to ... that time ... in Virginia. When...."

She couldn't go on for a moment.

"When that glamour was on us both," she continued. "You'll remember that I told you.... I warned you ... that it *was* glamour ... that some day ... some day...."

No. She could not go on. Love—when it has been real, if only for an hour—is always sacred. She sat very white, her chin in her hand, her eyes downcast.

There was all about her the atmosphere of that wild, windy night when, as she sat alone in the old house, he had rushed in to her like the very Magic of Youth....

Still looking down, she said presently:

"Won't you even let me be your true friend, Morris?"

Very huskily he said:

"Well.... I ought to be grateful for that much...."

It was all horribly sad. She felt faint with the wasteful, useless sadness of it all.

"What did you think of ... of proposing?" he asked, still in that husky, beaten voice.

Sophy's own voice trembled a little when she spoke.

"I think this, Morris," she said. "I think your life ought to be free ... to offer to Belinda."

"'Free'? ... to offer ... '*free*'?" he gasped.

"I am willing to set you free...." she said.

There was silence. It lasted so long that she lifted her eyes to his face. The look on it appalled her ... a sort of blasted look, as though rage had struck like lightning.

"Are you ... are *you*...." he tried to get out his question. Choked on it. He tore it out finally. "Are *you* suggesting *divorce* to me?"

"It is the only straight, honest way out of this ... this tangle, Morris."

"You ... *you* ... suggest divorce? Like that? Coolly ... *damned* coolly ... as you might suggest a drive ... a walk...? Divorce?... *You?*"

He jumped up, his face all distorted. He seized the chair in which he had been sitting and dashed it with all his might against the wall. It fell in splinters.

"Hell!" he almost sobbed at her. "Do you too take me for a fool?... 'A common or garden fool'?... Do you, I say?... Now, then! Out with it! I'm a soft fool you think. Hey?— The sort of little, tame husband-fool that never feels his budding antlers, till he sheds 'em in the divorce court? Hey? That's what ... is it? You think so?..."

He was so incoherent with fury, that she could scarcely understand half of what he said. The saliva churned at the corners of his mouth in the frenzy of his sudden madness of jealous rage and suspicion. He'd show her he saw through her noble unselfishness. She and her dago!

Sophy stared at him in horror. She thought that his brain had given way.

"Morris ... Morris...." she kept murmuring.

"O *God*...." he choked. "God ... God that you should take me for a sucking fool—you and your dago ... you and your little Lombard mucker.... You!—To *me*!... for *my* sake!... 'Divorce'!... Set *me* free!..."

He dropped across a table, hugging himself, shivering with stridulant, choked laughter. He shook with it—was convulsed with it as with throes of

nausea. Long, steady drinking had its meet effect. He was hysterical bedlamite—unmanned man—raging tiger of jealousy ... all these things in one ... dreadful to see ... to hear....

Sophy stood gathered up and back from him. She looked dead—as though she had died standing.

With Loring, the paroxysm passed. He clung to the table as to the taffrail of a reeling ship. The whole world seemed waving like a flag.

Then suddenly, in a high, clear, toneless voice, Sophy said:

"I do not now offer to set you free.... I demand to be set free myself...."

She went swiftly into the next room. He heard the key turn in the lock. He went on clinging to the table which seemed to swing him to and fro. He remembered hearing that rage kills sometimes. He thought for long moments that he was dying.

For some days after he was, indeed, seriously ill.

XXXV

When Sophy had realised the full meaning of Loring's confused, frenzied words, she had felt in addition to her unspeakable indignation and disgust, a strange sensation as of something withering and falling away from her. At the same time, in the depths of her, there was a quick clench like the snap of a vise. And

she knew that this gin had set upon the past—upon her long forbearance; that inevitably, implacably her whole being had revolted, had set itself in that vise-like lock against all future temporising. It was over—done with. Her life with Morris Loring was as past as though they had lived it in another age, on another planet. She knew that she would be inflexible. Her mood might soften, pity might rise murmuring. She, herself—her very self of self—would never change—could not change indeed. It was her inmost being—her realest self—that had locked thus vise-like.

Had she desired to with all her might she could not have dragged it open. One may not love, or hate, or even be wroth at will. Here her will was powerless, or rather, this *was* her will, the irresistible law of her nature acting with a sort of divine mechanism—as undefiable as the law of gravitation.

Under this revelation of personality acting in utter disregard of the person—of any wish or will of the ratiocinating individual—she rested breathless. Quite independently of her reason or her conscious will, this inmost, vital nature had solved all, come to an immutable resolution. "I will be free. I *am* free," it had announced. "I have a supreme right to be myself. I refuse further humiliation. I repudiate further self-sacrifice."

In the vigorous reaction of her whole being, she wondered at her past meekness, as at the unworthy subservience of another. How had she borne it all so long? *Why* had she borne it? She had behaved towards Morris just as his parents and relatives had behaved from his childhood. She had criticised them unsparingly in her thought, and all the time, she, too, had been victimising herself that he might be

content, untroubled, indulged, easy in his boundless egotism.

When she thought of her long patience in certain matters, she shrivelled with shame. Reaction is a terrible exaggerater. Under its influence Sophy saw herself as a wretched puppet sewn together of rags of sentiment. If at the first she had been courageous, if she had said to him fearlessly: "Either things must be different or we must part," how much better it would have been than this long-suffering condonement of what she despised!

What was it in her nature, what hidden spring that had led her to act Griselda to two such men as Chesney and Loring? She knew herself fundamentally imperious, impulsive, not to be commandeered. Why, then, had she coerced herself to sit meekly in two houses of bondage, and for long, long years?

She wondered and wondered over it. Yet the answer was very simple. She was tender-hearted, and she was one of the women who watch long by the sepulchre of Love, lest perchance he may be not dead but sleeping, and she not there to roll away the stone.

She gave up trying to solve the riddle of her own state at last, and set to work to put her thoughts in order.

First of all, then, she must be free again.

To be free she must be true—quite truthful. This made her shrink. But the pain would be only temporary. His nature could not long sustain any emotion. Besides, such pain as he would feel would come from wounded pride and jealousy, not from

love.

She must go away. She would write Charlotte a letter asking her to send a telegram requiring her (Sophy) to come at once to Sweet-Waters, "on a matter of importance." Harold Grey, Bobby, and Rosa should go with her. Then her mind checked again. She must have an interview with Belinda. This was an odious necessity, but unescapable. Sophy had certain things to say to Belinda. That done, she would leave at once for Virginia.

Suddenly a new thought halted her. She remembered Amaldi. She could not leave like this, without even a good-by. Should she write? But what then could she write? Perhaps it would be best to see him for a few moments. Yes. That would be best. And yet her heart swelled painfully at the thought. Amaldi was too near her with his idealising friendship for her to treat him with absolute convention. And she could not speak out to him.... Or, *could* she? No, that was impossible. Still, it would be better to see him. She owed him and herself that much.

It was the day after Loring's outbreak. His fever was high. Sophy had sent for James Griffeth, the family physician of the Lorings. He had been quite frank. "A collapse from alcohol and over-excitement," he pronounced it.

She shivered uncontrollably. Griffeth begged her to go and rest. She said that she would, and when he had left went thoughtfully upstairs. She had to pass Loring's door on the way to her own room. She paused, startled, just before reaching it. Belinda was standing close to it, the knob in her hand. The door was open on a crack. Evidently some one also had hold of the knob on the other side. The door swayed

to and fro in little jerks. Belinda was speaking in a hoarse, passionate whisper.

"I *will* come in.... Let me in this minute—you impertinent woman!" she was saying.

Sophy came forward. She could now see the white cap and flushed face of the trained nurse. She heard her answer:

"You can't come in.... It's the doctor's orders.... Nobody but Mrs. Loring can come in.... Please let go the door...."

"Belinda...." said Sophy, now close to her.

She wheeled like an angry cat.

"Come with me, please, for a moment," said Sophy.

The nurse had shut the door. Belinda, after a side-glance at it, jerked up her chin and followed Sophy, defiance in every vigorous line of her.

Sophy led the way into her writing-room and closed the door. She stood, and Belinda stood facing her. The girl was scarlet and Sophy very pale.

"Belinda...." she began.

Words leaped like flames from Belinda.

"Oh, I know you saw us!" she said. "He loves me.... What are you going to do about it?"

Sophy's eyes were so almost smilingly scornful that the girl's bravado failed her. She began changing colour. Her black brows scowled, but she held her tongue.

"I wished to speak to you about ... your mother," said

Sophy quietly.

Belinda scowled on without a word.

"I think, that for ... every one concerned ... it will be better for your mother to know nothing of all this ... at present."

Belinda kept silence.

"So I am going to ask you to go back to Nahant tomorrow. As soon as Morris is better, I shall have to go to Virginia on an important matter. You cannot remain here alone. If you go quietly, there will not be any need of my speaking to your mother. Tell her that your visit has been shortened by my leaving for Virginia."

Now Belinda burst forth again:

"Oh, I see!... Morry may be dying and you want him all to yourself!... You don't want us to be together ... even if he's dying.... You...."

"Not another word...." said Sophy.

Her eyes sobered Belinda. Grey eyes are the most terrible of all when utter wrath lights them. Belinda glared into those burning eyes and was silent again. Sophy went to the door and held it open.

"That is all I wished to say. Do as you choose. If you do not go, I shall send for your mother."

Belinda gave her one look of wild hatred, and went out. The next day she left for Nahant. She was quite desperate with rage and grief, but she dared not do otherwise. She dared not risk being separated from Morris by some distance far greater than that between Nahant and Newport. If her mother knew

what had happened, she might whisk her off to the ends of the earth. Rage, pain, doubt, fear, jealousy—all these swarmed stinging in her heart.

The next day Morris was much better, but still too weak to talk. Sophy went in and out of the room at stated intervals. He always closed his eyes and feigned sleep when she was there. He could not face her or himself. He tried not to think. But thoughts, sharp and burning, clotted in his mind like sparks against the dark side of a chimney.

On the fourth day came the telegram from Charlotte. Loring was now sitting up in his bedroom. Griffeth said that on the morrow he could go out. Sophy gave orders to have some necessary things packed. She had decided to leave the next night by boat. How was she to see Amaldi? More and more she felt that she must say farewell to him. People had been coming to inquire about Loring. She had not seen any callers since his illness, but to-day she decided to receive them—and in the morning she sent a note to Amaldi. She told him that she had to leave suddenly for an indefinite period. "I am seeing my friends to-day," she wrote. "If you will come about half-past six this afternoon we can have a quiet talk."

Then she took Charlotte's telegram in her hand and went to Loring's rooms.

XXXVI

She knocked at his dressing-room door, and Miss

Webb, the trained nurse, opened it. When she saw Sophy, she stepped aside, smiling, for her to enter.

"My patient's doing *fine*, to-day," she said. "He's eat half a chicken, and wants more. So I'm giving him the other half."

Sophy showed her the telegram, and asked if she thought Mr. Loring were well enough to be consulted about a matter of importance. Something that might perhaps agitate him. Miss Webb asked *how* important it was. Sophy replied that it was of the utmost importance. Miss Webb considered a moment, then said:

"Well, if he's got to know it, morning's the best time. I guess he's well enough not to have important things kept from him."

She held open the door and Sophy went through the dressing-room to Loring's bedroom. Miss Webb opened that door also and called out in the tone of artificial good cheer with which one addresses convalescents:

"Here's Mrs. Loring come to see you eat that other half, Mr. Loring!"

She withdrew, closing the door, and Sophy went over to where Loring sat in an armchair with a tray on a little table before him.

He had swallowed a mouthful of broiled fowl with undue haste when he heard Miss Webb's announcement, and now as Sophy advanced he gulped some White Rock, partly to clear his throat, partly to cover his embarrassment.

His face, pale and chastened by his recent attack,

went to her heart. There was in it something so boyish, so irresponsible. That mother-pity welled in her. What she had determined on was going to hurt more even than she had dreaded. Yet she knew that she would go through with it to the end, no matter how it hurt. The pain of freeing herself from this coil would be as nothing to the pain of remaining stifled and loathing in it.

She drew up a chair and sat down on the other side of the little table.

"I'm so glad to see you so much better!" she said. "Please don't stop. You make me feel that I've spoiled your appetite."

"No. I've finished," he said, pushing the plate from him.

He touched a little bell. Miss Webb appeared.

"Please take these things away," he said.

"Oh!..." she exclaimed, disappointed, as she lifted the tray. "You said you could eat it all, and now you've left a whole drumstick!"

Loring reddened. Fool of a woman! She made him ridiculous with her nursery expressions and concern as for a sick little boy who wouldn't eat enough.

"Take it away!" he repeated sharply. "I'll ring again when I need you."

Miss Webb retreated, her eyes fixed regretfully on the neglected "drumstick." When the door had closed again, he lifted his moody glance with an effort to Sophy's face.

"It's rather good of you to come, I must say," he

observed. "I thought I'd be taboo for a long while...."

Sophy held out the telegram.

"It's from Charlotte," she said. "I shall have to go to Virginia to-morrow."

He looked startled—glanced through the telegram. "What's up? What is it?" he then asked. "It strikes me as rather high-handed to send you a wire like this—without a word of explanation."

"I asked her to send it," said Sophy.

"You *asked* her...."

"Yes—so that my going suddenly wouldn't be commented on."

He remained dumfounded, staring at her. Sophy returned his gaze steadily and very gravely.

"Morris," she said, "has it really not occurred to you that I wouldn't remain longer in this house than I could help?"

His stare grew quite bewildered, a little frightened.

"In ... *this* house...?" he stammered.

"In any house of yours, Morris."

Now his lips whitened. Sophy felt sick. But she had to go through with it—she *had* to....

"What am I to understand by that?" he asked at last, his voice husky.

"Ah! I'm sorry...." she said, her own voice quivering. "But ... it's the end.... It's all ... over...."

"What is?" he asked; but he knew already.

"Our life together," she answered.

He said nothing, just sat there looking down at the bit of yellow paper in his hands, which he folded and refolded with the utmost nicety. Then he asked:

"Do you suppose that I'll take this seriously?"

"I hope you will."

"Well, I don't, and I won't, by God!" he retorted, in a sort of fierce whisper, and the violent words sounded strange uttered in that whispering voice.

Sophy sat still, her eyes on his.

"Morris," she said, "do you think that I will ever be your wife again, after what you said to me the other day? After what you accused me of?"

The blood rushed into his face, up to the very roots of his hair.

"I was mad.... I didn't know what I was saying——"

"You knew well what you were saying.... You were only mad with rage.... I can never forgive those words—never really forgive them. There's some part of me that *cannot* forgive them."

He looked at her doggedly. His face was a mask of obstinacy.

"What did I say?" he demanded. "I've forgotten.... I was beside myself, I tell you.... What were those unforgivable words?"

Sophy did not reply at once; then she said softly, on a deep breath:

"Oh ... *Morris!*..."

He flared red again, set his jaw. All at once he relaxed. There came a kind of hopeful bravado into his voice.

"It's no use," he said. "You can't get me to believe any such thing as this. But you've given me a bad jolt—if that's any satisfaction. I suppose what you're after is to discipline me a bit. That's why you've rounded on me like this.... Well, I'll admit I've deserved it. But if you only knew how that little demon worked on me ... damn her!"

He brought his fist down on the arm of his chair several times.

"Damn her! Damn her!" he kept repeating back of his locked teeth.

Now Sophy reddened.

"Don't...." she exclaimed, in revolt. "Don't lay the blame on a woman ... a girl...."

"Why shouldn't I lay it where it belongs?"

"Then lay it on yourself," she retorted, with passion. "Take the blame like a man ... let me remember you as acting like a man ... not like a spoiled child...."

"A 'spoiled child,' am I?"

"Yes, Morris, yes.... And that makes me patient with you. You haven't had half a chance—no, not from boyhood. And I ... I've helped.... Oh, do you think ... do you *dream* ... that if it hadn't been for that, I'd have stayed one moment under your roof after you said those vile, unspeakable things to me? Don't you understand?... It is over.... I am going back to my own home. I will never live with you again.... Never.... Never!"

Still he did not believe her—he could not. He said sullenly at last:

"Well—go to your precious Virginia. I'll come there later when you've simmered down a bit. Then we can talk of things rationally." He stopped, and added with surly but genuine feeling: "I suppose you know I'm damnably sorry and all that.... I apologise ... humbly. I ... I ... acted like a cad to you, and that's a fact...."

He paused, as if waiting for her to say something. She said nothing. He blustered on:

".... But when you mentioned divorce to me in that cool way.... By God!... I *did* go crazy.... I'll swear I did.... And that little fiend had...."

"Don't, Morris...." she said again.

"But I tell you I was a lunatic for the moment...."

"No, Morris ... it's no use ... it's no use...."

"And that cursed Italian chap!..."

Sophy's eyes grew hard.

"The Marchese Amaldi is an old and dear friend of mine," she said; "please don't vilify him to me."

Loring had a flash of rage; then controlled himself.

"Well—I guess that subject *had* better be dropped between us," he admitted shamefacedly.

Sophy, looking at him quietly, said:

"Another thing that I have to tell you is that Amaldi is coming here this afternoon. He will come about half-past six. I wish to see him before I go to

Virginia. I asked him to come."

"Oh, all right ... all right ... of course," Loring replied, in a rather foolish voice.

"I shall take Bobby and Rosa with me to Sweet-Waters," Sophy continued. "Mr. Grey will follow in a day or two after he has seen that the household and accounts are all in order. We went over the accounts together this morning. I am also leaving directions with him about a few other things. He will hand you certain keys. You had better have the jewels taken to the bank at once."

Loring looked rather staggered. He forced a smile.

"I say...." he protested. "You *are* laying it on a bit thick, you know...."

He had again that boyish look which so hurt her—there was in his forced smile the sort of timid, ingratiating air that a dog has when it knows that it is muddy and yet wishes to jump up on the most cherished chair.

She said hurriedly:

"I shall have to dress now. I've told Simms that I'm at home this afternoon...."

She went out.

Loring stood a moment, looking at the telegram which he still pinched and twisted in his cold fingers. All at once he sank down, laying his face on his arm and his arm on the little table. His hands were tight-clenched.

"Oh, Lord, what a fool I've been!..." he groaned. "What a double-damned fool!..."

But he did not believe for one instant that Sophy's words were final. He did not for the most fleeting atom of time give credence to the idea that she meant to break with him entirely and for good.

Sophy waited for Amaldi in the "little music-room." It was nearly September. In the last two days the mornings and evenings had grown chilly, so she had had a log fire kindled in the big chimney-place. The shadows leaped elfishly upon the bare, clear walls, as though shaken with silent laughter. The fire-gleams flickered over the glossy case of the piano until it glowed like a black opal. White chrysanthemums thrust their pretty dishevelled heads into the dance of gloom and shine. The room was fresh with their bitter-sweet, autumn scent.

Sophy loved this room. She looked around it with regret, as she stood waiting for Amaldi. Bit by bit she had thought it out. She had spent many hours alone in it. Here Amaldi had made that wonderful music for her. She tried to recall it as she waited for him. Phrases came ... melted away. It was like trying to hold snow-crystals in one's hands. Then his words came back to her:

".... By the window of a Castle on the North Sea, sits a beautiful, ill woman.... Love brought her to the Castle ... then Love died ... but Love's ghost wanders through the empty halls...."

Had Amaldi really guessed?... Did he know?... Had he known when he said those words—when he played that music to her? She stood gazing into the spark-broidered violet of the flames from the

driftwood fire. How much had he divined? Somehow, she felt that he knew.

And she did not mind his knowing. It would make him understand all that was to follow.... How strange that, after all her passionate, wild dreams, friendship and not love should be what life had to give her!

As Amaldi came towards her through the firelight, she thought that his face looked set and rather strange. She said as she gave him her hand:

"I sent for you because I didn't want to write 'good-by.' It may be a long time before we see each other again."

"May I know how long?" he asked, in a low voice.

"I don't know that myself," she answered. "Perhaps a year ... perhaps longer. It ... it depends. But ... afterwards, I shall be in England with Bobby."

"Ah!" said Amaldi.

They stood silent, looking into the fire. Then he said abruptly:

"May I write to you?"

"Of course, Amaldi." Her lip quivered suddenly. She added in a rather uncertain voice:

"I haven't so many real friends that I could be indifferent about hearing from one of them."

Amaldi said slowly without looking at her:

"I shall try to be your friend.... I shall try not to fail you."

"As if you could fail any one!"

Now he looked at her with a very curious expression —as he had looked at her the evening he played for her. He hesitated a moment; then the words rushed:

"Forgive me ... but it's not an easy thing to be the friend of the woman one has loved.... Are you very angry with me?"

It came like a real shock to Sophy. Her absorption in her own troubles had blinded her to this possibility. She could not think of the right word to say— murmured nervously: "No ... no. I'm not angry ... only...."

"'Only'?" he took it up.

With tears in her eyes, she said:

"Oh, Amaldi ... your friendship meant so much to me!... It meant so much!..."

This cut him cruelly. He exclaimed with passion:

"How can you speak as if it were past ... over?... I'm honest with you. I confess that it is a struggle for me ... to feel ... to act only as your friend. But I tell you that I shall try ... and you turn from me...."

"No, Amaldi.... No.... That isn't just ... it isn't fair...."

"You said 'meant' ... that my friendship meant much to you ... as if it were over...."

"No, no. But I...."

She broke off, and they stood in unhappy silence. Then all at once she turned to him.

"Listen, Amaldi," she said impetuously. "I can't tell you ... but if you knew...."

"I do know," he said.

They stood silent again. At last she said, under her breath:

"Then ... if you know ... you must feel that everything is over for me ... but friendship.... You must feel that.... The mere idea of ... 'love'...."

She broke off again, shivering.

Amaldi said in a constrained voice:

"I was not speaking of you, but of myself. I don't think that you can imagine how intensely I want to be a real friend to you. As I said, not to fail you...."

"And you think," she returned, her lips again quivering, "that I would take your friendship at such cost to you? You think I'm as selfish ... as unfeeling as that?"

Amaldi looked at her almost indignantly. "You know I think nothing but the highest of you," he said. Then his voice shook, the look in his eyes changed. "Forgive me...." he said. "It's I who am selfish."

But Sophy couldn't speak. She put up one hand to shield her face from him, and he saw that her wedding ring was gone. He flushed, struggled with himself; then, going close to her, he said in a vehement whisper:

"I will be what you want ... only what you want. And if the time comes when ... when I find I can't hold out ... I will tell you, and go away."

Still she could not speak. She held out her other hand to him in silence. The tears were running over down her face.

He took her hand, hesitated a moment; then lifted it to his lips.

"I swear that I will be your true friend," he said.

She put up the hand that he had kissed with the other, over her face.

"Go now...." she managed to whisper.

"But you believe me? You will still call me your friend?"

"Yes ... my dear, dear friend."

He went quickly from the room. He vowed to himself that he would be her true friend at no matter what cost to his own feelings. But he had never loved her as he loved her in that hour. And underneath it all there was hope, hope, hope—— He could wait. Yes, he could wait long years more, if need be.

XXXVII

Sophy stood by the open window of her old nursery bedroom at Sweet-Waters. It was only ten o'clock, but she had come up early this first evening. She wanted to be alone. Now that she had told Charlotte and the Judge how things were with her, it was a strain to live up to their pained conception of the situation. She felt it a reproach that in spite of all, such an irrepressible fount of glee bubbled within her. It was not happiness certainly, yet too much akin to it not to be out of keeping with her present

outward state. Her heart would sing in spite of her. It was like a naughty, overexuberant child shouting week-a-day songs at a funeral. It sang: "I am free! I am free! I am free!" The sky was spread with clouds. Behind these clouds was a hidden moon. Its rays filtered through, and this soft, grey moonlight was eerily lovely—elfin-like.

From this pale fleece of cloud fell a light shower, trilling on the roof of the east wing beneath her window. And from field and wood and hill went up another trilling, exquisitely musical and plaintive—the clear, sweet, myriad flutes of autumn crickets. So that heaven and earth seemed doubly woven together by this interlacing of lovely sound, the one descending, the other ascending.

The rain came softly in her face. She held up her face to it, loving the delicate, cool touch upon her lips and eyelids.

As usual, Sweet-Waters had given her to herself again. She was just Sophy Taliaferro once more. Sophy Chesney and Sophy Loring were poor, wind-driven waifs, somewhere far away in the outer deserts of her mind. To-morrow Charlotte and Joe wished "to talk *very* seriously with her." This had been Charlotte's parting word that night. Well—to-morrow was twelve hours away. Now she would just be Sophy Taliaferro.

But she waked up next morning to find herself unmistakably Sophy Loring once more.

Her heart was very heavy. Life had no taste. The

future rose before her like a cyclopean wall, which could not be scaled or dug under and in which there was no door.

Her heart winced and shrank from the long, painful scenes with Morris that she apprehended. She was quite sure that he had no real love left for her, yet she knew his nature. She feared that the very fact of finding himself about to lose her would kindle in him a fictitious ardour. It might well be that, as the unattainable, she would once more seem his heart's desire.

After breakfast she went with Joe and Charlotte to Joe's study. Bobby and Winks were having a gorgeous time playing "Indians" all over the place. As she sat in the open window, Sophy could hear the voices of the two "Braves," rising in shrill, ecstatic warwhoops from the straw-stack near the stables. She smiled. At least Bobby was thoroughly happy in the new state of things.

She was seated on the low window-ledge, Charlotte opposite her. The Judge had established himself in the revolving chair before his desk. He felt the need of some strong, dignified background during the coming interview. His sombre, official-looking desk, with its piles of legal documents and tomes, afforded him this spiritual sustainment. He was very nervous. Sophy was so "hard to tackle" sometimes. "Rash" was the disconcerting adjective that kept rising in his mind. Sophy was so "almighty rash"! He thanked his stars that rashness was not Charlotte's characteristic. "Firmness" described his helpmeet. He felt that this firmness would indeed make her a true helpmeet in the present case. There was certainly no help coming from Sophy herself. She was (they both thought)

most inconsiderately waiting for them to "begin."

The day was exquisitely temperate and golden after last night's showers. She had put on one of her old duck skirts and thin white blouses. Her hair was "clubbed" and fastened with a black bow as of old. She was, outwardly at least, even defiantly Sophy Taliaferro. Charlotte felt that it was almost improper of Sophy to look so like her former self, so "unmarried," as it were, "after all she had been through." But Sophy was Sophy. The most that they could hope was by great "tactfulness" to persuade her to be "reasonable" on certain points.

The Judge cleared his throat. Sophy had her hands clasped about her knee, one slim, brown-shod foot was dangling. It was a disconcertingly "unmatronly" attitude. The Judge glanced nervously at Charlotte. Her eyebrows said: "Go on." He cleared his throat a second time:

"*A-rrrum!*"

Sophy turned her head and looked inquiringly at him.

"Yes?" she said.

The Judge flushed as his eyes met hers. Good man ... it embarrassed him to meet the eyes of one of his own womenkind whose wedded husband had actually embraced an "abandoned minx" under their own roof. Charlotte had termed Belinda Horton an "abandoned minx." The Judge considered the term apposite. So Belinda figured thus in their thoughts from that moment. But all this came too perilously near to mentioning the seventh commandment in "the presence of a lady" not to cause the dear, old-

fashioned man acute discomfort.

"Well, Joe?" said Sophy again, as he hesitated.

"It's ... it's all ... mighty involved, Sophy," he stammered, looking down at the snowstorm paper-weight which he had picked up and was turning nervously round and round.

"Yes, Joe. I know that," she said gravely. "That's what I want you to help me about."

"Divorce is a mighty serious—er—ugly thing...."

"But not as ugly as marriage that is no marriage, Joe."

The Judge rumpled his smoky wreath the wrong way.

"Yes ... I know how you must feel...." he admitted unhappily.

"No, Joe. Nobody but a woman can know how she feels," put in Charlotte, reddening in her turn.

"Well ... I reckon I can give a mighty shrewd guess at it," said the Judge.

"It's very simple," Sophy said. "I want to be free. I don't think I've any false vanity about it. I did have at first. But then, you see, *I* was mistaken, as well as Morris. I don't feel hard to Morris. It really isn't all his fault...."

"Oh!" said Charlotte. She was quite crimson now.

"No, Chartie, it is not," Sophy persisted. "But I can't enter into all that...."

"I should think not!"

"I only want to get free and to set him free, as soon as possible."

"*He* oughtn't to be free—the idea!" cried Charlotte indignantly.

Sophy shook her head at her, smiling.

"Oh, Chartie," she said, "we aren't in the 'dark backward' of the Victorian era! Why shouldn't he be free to live his life as he wants to, as well as I?"

"That's downright irreligious, Sophy!" cried her sister with passion.

"I don't think so," said Sophy mildly.

The Judge intervened.

"Come," he said nervously, "don't let's squabble over side-issues."

"'Side-issues'! *Joe!*" exclaimed his wife.

"Oh, well ... don't let's squabble, at any rate," he said huntedly. "The main point, what we're here to discuss, is Sophy's wish to be divorced."

"And I think she's perfectly justified!" snapped Charlotte.

The Judge resumed, addressing Sophy:

"Now, the question is, what will be ... er ... Mr. Loring's attitude in the matter?"

"I think he'll oppose it ... at first," said Sophy.

The Judge looked curious.

"Why only 'at first'?" he asked.

Sophy said quietly and rather sadly:

"Because it isn't in his nature to keep up anything for long."

"Mh!" said the Judge.

He took up the paper-weight which he had laid aside and turned it so vigorously that the little cottage and figures within the glass-ball were almost blotted from sight by the mimic snowstorm.

"Divorce is a slow affair in Virginia," he said at last.

"Then I'd rather get mine in the West," said Sophy.

Charlotte looked at her in horror.

"Oh, Sophy!" she cried. "No! ... you *wouldn't*!... It's ... it's so *vulgar*!"

"Life is vulgar," said Sophy.

"Oh, my *dear*!"

"I mean it in the big sense. Vulgar means common to all—to all people. So I say life is vulgar ... and the longing for freedom is vulgar. No one has ever longed for freedom as slaves have, I suppose. Well, I am a slave ... and I long for freedom. I long for it so that I want it quickly. I want it as one wants water when one's famishing, and bread when one's starving. I'm not so aristocratic in my hunger and thirst that I prefer to wait through dignified years for a bit of stale bread. I want my loaf *now* ... and I want the whole loaf ... not half...."

Sophy was indeed speaking with "vulgar" intensity. She "let herself go" because she wanted Joe and Charlotte to understand once for all that there was

no use in trying to make her behave "reasonably."

Charlotte's small mouth was tight shut. The Judge looked rather pale. Just as he had thought, Sophy was evincing rashness in its most aggravated form.

XXXVIII

Sophy slipped down from her perch on the window-sill, and came and stood between them.

"Oh, Chartie ... Joe...." she said, turning from one to the other, "why do you look so? Surely you don't want me to waste long years of my life, clanking this chain after me, wherever I go?... Not free ... not a wife ... not *anything* really—and Morris in the same plight!... And Belinda.... Think of that wild, self-willed girl...."

"You're crazy, Sophy!... You really talk as if you were crazy!..." broke in Charlotte, suffocated. "How can you *mention* that ... that...." Propriety prevented Charlotte from expressing herself fully. ".... That *creature*?" she ended, breathing very short. "How can you care *what* becomes of her?"

Sophy looked tired all at once. She dropped into a chair near the desk.

"I suppose you'll think I'm crazier than ever," she said. "But while I don't like Belinda, I don't think she's *quite* a 'creature' ... not yet, anyway. And her one chance is to.... Well ... my setting Morris free quickly ... as soon as possible, will give her her

chance."

Charlotte stared at her; her little mouth unlocked by sheer amazement.

Then she said in a faint voice:

"To *think* of my living to hear *you* speak like that!"

"I can't help it, Chartie. That's the way I feel. I must be perfectly honest with you and Joe, or what's the use of my talking with you at all? Do you think I *like* doing it?" she asked, her own voice suddenly trembling. "Never, never have I hated anything so much!" she ended vehemently.

She got up, went over to the window again, and stood leaning against it, her back to them.

The Judge looked miserably at Charlotte, and her eyebrows said: "Wait a while. She'll calm down."

So all three waited in an uncomfortable silence.

Presently Sophy turned round. There were tears in her eyes, but she was smiling. "My poor *dear* dears!" she said, in such an affectionate, sorry voice that their hearts jumped towards her. "It was horrid of me to burst out at you like that...."

Charlotte went up and put a brisk, muscular little arm hard about her sister's shoulders.

"Come, now, darling ... let's talk *sense*," said she.

"I've got a friend in the West...." the Judge began, fidgeting a little.

Charlotte could not help it.

"Oh, Joe! *Not* ... Sioux Falls!" she pleaded, as who

should say: "At *least* let the headsman's axe be *clean*."

Sophy interrupted:

"If the gods give me freedom, Chartie, why should I care whether the oracle speaks from Sioux Falls or Athens?"

"Well, *I* care!" said Charlotte.

"It's *not* Sioux Falls," said the Judge.

"Go on, Joe," said Sophy.

"I'll write to him. He's a very able lawyer—upon ... er ... these questions...."

"Thank you, dear Joe," said Sophy softly.

The Judge replied mechanically: "Not at all." He was fingering the paper-weight again. He looked uncomfortable ... with a new sort of discomfort. He cleared his throat. Regarding Sophy with doubt in his worried eyes, he said:

"Er ... Sophy ... er ... in case ... what about the question of alimony?"

Like lightning, she replied as he had feared she would:

"Not a penny ... not a cent of alimony, Joe!"

"But in such a case, the Court...."

"I wouldn't accept it."

"Perhaps, dear...." began Charlotte, in a "sense-of-duty" tone. Though she considered her sister unwise, yet she sympathised ardently with this unwisdom.

"No—never!" Sophy said again.

The Judge looked more and more uncomfortable. The snowstorm in the paper-weight became a blizzard. At last he jumped into the midst of things, with all the jerky suddenness of a man who has at last determined to break through the ice-skim on his morning tub.

"Sophy," he blurted, "I must tell you—there was a settlement ... at the time of your marriage with Mr. Loring...."

(He had "Mistered" Loring punctiliously ever since Sophy's disclosure.)

"A settlement?" said Sophy blankly.

"Just so. Yes. A-rrrm!... I ... er ... am responsible for the ... er ... arrangement ... a marriage settlement, you know.... It gives you ten thousand a year, in your own right."

"Gives *me*...? Ten thousand...? My own right?" stammered Sophy. "Oh, you must be mistaken, Joe!" she added, colouring deeply.

Then the Judge explained unhappily. He had stood *in loco parentis*.... The future was always uncertain.... He should have felt himself culpable towards her, *et cetera, et cetera*. And fearing that she might raise objections against her own interests, he had accepted a power-of-attorney to administer the property for her. This was the reason of her ignorance on the subject.

Sophy stood transfixed. Then she took it in. She went up to him, put her arm about his neck, and kissed his harassed face. "You're a dear, kind, *real* brother," she murmured; "but you're a lawyer, too—so you can just arrange to unsettle that settlement."

"Now, Sophy ... now, Sophy...." he pleaded. "There's nothing undignified ... or ... or...."

"I couldn't, Joe! It's impossible ... utterly...."

"Think of Bobby...."

She coloured deeper than ever.

"I should never maintain my son on Morris's money," she said proudly.

"But, Sophy!... Oh, dog my buttons!..." groaned the harried man. "You've got to *live*...."

"You forget what you saved for me, Joe ... and my thousand a year."

"Saved! About twenty thousand. How will you eat and clothe yourself and the boy and educate him on the income of such a sum? I'm not talking high sentiment; I'm talking hard facts," wound up the Judge, much excited.

Charlotte sat motionless, looking at them. Sophy's eyes had gone black.

"I'll ... I'll ... sing for my living and Bobby's first," she said.

"Pooh!" said the Judge.

He was quite reckless. He, like Charlotte, sympathised too much in one way with this quixotic attitude of hers not to feel called on to remonstrate vigorously in another. He kept telling himself that Sophy was being hifalutin in addition to being rash. He must save her from hifalutiness at least.

"Pooh!" he said again hardily. "As Chartie said, let's talk sense. What about Bobby's education?... Eton—

Oxford ... this tutor who's coming in a day or two? Do you think you're going to get divorced and established at the Metropolitan in time to pay for all that?"

"*Joe!*" cried Charlotte.

"Never mind.... I like him to speak out," said Sophy bravely, a scarlet spot on either cheek. Then an inspiration came to her.

"Gerald will educate Bobby for me," she said. "I know he will! I shall write to Gerald and tell him the whole truth. He has always been like a true brother to me."

The Judge was thinking hard and quickly.

"Yes—and suppose he dies suddenly—what then?"

"How 'what then'?" asked Sophy, bewildered.

"Why, what about the property? Is it all entailed—or only partly!"

"I ... I ... don't know," faltered Sophy.

"Very well. If Lord Wychcote dies suddenly, Bobby will inherit ... as I understand it. But if the property is all entailed, your brother-in-law can't leave *you* anything. The property would be in trust for Bobby until he came of age legally. It would depend entirely on the Court what you had as his mother. Suppose you found yourself more or less at the mercy of the old lady—Bobby getting his education in England—as you've promised he should, mind you—and you without the means to live near him—— Eh? What then?"

"I ... I will write to Mr. Surtees," said Sophy, very white.

"Who's he?"

"The family solicitor."

"Well, do.... I advise you to, by all means."

Here Charlotte stepped forward. She put her arm about her white, suddenly subdued sister, and looked sternly at her husband.

"Joe.... I'm *surprised* at you!" she said. "A Virginia gentleman being so cruel to a woman!"

"Pooh!" said the Judge a third time. He was in a state of flagrant rebellion. "Stuff!... I'm being a Virginia lawyer and a mighty good friend. If I wasn't darned fond of Sophy, I wouldn't go on like this, you may be sure. Whew!"

He wiped his brow and looked at his handkerchief as though expecting to see it incarnadined. It really *was* like sweating blood to try to talk reason into one so hopelessly unpractical and hifalutin as Sophy.

"I'll look forward to reading Mr. Surtees's letter with great interest," he remarked grimly.

Sophy had a flash of spirit.

"No matter what he says, I shan't accept alimony!" she retorted.

"And the...."

"Or that settlement either."

The Judge glowered at her for a second. Then he reached out, drew her to him, and kissed her.

"Well ... God bless you for a sweet fool!" was his strange remark.

Sophy laughed faintly, and the sisters went out with their arms about each other. The Judge sank exhausted into his chair.

"Dog my buttons!..." he murmured, as the two disappeared. "The Lord probably thought Adam out more or less carefully, but I reckon He made Eve on impulse...."

XXXIX

But Sophy did not write to Mr. Surtees, as she had said so boldly that she would do. All that was finest in her rebelled at the idea when she came to think it over clearly. It was quite impossible for her to write thus cold-bloodedly and ask the old solicitor what would be her prospects as Bobby's mother, in the event of the sudden death of the man who had really been to her like the kindest, most indulgent of brothers.

Instead, she wrote to Gerald himself, telling him of her proposed divorce and her determination not to accept alimony or avail herself of the marriage settlement arranged by her sister's husband without her knowledge. She asked him not to tell Lady Wychcote of this matter until it should be accomplished. She said simply: "So you see, dear Gerald, as things will be, I shall not have the means to educate Bobby as his father wished. Will you do it for Cecil's son, dear Gerald? Somehow, I don't mind asking you this at all. I feel, indeed, that you would be hurt if I did *not* ask it."

Gerald's answer came with the name of a steamer written on the envelope to insure promptness. Sophy cried when she read that letter.

"Dear Sophy," he wrote, "I am more touched than I can express by your confidence in me. I beg you not to give another thought to the matter. All shall be just as before your present marriage. I only hope that you will resume Cecil's name again when you are at liberty to do so. As Bobby's mother, it seems to me that it would be more fitting. I am very happy to think of your being in England again. Don't make it too long, and don't think, 'There's that poor, hipped old rotter Gerald, mooning about himself—but sometimes I have a beastly feeling that I mayn't see you again. And as you know, I'm rather fond of you, old girl. Love to the little chap. G."

One thing in his letter, however, seemed odd to them all. It was his suggestion that she should take Chesney's name again, after her divorce. About this, on the Judge's advice, she did write to Mr. Surtees. She herself, as Bobby's mother, would have much preferred to be called Mrs. Chesney. She did not wish to go on calling herself "Mrs. Morris Loring." She felt very sure that within a short time after the divorce there would be another "Mrs. Morris Loring." She awaited Mr. Surtees's reply with some anxiety. It was quite satisfactory. He expressed himself as of the opinion that it would be "quite natural, fitting, and possible for Mrs. Loring to resume the name of her first husband." He quoted the case of Cowley v. Cowley, decided in the House of Lords in 1901: "Lady Violet Neville, after becoming Countess Cowley, obtained a divorce from her husband on the ground of his misconduct. She then married a commoner, a Mr. Biddulph, but nevertheless

continued to call herself Countess Cowley. The Earl brought proceedings to restrain her from using the name, but the House of Lords, on appeal, refused to grant an injunction. Lord Macnaughton, in giving judgment, said: 'Everybody knows that it is a very common practice for peeresses (not being peeresses in their own right) after marrying Commoners to retain the title lost by such marriage. It is not a matter of right. It is merely a matter of courtesy, and allowed by the usages of society.'"

And all this time (it was nearly October) never a word came from Loring. Sophy corresponded with his mother, who knew nothing of the strained relations between them, and through her she learned that Morris had gone to Canada with some friends. A sporting expedition. Mrs. Loring mentioned it casually, of course, supposing that Sophy knew already. Mrs. Horton and Belinda were still at Nahant. Morry had been *so* thoughtful! He had come down to say good-by to her before starting for Canada—but had not stopped the night. Didn't Sophy think he looked rather thin? She herself was much better, *et cetera, et cetera*.

When Sophy read this letter, she wondered what had passed between Morris and Belinda during that flying visit to Nahant. He was evidently "disciplining" her (Sophy). Silence and absence were to bring her to a right frame of mind.

She began to get desperately restless and impatient. She felt that she must come to a definite understanding with him. She would have written, but she did not wish such a letter to follow him from place to place at the risk of getting lost.

Judge Macon had heard from his "friend in the

West." If Mrs. Loring wished to institute divorce proceedings, the sooner she came to Ontowega herself the better. So wrote the Western lawyer. He wished to interview Mrs. Loring personally.

Yet Sophy felt that it would be impossible for her to go until she had come to a definite understanding with Morris.

All her philosophy, drawn sound and sweet from the sodden husk of experience, could not keep her from fretting inwardly. Her first irrepressible joy over the mere idea of freedom died flatly down. She was unhappy—even very unhappy. Memories stung her day and night. Vain regret.... It was like the feeling of homesickness for a home that has been burned down. As she walked and rode, as she sat in her study, with its perfume of rose-geraniums and cedar wood, her collie at her feet—these memories came teasing, teasing, like wan-eyed, persistent beggars when one's purse is empty. Sophy's heart was empty of the coin of love—but it brimmed with pity—the heavy, leaden currency of pity.

The only real pleasure that she had in these days was from Amaldi's letters. The first one had been sent from the steamer in which he had sailed for Italy a few days after she had left Newport. It was rather short, rather shy. "You must forbear with my English, please," he had said. "I find it much more hard to write than in speaking." But the little quaintnesses of construction only made his letter seem more charming to her. He had not alluded to their last meeting except indirectly. He wrote: "There is much mist this morning. I see the last of America, dim as dreams through this mist. But above rises the great goddess, she that is to America what Pallas was to

Athens. She lifts high her torch—and it seems I see it shine upon your face. I remember her name and the meaning of this light that she is holding so high above the mist. For you I repeat her name many times in my heart. It is with a feeling of religion that I say this name over and over—linking it to yours. And I feel that for you, high above all mist, is that pure flame shining."

Sophy loved this letter, for among other things, it reassured her about their friendship. It made her feel in many ways that he was too fine not to have realized that there could be no more love in her life and too strong to sacrifice their beautiful friendship to a vain desire something that could never be. She spent a solacing hour in writing him a letter such as she felt he would love to receive—all about her home, herself, her daily doings, her dog, her horse ... some of her inmost thoughts that she felt he would understand and share with her.

The end of September had been chilly, but October came in with soft, spring-like showers again, very mild—real May weather—rather like Indian Spring than Indian Summer. On the second day the showers held about noon. Harold Grey set off with the whole "bunch" of boys for a long-promised jaunt. They were to ride up to the top of Laurel Mountain and spend the night there in an old rubble hut, sleeping on pine boughs. There was to be a camp-fire, they were to cook their own meals. Off they went, all on horseback, laughing and singing:

"*Ole ark a-movin', movin', chillun!*"

Sophy watched Bobby as he rode off on the old Shelty, his face a-shine, and again she felt that it was all worth while if Bobby were so blissfully content.

He had never worn that shining face in Newport or New York. That afternoon she went out to look for mushrooms. This was surely ideal mushroom weather. She put on an old corduroy skirt, and stout boots, and borrowed a little basket from Mammy Nan.

A great west wind had suddenly sprung up. Wild tatters of cloud were blown across the sky. Now they veiled, now they revealed the sun. The box hedges glittered darkly, waving their sombre plumes to and fro, up and down. The grass glinted like yellow crystal as the sun caught it. Leaves scurried in flocks through the air. The wet clay was just the colour of a sweating sorrel horse.

Sophy went down to the pasture behind the stable. There were cattle grazing there—a fine black Angus bull, and his harem of forty young heifers. But she was not afraid of them—they were all very gentle, the black Pasha as well as his wives.

The field hollowed in the middle, and a little dark-red path coiled through the soaked green. Sophy dipped under the pasture-bars, and went slowly forward, looking to right and left, for the cool, fleshlike glisten of fungi.

The bull was grazing on a hill at the far end of the field. His splendid, black silhouette stood out against the grey wrack of cloud. Half of his harem grazed near. The other half had discreetly withdrawn to that part of the field where Sophy was now walking. One lovely little heifer, black and soft of pelt as a black Angora cat, regarded her musingly out of lustrous, still eyes that were heavy as with sorrow. Sophy went up to her ... put out her hand, saying: "Coo ... co-o-o...."

The heifer let her stroke her forehead, her ears—let the slim, quick hand run along her sides, play with her glossy pelt. "You sweetheart!..." said Sophy.

She was more like a calm, friendly dog than a cow. Sophy finally gave her a kiss between her tranquil, melancholy eyes, and continued on her quest for mushrooms.

The wind was higher than ever now. It blew in squally gusts. Clouds were sagging dark in the southwest. The sun winked in and out like the light of a great pharos.

Sophy found her first mushroom—small, but a beauty. It nestled low in the grass on its plump, naked leg. Its round, white top was faintly browned like a well-cooked meringue. Then she found another, enormous—a real prize, it seemed. But something about it was *too* perfect—*too* white. She nipped it out of its green bed, and looked at the gills. They were snowy white. Its slender leg was cased in a fine, white-silk stocking that was "coming down."

"Oh," said Sophy, looking queerly at the too-lovely creature, "how very like you are to some other mistakes of mine!... And yet ... if I ate you ... you would cure them all," she ended quizzically.

She threw the false mushroom away. It lay, pale and corpse-like, in the wet grass. It was so like damp, dead flesh that Sophy shivered.

Now the wind began really to tussle with her. It blew in wild, *whoorooshing* blasts. The thickets seethed. The old orchard on the hill above made a harsh rattling with its gnarled boughs. She could see the tree-tops on the lawn, bowing, twisting, lashing

wildly, as though trying to wrench their roots free from the grip of earth, as though possessed to follow their flying leaves into the sky. Now came a spat of rain. She ducked her head and began to run.

The bull was proceeding with majestic leisureliness towards his shed. He booed from bass to treble, several times. "My sultanas," said this booing, "I advise you to seek, with me, the shelter of my palace."

All the heifers began moving after him towards the shed. Now the rain came in earnest—big, cold drops. Sophy ran faster and faster. The mushrooms in her basket bounced plumply. She was afraid they would be smashed. She took off her brown velvet cap and pressed it over them as she ran. The rain rather blinded her. She ran full-tilt into some one who emerged suddenly from behind a thicket near the pasture-bars.

"By Jove!... You're soaked!..." said a voice she knew. It was Loring.

XL

Sophy let him take the basket from her and kiss her rain-wet cheek. She was glad that the rain came between her and that kiss. She could not say anything just at first—her quick running and the suddenness of his appearance had quite taken her breath for the moment.

"But you're sopping ... *sopping!*..." he kept repeating.

He, too, could not think of anything more fitting to say. And Sophy began to murmur back:

"But you're getting wet, too ... what a shame!..."

They ran together towards the house. But now the rain ceased, and again the wind came—vicious, blatant. The big hedge of box just in front of them was a dark fury of tossing boughs.

"Oh, the trees!... I'm so afraid some of the trees will go down!..." said Sophy.

They ran on under the dark tunnel of box, and out upon the lawn. As they did so, Sophy gave a cry and halted.

"Look!" she gasped. "The big locust ... oh!... It's going ... it's going...."

She ran towards the middle of the lawn. Loring followed—caught her firmly by the arm.

"Wait...." he said. "Don't go any nearer...."

They stood dumbly watching the giant tree. It was fully a hundred feet high—a monarch shaft crowned with massive branches—wrapped python-like by a huge trumpet-vine. It was the last of its splendid generation—a royal tree. Now it rocked heavily—to and fro—farther and farther each way, each time—a groaning sound came from it. This sound splintered suddenly. It was like the bursting of a human groan into a shriek. The noble crown swept forward—majestically—as it were, deliberately at first—then faster, faster, in a sort of suicidal frenzy. The huge tree toppled, split at its middle fork—went crashing down, ripping loose the snaky folds of vine, shattering the trees next it. Their splintered tops

shone suddenly raw and yellow against the grey sky. The remaining half of the fallen locust had a great "blaze" all down one side, as though it had been stripped by lightning. The inner wood, thus disclosed, all torn and riven, had something ghastly, like the revelation of a wound in living flesh.

For a second longer Sophy stood quite still. Then she ran forward again. She was pale as at an accident to a dear friend.

The locust stretched across the gravel driveway. Its crown lay among the crushed branches of a huge box-shrub. The poor box-shrub had a piteous, feminine look, as though it had tried in vain to support the stricken giant on its soft breast. The boughs and leaves of the prone tree still quivered slightly as in a death-throe. The big vine swung its loose, snaky folds over the ruin. The grass was strewn with leaves and broken limbs. Sophy went up and put her hand on the rough trunk in silence. Her lips quivered.

"What an infernal shame!" said Loring.

He stared all about, then at the wrecked tree again.

"Isn't this where the hammocks used to hang?" he asked.

"Yes," said Sophy.

They stood silent again. Both were thinking of how they had swung day after day in those hammocks in their love-time. Then the scarlet bells of the trumpet-vine had hung above them. It had been like their flowering passion swinging scarlet bells above them. Both felt something sad and ominous in the fall of the great tree just as Loring had arrived.

"I'll send the gardener to see about it," Sophy said at last, turning away. They went together to the house.

"When can I see you ... for a long talk?" asked Loring, as they reached the door.

"As soon as I've changed. You'll want to change, too. Is your luggage here?"

"Yes. A darkey drove me up from Sweet-Waters."

"Has Mammy Nan seen to your room?"

"Thanks. Yes. Everything's quite right."

"Then ... in half an hour ... in my study."

Loring told himself that he'd forgotten how beautiful she was. And that black bow on her hair!... He had not seen her wear that black bow since.... Oh, what a fool he'd been! ... what a superlative ass!... That black bow had a queer magic for him. It made the past seem only yesterday. Oddly it set her back where she had been when he first saw her wear it. It shook his lordly sense of possession. She had not belonged to him then. Somehow she did not seem to belong to him now. He felt doubtful ... apprehensive. What if...? Yes. What if...?

He changed hurriedly and went down to her study. A clear fire of apple-boughs and cedar burned on the hearth. The warmth drew their sweetest scent from the rose-geraniums. There were no fuchsias on the green steps now. It irritated Charlotte that Sophy would not have her splendid fuchsias in this room. But Sophy could not endure the fantastic flowers near her. They were too potent with wild memories.

Before the fire Dhu was lying. He eyed Loring from golden, white-rimmed eyes without moving at first.

Then he rose and wagged a languidly polite tail. He had never quite approved of the young man.

Loring sat down and tried to beguile the dog into friendship. Dhu was civil but distant. Sophy came in, and he rushed and reared upon her, putting a paw on either shoulder.

She looked very tall in her black satin tea-gown. The collie was beautifully golden against the black, shining stuff. And this gown Loring recognised as he had recognised the black bow. It was a gown of old days. It had some yellow lace at the throat, and queer, carved silver buttons. How that lace smelt sweet of her! How often he had kissed it in kissing her throat! And those silver buttons ... how cold and hard they had felt to his cheek upon the warmth of her breast!

She came up and sat down in her own low chair on the other side of the hearth.

"Quite Darby and Joan we look...." said Loring, with a nervous laugh. Sophy smiled, but this smile was enigmatic.

"Why didn't you write to me? Why didn't you tell me you were coming, Morris?" she asked gently.

"Oh ... well...." said Loring.

He went red, and fussed with a piece of cedar that had fallen on the hearth. The fragrant smoke got into his eyes—and made them smart.

"You see...." he went on with more assurance, as he hammered the log into place again, "I knew this was the sort of thing that would have to be talked out...."

"Well, then...?" said Sophy.

He glanced at her rather sheepishly.

"Oh, hang it all, Sophy!" he said. "Don't make it *too* hard. What do you want?... Probation?... Kow-towing? What?"

"No. I don't want anything like that, Morris. What I want is for us both to act like good, sensible friends, and...."

"*Friends!*" he exclaimed.

"Yes ... friends," said she firmly.

"Now look here, Sophy," he protested, red again. "You surely aren't nursing that grievance still? After all these weeks?"

"What 'grievance' do you allude to, Morris?"

He grew redder and redder.

"Why ... you know," he muttered shamefacedly.

"No, Morris. I don't. I really haven't any 'grievance.' You did a thing that seems to me final. It isn't a grievance ... it's just an end."

"Now, Sophy! If you think my ... my ... a ... my idiocy with that girl...."

"Morris ... don't! But while that is one reason of my feeling as I do ... it isn't the thing I mean."

"Then in God's name ... *what* is?"

He was standing now, looking excited and angry. He came over in front of her.

"*What* is?" he repeated.

Sophy looked up at him and her nostrils spread a

little.

"Have you really forgotten?" she said, in a clear voice. "You accused me of having a lover...."

"Oh, for God's sake!" cried Loring. His chest laboured with his strong excitement. "Haven't I told you I was damned sorry! Haven't I apologised—humbly? Haven't I explained I was out of my wits? Haven't I? Haven't I?"

He stood waiting for her to answer. All up in arms—white now—quite outraged by her unkind obstinacy.

She answered without apparent emotion:

"All that doesn't change what you said then. Of course you apologise—of course you say you were out of your wits. What else could you say? But—— Well, you see, Morris—it happens to be one of those facts that can't be wiped out by apologies and regrets. Some words can't be wiped out by other words," she ended, with a flash of bitterness.

He gazed at her sullenly.

"Can't you make allowances for a man's being mad with jealousy?" he said.

"No. Jealousy—of that kind—is always an insult."

He stood silent for a while. Then suddenly he dropped to his knees beside her. He felt inspired.

"Sophy...." he said very low, a sort of wheedling cunning in his voice. "I wonder ... if *you* aren't ... just a bit ... jealous, yourself?"

"I?"

"Yes. You. Of ... oh, you know who I mean! But,

Sophy ... listen ... I swear to you a man can be ... like that ... about another woman—and yet love his wife ... *really* love only her ... I swear it to you."

Sophy smiled again.

"Yes. So I've heard," she said.

He was eager in a moment.

"Well, then ... don't you see?... It was only a ... a flash in the pan—as one might say.... Really, you know, it's true. That one can fancy a woman for a bit like that, yet never dream of loving her as one loves one's wife...."

"Morris...." said Sophy seriously. She leaned her chin on her hand, and looked gravely at him.

"Well?" he said expectantly.

"What would you think of an American who had himself naturalised a German, or a Russian, or a Spaniard ... yet declared that he really loved America best of all!"

"I don't see...." stammered Loring.

"Yes, you do see," smiled Sophy. "And I want to take this opportunity of assuring you that I'm not jealous of Belinda. Only—please don't try to make your love for her a proof of your still greater love for me."

"Sophy...!"

"I'm not one of those people who cut up love into sections—vivisect it ... for it dies, I can tell you, when it's hacked to bits like that!... This part ignoble —that part noble. Love is a whole—a whole—or it is nothing. What you gave to Belinda you could not

have given her if you'd loved me really. I don't say *would* not ... I say *could* not...."

"But I swear to you...."

".... *Could* not!" repeated Sophy inflexibly.

He had got to his feet again, and was looking at her with a disturbed, baffled look.

"I *do* love you, Sophy," he said at last. "Don't you believe I love you?"

"In a way ... yes," said Sophy.

"What do you mean by 'in a way'?".

"Well—in a way that doesn't allow me to interfere with greater pleasures."

He went crimson.

"Oh, I say!" he said. "How unkind ... how awfully hard and unkind of you!"

"There mustn't be anything but truth in this talk between us, Morris. I'm sorry to seem unkind. I only said what I feel and believe."

"God! I didn't know you could be so cruel...." he muttered, staring at the fire.

"It isn't I that am cruel; it's the truth that's cruel," she said.

"You call that 'the truth'? ... God!" he said again.

"Then tell me...." she said. "What pleasure have you ever put second to me?"

"What ... pleasure?" he stammered.

She looked at him steadily.

"Yes ... what pleasure?" she repeated.

"I.... I...."

He was frankly at a loss. She had such a queer, upsetting way of putting things. He stood ruffled, resentful, aggrieved, helpless. Not a pleasure could he think of that he had not put before her. His head buzzed with the effort to recall some small sacrifice that he had made in her behalf. She was speaking in a different voice now—softer, more feeling.

"Ah, Morris," she said, "it is all so sad ... so horribly sad! Though I may seem unkind—my heart aches with it. But this has not come suddenly. A long, long time it's been coming. It began ... yes ... that night ... do you remember?—that night over two years ago ... when you came to my room...."—she hesitated, caught her lip hard for a second, went on in a lower voice—"when you came to me—not yourself ... for drink...."

He had put up one hand over his eyes as he leaned with his elbow on the mantelpiece. He said in a choked voice:

"I've been a beast ... sometimes ... I admit."

She hesitated again; then said, whispering:

"*That* was a pleasure you always put before me."

"Don't!" he said.

"I won't, then," she answered pityingly.

Her eyes scalded with tears. Her hands, locked hard together, were trembling.

There was a long pause.

"Sophy," he said presently, very low, his hand still over his eyes, "how if I take an oath to you never to drink again?"

She looked with a tender, wise look at his hidden face.

"You would come to hate me for it in the end, dear."

"Oh ... Sophy...."

"Yes, dear. You would."

"I know.... You think I couldn't keep it," he said miserably.

"No. But if you kept it, you would be hating me all the time."

A gush of bitterness rose in him.

"So *that's* what you think of me?" he said.

"It's what I think your nature would make you feel—bound by such an oath."

There came another pause.

He broke out rather vehemently again:

"At least do me the justice to admit that I was dead set against having Linda visit us...."

"Yes. I remember. But it would have come sooner or later. You would have been thrown with her in other ways."

"You really think I ... a ... care for her?"

Sophy didn't answer for a second or two; then she

said:

"Morris ... that morning at Newport ... when you said those words to me ... you told me afterwards—that it was Belinda who had made you ... suspect me."

"Ah ... don't put it that way!..."

"What other way can I put it? You did tell me it was Belinda, didn't you?"

"Yes. And a more...."

"Wait, Morris. I want to ask you something. Whether you answer it or not, I must ask it. It's this: You had been with Belinda—before you came to me. Had you been together—like lovers?"

He dropped his face into his two hands. She could see the hot flush on it between his fingers.

"Oh ... but you're hard ..." he groaned.

Now Sophy had her moment of bitterness.

"I know," she said, "that the perfect wife is supposed to be motherly when her husband's fancy strays—and lover-like when it turns home again. But I am not perfect in any way. And I don't think I'm hard when I ask for truth between us."

Loring dropped his hands and uncovered eyes ablaze with a helpless fury of regret and vindictiveness.

"I wish to God the girl had never been born!" he cried.

"You haven't answered me yet," said Sophy.

He gazed at her with a sort of braggadocio of defiance for an instant, then dropped his face into his

hands again.

"Oh ... it's no use!..." he lamented. "We are low brutes ... men are low brutes.... Passion is a low thing...."

"No—real passion is not low," Sophy broke in on him.

"You know what I mean...." he muttered.

"Yes. I do. But don't call mere sensuality passion. Real passion is like a great, flowering tree. Its roots strike deep into the earth ... its crown is among the stars. Do you call a red rose 'low' because it springs from the earth?"

"How you catch one up!" protested Loring moodily.

She rushed on:

"I do hate so to hear that word misused—abused! Sensual fancies are low because they have no soul ... no flowering. They are like truffles ... all of the earth earthy. Yes ... there are truffle-loves," she ended bitterly.

"And men, you think, are like swine rooting for truffles!" he muttered.

"Sometimes ... when Circe is about...." she admitted.

Morris got up and leaned again upon the mantelpiece. He heaved a disconsolate sigh.

"Oh, Lord!... What a talk for a man to have with his wife!" he said heavily.

XLI

Sophy sat watching him, and her heart yearned over him. In spite of her flash of bitterness, she did feel truly mother-like towards him. He seemed to her so young—so very, touchingly young as he leaned there against the old, smoke-toned ivory of the carved mantelpiece, grasping the ledge, his forehead on the back of his hand. She knew how crushingly he was realising that he had "made a mess of things." But then—he *had* made a mess of things. She was powerless to comfort him there. If she could only show him how much better it would be not to try to rearrange this tangle—but to step free of it, and begin over ... that there was no real adjustment of their two lives—their two utterly different natures, possible.... Could she show him? Well ... she could at least try....

"Morris," she said softly. "Suppose we try to look at it all from another angle? Suppose we try to see it all as though *we* weren't concerned in it—as if some one had asked our impartial advice? Don't you think that would be a good way to get at it?"

"But what is it you want to 'get at,' Sophy? What is it you want me to do? God knows I'm ready to do anything...."

"Anything?"

"Yes ... anything in reason," he hedged nervously.

"Would you call it reasonable for us both to be free?"

He started—eyed her suspiciously.

"How 'free'? Free in what way?"

"Quite, quite free, Morris."

He paled.

"Divorce...?" he said.

"Yes."

"You want to divorce me?"

"I want us both to have our own lives wholly in our own hands again—that is the only way."

He stared at her, whiter and whiter.

"Didn't you ever ... love me ... at all?" he managed, at last.

"Ah!—you know whether I loved you...."

"You ... you mean ... I ... I've killed it?"

"Yes, dear."

"Oh, you are cruel ... you are cruel!..." he burst out. He stared at her, his face working. "You're the crudest woman God ever made!" he said huskily.

Sophy was white too. She, too, stammered a little.

"I ... I think ... that truth ... is nearly always cruel," she said. "But it's only truth that will make us free ——"

His hands were gripping the sides of the chair into which he had sunk again, so that his arms trembled.

"Damn the truth, then...!" he said slowly and thickly.

"You'd want to keep a wife who doesn't love you as a wife should?"

"Yes, I want to keep you.... I want to keep you if you

hate me!... Yes. Yes."

"*That* is cruelty...."

"Is it? Then I'm cruel, too."

Sophy sat with her eyes on his suffused, lowering face. Her hand went to and fro over the collie's head. She sat so long thus, without speaking, that he said gruffly:

"Well? What now? Why do you stare so?"

"I'm trying to imagine how it would be to feel like that. I'm trying to get your point of view."

"How ... my point of view?"

"The wanting to hold a woman against her will. But I can't understand it. I never understood how a man or woman could want to hold another when love had gone ... the love that is the only reason for marriage."

"You rub it in, don't you?"

She said sadly:

"Why do you speak so roughly and bitterly to me—as if it were my love only that had failed? Do you think I didn't know when first your love began to wane?"

He tried to brave it out.

"And why did it 'wane,' as you call it? Can a man be snubbed day in, day out, and yet keep at concert pitch forever?"

"You mean that I would not respond to you when you had been drinking?"

"Well—put it that way."

Sophy gave a tired sigh.

"Why must we go over it and over it?" she asked. "It is not me that you want, Morris—it is your own way. You never want what is yours—only what is out of reach. You have turned on Belinda now, only because she came to you too easily. If I came back to you—you would not want me any longer."

He sneered.

"It's easy to say what I would or wouldn't do. It's easy to arraign me. But what of yourself? I thought you were so great on unselfishness! Where's the unselfishness in all this, I'd like to know?"

"I'm not trying to be unselfish, Morris. I've been unselfish so long that I've nearly lost my best self. I find it's better to keep one's best self than to be selfless."

He looked startled at this heresy against the great Credo of Man's-Ideal-Woman.

"Good Lord!... You *have* changed!" he said, in blank dismay. "It doesn't seem to be you talking...."

"It's a 'me' that you don't know, perhaps...."

"I certainly don't know this side of you."

"It isn't a side of me—it's the core of me."

They were both silent again. Loring was the first to take it up.

"Look here ... have you spoken to Judge Macon and your sister about all this?"

"Yes."

He reddened angrily.

"A pleasant position for me, isn't it?"

"It's odious for both of us, Morris," she said, with feeling.

"Did you tell them about ... about...?"

He couldn't bring it out.

"I told them about you and Belinda. I didn't tell them ... that other thing. I couldn't tell any one that...."

"Oh ... thanks!" he sneered.

Sophy flashed out:

"It wasn't for your sake I didn't tell them—it was for my own!"

He looked staggered. He was so used to her forbearance and gentleness that he could almost have believed in the old tales of "possession." It was as though Sophy's body had become "possessed" by a strange, heretic spirit that denied all her former religion of abnegation in one strange speech after the other. He was humiliatingly at a loss in dealing with this new, essential Sophy. He felt something as the Miltonian Adam might have felt if his docile Eve had announced her intention of leaving him and Eden in the companionship of the serpent. Indeed, these new ideas of hers hissed like a whole nestful of serpents. And all the time, just because—in spite of his angry denials—she seemed slipping farther and farther from him—he desired her as he had never desired her. Not beautifully, as of old—but desperately, bitterly, blindly!

He sprang up suddenly, and took a few turns about

the room. He went and stood at the window, gazing out into the twilight. The fire reflected in the window-panes seemed flickering among the dark leaves of the magnolia.

Joycie came in with the tea things. He sat sullenly nursing one leg upon the other while Sophy made tea. He wouldn't have any.

They could hear Charlotte's voice here and there about the house. The Judge rode past the window on Silvernose. But no one interrupted them. Only Joycie came in after a little, to clear away the tea things. She went out with the tray, Dhu following her, and they were alone, once more. Sophy rose as Joycie went out, and herself lighted the lamp on her writing-table.

"Why didn't you ask me to do that?" he said irritably.

"I didn't think," she answered.

Now in the lamplight he could see how very white and tired she looked. His heart softened. He went over impulsively and stood close to her.

"Sophy," he said, "what is it you really want?"

Her answer gushed quick and hot like heart's blood:

"My freedom, Morris!... My freedom ... my freedom!" It was like the breaking of the waters. It poured in a cataract of passionate, breathless words. "Oh, be kind ... be generous, let me go, without haggling ... without bitterness.... We owe it to the past to part as friends. We should be big in this big thing ... get above littleness of every sort. Just because we have made a heart-rending mistake ... why should we be like enemies?... Give me this one memory of you ...

clear, great. Something I can remember all beautiful. You owe it to our love, Morris. You owe it to that wonderful dream we dreamt together...."

"Stop ... stop!..." he gasped. "It's like death.... It's worse than death...."

"Oh, my dear!..." she said. "I know.... It's horrible! To me, too, it's horrible.... But let me go ... ah, let me go, and I'll love you with a new love!... It will last ... it will bless you all your life.... Let me go, dear, let me go!..."

He stood shaking. His breath came quick and hard. He was dreadfully near to tears.

"I can't," he got out at last.

"Yes. Yes. You can ... you will...."

"No," he stuttered, "no ... no...."

She turned away, sank down again, her face in her hands. For a second or two he stood watching her. Then he went and flung himself on his knees before her as he had done that wild, windy night, three years ago. He grasped either side of her chair as he had done then, prisoning yet not touching her with his arms.

"Beautiful...." he whispered. "Beautiful...."

She cowered back as though he had struck her, her face still hidden.

"Don't you remember...." the husky voice went on. "That night ... the wind ... the wild moon!... Oh, Selene! Selene!... I've blasphemed ... but I still worship.... I still worship...."

She began to sob, desperately, helplessly, like a child.

"Forgive me ... take me back, Selene.... Only try me once more.... This one time.... You'll see.... You'll see you can trust me ... give me your love again ... this once ... this once...."

She struggled to speak. The big sobs choked her. At last, between them, the words came. "It's ... all ... emptiness," she said, "here...." She put one hand to her breast. "There's nothing...." The sobs broke in again. ".... To give...." she ended.

He knelt staring at the slight hand that still hid her face from him. Suddenly he noticed, as Amaldi had done, that her wedding ring was not on it. He dropped his head upon her knees. That broke his manhood to see that she had put aside even the symbol of their union. He felt her hand upon his hair. He wept and wept, wishing, as he had wished about Belinda—that he had never been born.

And over Sophy came the old feeling of nightmare—the sensation of having lived twice over her fatal marriage with Chesney. Just so Cecil had once clung weeping to her knees. But then she still had some hope—some love to give. Now she was beggared of all but pity. And even this pity was not strong enough to make her return once more to the unspeakable sacrifice of loveless marriage.

A sudden rattling at the door sent him to his feet, apprehensive, shamefaced. Then an impatient whine told him that it was only the collie asking to be let in again. He crossed over and opened the door with a vexed jerk. The dog always irritated him. Now he would have liked to kick it. The collie rushed over to

Sophy, and pressed against her anxiously, as if he knew something were wrong with her. He whined again, nuzzling his head against her breast. Loring pulled out his watch.

"I suppose I'd better get ready for dinner," he said.

"Yes," she said, rising.

He held open the door for her, and she went out, her swollen eyelids lowered. His heart gave a great gulp as she passed him—half love, half anger. His vanity ached with resentment that she should hold out against him like this. What was left of love ached also with the dread of losing her. He was beginning to take it in that he really might lose her.

As he changed for dinner, he bruised his brain trying to recall exactly the words that he had used to her in that mad outbreak of jealousy. He could not remember half. But what he did remember made him scorch with shame. No wonder she had revolted!... No wonder!... No wonder!... He had this spasmodic burst of inward honesty. But then again she was *too* hard ... *too* self-righteous. Yes, damn it all ... that was what she was—"self-righteous"!

A reaction of mood began to set in. The dinner was constrained and painful to a degree. Every one was glad to go to bed early and break up the oppressive evening.

That night Belinda haunted Loring's dreams. He would wake up aflame—resentful ... then plunge back into the maze of lurid dreams again. Towards morning he had a long, hateful illusion of being married to both Sophy and Belinda. He was going up an endless church-aisle all sickly with flowers—and

on either arm was a bride in veil and orange-blossoms. And one of these brides was Sophy, and one Belinda.

The dream was ridiculous and horrible as well as hateful. The clergyman was a huge negro, all in red. He wore an Oxford cap and married them out of a little box covered with red velvet, instead of out of a prayer-book. This box was a music-box. The clergyman explained. He said: "When I grind the first tune, you will be married to this woman." He pointed at Sophy. "When I grind the second tune, you will be married to this woman." He indicated Belinda. Then he ground away at the little red velvet box. The tunes were rag-time. The big negro patted with his foot as he ground them out.... Then he gave Sophy a ring, and Belinda a pointed knife. He said:

"*This is the black knife of Lur; it cuts through all things.*"

And at these words, Loring broke out in the horrible cold sweat of fear that only a dream can give.

Then everything changed. He lay in the midst of a frightful, black, catafalque-like bed. On one side lay Sophy, on one side Belinda. He could see Belinda; but try as he might he could not see Sophy, though he knew that she was lying at his other side. Belinda was leaning across him and pressing down his face with her hand. She was laughing. He could see the tip of her tongue between her white teeth as in mischief. She looked very beautiful, but wicked. Her white breast showed through little petals of red flowers. He struggled to lift his head.

"Where is the black knife of Lur?" he cried; and as he cried it, again he broke into a sweat of fear. Belinda laughed more, and said:

"It is there. Look!"

She took away her hand from his face, and he rose on his elbow, and turned to see Sophy lying, white and still, with the handle of the knife protruding from her breast. Belinda was saying:

"Didn't I do it well? Not a drop of blood!"

He gave a choked scream, and woke sweating and trembling like a panic-stricken horse.

XLII

The next day Loring felt unnerved in an absurd manner by that dream. It kept coming between him and reality. Even after he was wide awake, the remembered voice of the huge negro saying: "*This is the black knife of Lur*," gave him a disagreeable shiver. The mental atmosphere of the house did not tend to soothe him. At breakfast Charlotte was icily polite, the Judge restrained and taciturn. Sophy did not come down till after ten. She suggested a ride. This ride also was very trying for them both. He began with the old arguments. She answered with a sad listlessness, but with an under note of determination which made him feel angry and discouraged.

The day was so triumphantly clear after the great wind of yesterday that it seemed to emphasize their inner gloom.

After luncheon they went for a walk together, and

again they had "great argument about it, and about." They were frightfully unhappy, and one as determined as the other. Yet Belinda would keep stealing upon Loring's thought—the Belinda of that ridiculous, odious dream, with her white breasts peeping through red petals and the tip of her pretty feline tongue between her teeth. He could hear her saying: "*Didn't I do it well? Not a drop of blood!*" Damn dreams, anyway!... As if a man hadn't enough to contend with by day!...

About tea-time the camping-party returned in great spirits. Bobby came whooping in to his mother's study waving a big branch of scarlet berries. He stopped short at sight of Loring. A sort of stiffening went through him. Loring, too, stiffened. Then Bobby came forward. They shook hands coldly, more like two men than a man and a little boy. When Bobby went out again, Loring, looking after him, said bitterly:

"There goes one of the chief causes of division between us."

"Never, never have I put him before you!" cried Sophy, with a painful flush. "Be just to me, Morris; at least be just to me."

He said sullenly:

"You didn't need to 'put him' ... he was always there."

Sophy parted her lips to deny passionately, then closed them again. What was the use? They must not come to recriminating each other.

"Oh, Morris," she pleaded, a moment later, "let's be kind to each other! Let's have kindness to remember..."

He gave that short, ugly laugh of his.

"You think you're being kind, eh?"

Chesney's tone—almost his words again! Sophy, too, had her haunting nightmare.

The third day Loring decided to speak with Judge Macon "man to man." He asked for a private interview. The Judge gravely ushered him into his sanctum. As during that first "serious talk" with Sophy, he established himself in the revolving-chair before his desk. Loring sat to one side. He was pale and felt abominably nervous. The Judge looked calm and noncommittal. He waited for Loring to begin.

The young man began rather unfortunately:

"Sophy tells me she's confided in you about this teapot tempest of ours," he said. "I find it's devilish hard to get a woman to look sensibly at such things. But you're a man, Judge ..."

"Yes," admitted the Judge imperturbably, as the other paused.

".... You're a man," Loring continued. "You know that these ... a ... little lapses will occur 'in the best-regulated households'...."

The Judge's face took on suddenly the expression of a Rhadamanthus.

"May I ask what you refer to?" he said starkly.

Loring's smile became a rather foolish grin.

"Why ... a ... this ... a ... this—this.... Oh, hang it all, Judge! You've surely kissed some pretty woman besides your wife in twenty years of marriage!"

He was rather startled by the effect of this jocose insinuation. The Judge suddenly stood up. Wrath and disgust transformed his kindly face.

"I allow no liberties from any man," he said, in his deepest bass.

Loring, also, leaped to his feet. He looked genuinely dismayed and confounded.

"But ... but ... I meant no liberty...." he stammered.

"Then," said the Judge, in no wise placated, "your idea of what constitutes a liberty differs fundamentally from mine."

He remained standing.

"Do you mean to say...?" fumbled Loring.

"I mean this," retorted the Judge: "That to the best of my poor ability I strive to conduct myself according to the teaching of the Christian faith." (The Judge, like Charlotte, always became Johnsonian when righteously wrathful.) "The Founder of that Faith pronounced once for all upon the question that you refer to as a 'little lapse.' He said: 'He that looketh upon a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.'"

The blood beat into Loring's face. He looked away from the other's contemptuous eyes. He was too dumfounded to feel resentful at the moment. Somehow it never occurred to him to doubt the Judge's perfect sincerity. He was dumfounded just because he believed in it. Here was actually a man who looked upon strict faithfulness in marriage as onerous on both sexes.

There is no one so fiercely chaste as the Southerner

who believes in the sanctity of marriage. "Philandering" is not admitted in his code. He would call it by a plainer and a coarser name.

When Loring had recovered his wits, he apologised profusely and meekly. But the interview was not a success. The Judge was now too frankly on Sophy's side in the matter. He thought the whole situation deeply to be deplored, but he gave, as his judicial opinion, that in such cases the process of "patching up" was never successful.

Loring left the study, humiliated and downcast. He realised that he had not only lost Sophy's love but the friendship of a man whom he really valued. Somehow, though he tried to jeer at the Judge for a narrow-minded old fossil who had never known the true fire of manhood, he could not actually do so. Something in him knew that the old Virginian was every inch a man. The strength of his passions was apparent in his dark, powerful face. But these passions had been curbed by a principle—an ideal. And, drearily enough, Loring began to wonder less at Sophy's present attitude. It was from the loins of men like this that she had sprung. She came of a race that required chastity in husbands as well as in wives. What made it all so overwhelming was that Loring knew well that he "had committed adultery already in his heart." It was as though his spirit were being arraigned by these people. That he had only kissed a woman made no difference to them. To them it was adultery in the heart....

When he had been at Sweet-Waters a week, something happened that absolutely staggered him.

He felt, when he read a certain item in a letter from his mother, as though he had received a violent blow in the midriff. He had ridden down to the station at mail-time, and opened this letter on his way back. The portion of its contents that so undid him ran as follows:

"What I am going to tell you now, my dear boy, is a family secret as yet. Eleanor is delighted. I reserve my opinion. I wish to hear what *you* think on the subject. Of course, from a worldly standpoint the match is a very brilliant one for Belinda...." For *Belinda*?... Loring held the letter nearer his eyes. He thought that he must have read the name wrong. His mother's writing was not always easy to read. No. It was plain enough this time. The word was "Belinda." His eyes gulped the following pages. "She seems in high spirits—but then her spirits are always high. But I must explain. She is engaged to Lewis Cuthbridge. He was in your set at Harvard, he tells me. He is certainly what people would call very handsome, and, as you know, the Cuthbridges are extremely rich. But I don't care for that kind of good looks myself. He is too red and white and black for a man in your old mother's opinion. I like a more distinguished type...."

"God! Get on ... get on ... get on!..." Loring was raging in his mind. His eyes glanced avidly ahead. He read: "They certainly seem very much in love with each other. Belinda, I think, shows all her feelings far too openly. They make a very striking couple. But haven't I heard that Lewis Cuthbridge was rather 'wild'? I surely have that impression. I should have preferred a more settled character for Belinda. Some one of mature opinions—a professional man, steady in his habits...."

"Get on ... *get on* ... can't you?..." Loring's thought was urging angrily again. He skipped ahead.

"What gives me the greatest concern, though, is that the whole affair is to be so hurried. They are to be married at Christmas, and go straight to India. It seems that Belinda is very anxious to see the East. But the engagement will not be announced until the last part of November. I am most anxious to talk with you about this young man," *et cetera, et cetera*.

Loring crammed the letter into his pocket. The glare of the sunlight on the sheet of white paper had set reddish spots dancing before his eyes. He rode on in a wild flare of outraged protest for half a mile, the horse going as it willed, at a lazy walk. Suddenly it snorted and leaped forward, feeling the jab of spurs in its sides. It ran away indignantly for quite a mile. Then Loring pulled it in, and again they subsided to a dawdling foot pace.

The spurs had been jabbed into Poor Aleck because Loring had suddenly thought of Cuthbridge's too red mouth under its too black moustache.... Of this mouth and of Belinda's....

"Engaged"!... The little devil!... So this was her way of paying him off!... The callous, revengeful little devil!... But then it couldn't be allowed.... He knew too much about Lewis Cuthbridge to think for a moment of allowing him to marry one of the women of his family.... Belinda might not be a blood-relation, but that made no difference. It must be put a stop to—at once—at once! He would write his mother. His head spun. He felt as though some one had his brain in a sling and were whirling it round and round.

When he reached the house, he went up to his own room, locked the door, and, dropping into a chair, pulled out the crushed letter and read it over. Then he jumped up and began striding to and fro in a blind fury. The crash of a chair that he flung out of his way startled him into self-realisation. He recalled Griffeth's warning after that last outbreak in Newport, and sat down again, battling for self-control. And boiling up in him with his wild rage came the old, mad passion for the girl. Those lips—those lips that he had made his own at such cost!—given to that low blackguard!... Pah! The things he knew of the brute!... And now ... now.... Perhaps at this very minute.... Oh, he understood how men could beat women!... He could have dragged Belinda out of that hound's arms by the hair of her head—and beaten her with his fists!... He remembered Griffeth's words again, and again got some sort of hold upon himself....

Morals are more a matter of geography than we like to admit. Loring, an indifferent member of Christianised society, would have made a very respectable Mohammedan.

He withstood for two days the gnawing, racking desire to go and see for himself just "how things were." Then he gave in. He told Sophy that he had decided to go away and think over this crisis between them by himself. Sophy, who had also heard from Mrs. Loring of Belinda's engagement, understood quite well why he was leaving so suddenly. Something in her was glad and sad both at this knowledge. "It is the end," she thought. And

endings are always sad. It is said that prisoners of many years leave their cells with a certain regret. Convalescents often have this queer nostalgia on quitting the sick-room. Sophy had known far more sorrow than joy in her marriage with Loring, and yet it was with a mysterious, indescribable, contradictory pain that she held up her cheek for his farewell kiss. He said that he would see her again in two or three weeks. But she felt utterly sure that this was their final parting. Very pale, she held his hand in both hers.

"I wish you all good ... all good, Morris," she whispered. "Whatever comes ... you know that, don't you?"

"I think so ... yes. I know it," he said unsteadily.

The carriage was waiting for him. There was no one else about. She went down the old stone steps of the portico, and stood there while he got in. She was not going to drive to the station with him. Neither of them wanted to say good-by in public. As he took his seat, she put out her hand and tucked in the rug which had slipped. He caught this kind hand and his face broke into a shamed wretchedness. One of the horses plunged impatiently. Their hands were torn apart.

As he drove off and Sophy was left standing alone in the autumn sunlight, they both felt as those in old times must have felt when the sword was pulled from a wound and death came as a relief with the gush of blood. It was like death in many ways, this parting; but it was also an unspeakable relief.

XLIII

Loring's mother had written that Belinda was now with her at Nahant.

He arrived there late the next day, and learned that Lewis Cuthbridge was stopping in the neighbourhood and was expected to dinner. He did not see Belinda until she came down to the drawing-room. He was already there alone when Cuthbridge was announced. They had never liked each other. Now, instinct turned dislike to loathing. It was hard for them to be ordinarily civil. But while Loring's detestation amounted to fury, Cuthbridge only thought Loring "a sour, ill-bred cub." He was by several years the elder of the two, and showed it. As Mrs. Loring had said, he was good-looking, but too exuberantly so. He looked almost "made up," with his white forehead, red lips, shoe-black hair, and eyes of a dense, swimming blue. And he was also slightly fat. As he sat there with crossed legs, talking to Mrs. Horton, Loring thought the way that his full, pleasure-loving thigh filled tight the sleek black cloth of his trousers was one of the most obnoxious things he had ever seen. He hated that plump, self-assured thigh and the glossy black stripe that curved along it.

Belinda came down all in light yellow, with a scarf of pale green about her shoulders. She wore the knot of topazes over one ear, as at that first dance in Newport. When she saw Loring, she said "Hullo, Morry!" in her coolest voice.

Cuthbridge regarded her with an air of ownership for

which Loring itched to smash him. He quoted, waving a thick, white hand with too-polished nails:

"'Daffy-down-dilly has come up to town
In a yellow petticoat and a green gown.'"

Belinda went and stood before him, shaking out her yellow petals.

"D'you really like it, Lewis? Is this the shade of green you meant?"

She held up an end of her scarf. She was very charming with this new air of almost docile appeal. Her eyes said that it mattered oh, so much to her! whether Lewis found her scarf the right shade of green or not. He came closer—took the thin stuff over his own hand—held it up against her face.

"Yes. That's it," he said finally. "It's just that foliage effect I wanted to get; throws out your hair and skin stunningly."

When Cuthbridge alluded to Belinda's "skin," Loring could scarcely keep his hands off him. He was sick with pent rage. He sat near the fire pretending to look at the evening paper. He could see them quite plainly—every gesture—without raising his eyelids.

Now Belinda had her hand in Cuthbridge's bulging, black-sleeved arm. She was cooing to him as she used to coo to Loring:

"And where's the prize I was promised for getting myself up all green-and-yellow, like a bruise?"

"Oh ... you mercenary child!" reproached Cuthbridge. "Isn't my homage reward enough?"

"Not by a long shot!" said Belinda ringingly. "You've

spoiled me, you know, Santa...." She broke off, and addressed Loring over her shoulder: "I call him 'Santa Claus,' Morry, because he's always bringing me such bully presents."

Loring thought of the lines in the classic rhyme on Santa Claus:

"... A little round belly,
That shook when he laughed like a bowlful of jelly."

He longed to quote them. But he held on to himself. He merely said:

"Most engaging pet-name, I'm sure...." and went on with his paper.

Belinda was already coaxing Cuthbridge again.

"Come, now—fork up! I know you've got something for me hidden away in some pocket or other...."

Cuthbridge chuckled knowingly. This fat, pasha-like chuckle almost sent Loring bounding from his seat.

The next thing he heard was a little scream of delight from Belinda:

"Oh, Santa!... You dear ... you *angel*!... Oh, *you* shall have a prize for this!... Just you wait.... Look, mater! Just *look* what Lewis has brought me this time!"

Morris glanced up to see the girl whirling about with a necklace of great emeralds looped from hand to hand. The big, translucent stones hung like threaded coals of green fire from her white fingers. She danced up to her mother, then to Loring, thrusting the jewels under their noses.

"Emeralds! Emeralds!" she sang. "I'd sell my soul for

emeralds!"

"If you had one to sell...." said Morris under his breath to her.

She didn't seem to hear him. Dancing back to Cuthbridge, she put the necklace into his hands again, and turning her back lowered her white nape and cushion of ruddy hair before him.

"Put them on for me, Santa," she said. "I must *feel* them on me...."

Loring stifled with helpless rage, while those thick white over-manicured hands fumbled about the soft throat of Belinda. Oh!... But just wait until he got her by herself!

Now she cried out, laughing:

"Oooo ... oo! How *cold* they are!"

Cuthbridge said low, but not too low for Loring to hear:

"Ah ... but they'll be beautifully warm in a few minutes!..."

His voice gloated. So did his hands and his heavy, dense-blue eyes. He was altogether a rather unpleasantly "gloatful" person, as a lover. Loring quivered with wrath and nausea. He would have liked to tear Cuthbridge "from the scabbard of his limbs."

"Dinner is served," said the old butler.

It was not until the next day at tea-time that Loring got a chance to see Belinda alone. He came in just as she and her mother also returned from a drive. "I

must go up to have tea with Grace," said Mrs. Horton. "You give Morry his tea, Linda."

"All right-o!" said Belinda cheerfully. She was her most glittering self. Hair, eyes, brilliant skin and teeth—all were shimmering, as though she gave forth a transparent, throbbing glow like a landscape in the summer sun. She was all in green to-day, a vivid, bright green cloth that sheathed her closely. Her shining, ruddy head rose from the rich bitumen-black of costly furs. One of the many gifts of her Santa Claus—Loring guessed. He longed to snatch them from her throat and chuck them into the fire.

"Don't wonder you stare, old boy," said she, with her gayest grin. "I know I look a Katydid in all this green —but Lewis is just dotty about my wearing green...."

Mrs. Horton had left the room. Loring looked at her, narrowing his lids.

"You little light-o'-love...." he said, in a low, level voice.

"Oh, tut-tut-tut!" said Belinda, with grieved reproof. "'Sich langwidge' for a tea-party!"

".... Little heartless wanton...." Loring continued, in the same voice. "Mercenary, too ... like all your kind.... Even *he* ... that fat louse! ... called you mercenary...."

"Really ... I shall have to put disinfectant in your tea instead of cream," mocked Belinda.

Then he pounced on her. He caught her by both wrists and jerked her to her feet before him, almost upsetting the tea-things.

"Answer me...." he said. "Has that brute kissed you?"

"Yes, dear," said Belinda, eyeing him calmly; but the garnet sparkles were in her eyes.

"You...!" He choked, controlled himself. "On the mouth?" he asked huskily.

"Oh, yes, dear!" said Belinda, and she laughed. His gaunt, furious face filled her with fierce joy. He was paying—paying—paying. Drop by drop she would wring from him all that he owed her. She had never enjoyed anything more in her fierce, wilful little life —not even Loring's kisses—than she enjoyed lying to him now. For she was lying when she said that Cuthbridge had kissed her on her lips—at least, in the way that Morris meant. Perhaps one of her chief charms for the satiated young roué to whom she was engaged was her Cossack-maiden savagery of reluctance in matters of pre-marital love-making. But she chose that Morris should think that another man with the right to do it had kissed her as he had once kissed her, with no right but what her own love had given him.

He stood now, looking at her, his face inflamed with the strange fever of mingled hatred and desire. "*Faugh!*" he said at last, turning from her as from something sickening.

She laughed again, and began calmly selecting four of the largest lumps of sugar for her tea. As she did so, she hummed an air from the latest musical comedy. Oh, she had him! She had him "where she wanted him." He might rage round the arena of circumstance like an infuriated young bull. She was the Matadora who knew how to tame him.

He was back again in a moment or two. The red gleam of her cloak of insolence maddened and

attracted him at the same time—just as a real Matador's cloak maddens and charms a real bull. He stood over her, hands in pockets, "to keep from wringing her neck," he told himself.

"Look here," he said. "I suppose you mean me to believe you love that bounder?"

"Why no—— What d'you take me for?" she said, a lump of sugar in one cheek. She crunched down on it contentedly with the last words.

"Better not ask what I take you for," said Loring hotly. "You're a cool hand, Linda; but I don't think you'd stay cool if I formulated my opinion of you."

"And I wonder if *you'd* stay *at all* if I gave *my* opinion of *you*?" asked she, grinning.

Loring clenched his hands that he still kept in his pockets.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, "that you're going to marry this brute without loving him?"

"Oh, well.... Marriage 'makes the heart grow fonder,' they say," she retorted easily.

"Good God!... How dare you say such things to me ... to *me*?" burst out Loring furiously.

"And why not 'to you ... to *you*'?" she mimicked.

She slid suddenly from the edge of the table on which she had been perched, and went up close in front of him. The garnet fire blazed in her eyes now. Her black brows were drawn down close over them.

"See here, Morry," she said. "I'll give you a straight tip: You can't play dog-in-the-manger with *me*. You

can behave decently to me or ... clear out!"

It was Loring's turn to laugh.

"'Clear out'?" he exclaimed. "Well, of all the cool minxes!— '*Clear out*' did you say? ... from my own mother's house?... I'd like to know how you mean to accomplish it?"

Belinda gave him a look of supreme and contemptuous insolence.

"*I'll tell Lewis the truth about you*," said she.

Then Loring "saw red." Without a word, he seized her in his arms.

"Aren't you afraid to say such things to me?" he demanded thickly. "Aren't you afraid...?"

"No," said Belinda. But just for a second she was afraid. There had been such a gleam of dementia in his eyes.

"Yes, you are afraid," he said, still holding her fast. "Little devil ... you *are* afraid.... And you need be ... you need be...." He laughed cruelly. "If I were an Oriental," he went on, "I'd cut off your lips for having let another man touch them...." His face suffused suddenly. He bent it down over hers. "Give them to me all the same...." he muttered. "Give me your lips, Linda. They're mine...."

For answer, she pressed them inward until they were only a thin mark in her face. Her eyes glittered up at him, defiant, rebellious, fiercely mocking.

The passion ebbed gradually from his own face. As he still held her, and she still continued to keep her full lips turned inward, he broke into a helpless,

unwilling laugh. "Of all the little brutes...." he muttered unsteadily. At last he let her go. She backed away from him, then her lips curled free again, redder for their imprisonment. She smiled with impish delight at the success of her simple device.

"And yet women say they've been kissed against their wills!" she gurgled gleefully. "We *are* liars ... we women, Morry, dear!"

Something in her tone gave him a queer hope. He went up to her again. He said in a voice that trembled a little:

"Have *you* lied to *me*, Linda?... Was it a lie when you told me that beast had kissed you?... Had kissed your mouth?"

Belinda certainly had inspirations. She looked at him with her most melting yet most wayward look. Her dimples flickered.

"Well ... I guess he didn't enjoy the sort of kisses he *did* get," she murmured.

"Linda...." whispered Loring. "Linda...."

The sudden revulsion of mood made him dizzy.

"Oh ... Linda," he repeated, and, putting out his arms, drew her to him again.

But she was quite serious now. Frowning a little, and swayed back stiffly in his grasp, she said:

"See here, Morry—you've called me some hard names. But I'll let that pass. I can understand that. What I can't understand, and what I won't let pass is your trying to keep me and your wife at the same time. I won't lie any more—— Yes.... I *did* lie just

now. It did me good all over, too!" And she showed her white teeth in a rather fierce little smile. "But I won't lie any more. I *don't* love Lewis Cuthbridge— I rather loathe him ... but as sure as I live ... as we both live ... unless you break free ... unless you get that divorce, or let her divorce ... I'll marry Lewis within two months. Mind you...." she added, as she felt his arms tighten convulsively, "I'm not lying.... I mean it."

Loring's face looked drawn and curiously hunted.

As she spoke, his eyes followed the movements of her full, soft lips. They curled into such lovely curves when she talked—now hiding her little fine, white lower teeth, now revealing them.

"And if I say I'll do it ... then ... will you kiss me?" he whispered.

A wild thrill sang through Belinda. Her arms, which had been hanging at her sides, whipped round him. She strained him to her.

"If you'll *swear* it ... I will," she whispered back.

"And ... and ... you'll ... give yourself to me ... you'll chuck that brute ... at once?"

Respectability, the only chaperon that ever influenced Belinda, warned sharply. She relaxed her hold of him a little. Her voice took a keener note.

"D'you mean ... will I marry you when you're free?"

Loring paled, then the blood rushed to his face again.

"Yes ... damn it ... I mean that," he said.

She eyed him for a few seconds narrowly. Then she

said:

"You swear it?"

"I swear it," he muttered.

"On your honour?"

"Yes ... on what's left of it."

Belinda stretched upwards against him, like a luxurious young puma, relaxing to pleasure after a long strain of crouching watchfulness.

"Ah ... Morry...." she sighed, and she held up to his her parted, vaguely smiling lips.

XLIV

But that kiss-sealed oath to Belinda did not keep Loring from "going two ways" in his heart, for some time still. He was truly between two fires. He could not bear to let Sophy go in order to keep Belinda. It was unendurable to think of relinquishing Belinda that he might keep Sophy. In the end, however, Belinda won. When it came to the final test, he found that he could more easily let Sophy slip from him into a vague future than resign Belinda to the fat arms of Lewis Cuthbridge. And he suffered. For the best in him clung to Sophy, and he knew that it was with his best that he clung to her.

Belinda saw this inward struggle quite plainly. She remained calm in presence of it. Propinquity was her staunch ally. Besides, she had refused to break her

engagement with Cuthbridge, until Morris could assure her—could let her see "with her own eyes"—that a divorce between him and Sophy had been decided upon past recall.

By the middle of December he was able to satisfy her in this respect. As soon as she was convinced that matters had reached an irrevocable point, she broke her engagement as she had promised. Then she set herself to blot out all possible regret on Loring's part. For this rôle nature had consummately endowed her. Loring's heart had no chance to ache. His frantic passion filled every crevice of his consciousness. Memories, doubts, regrets—all went scurrying before it, like wild things before the onrush of a prairie fire.

As "Venus Victrix," Belinda was quite wonderful. Yet though she was now wholly Venus and triumphant, she still kept homespun Respectability at her elbow. Not a hair's-breadth too far did she permit her inflammable lover to venture. Belinda as Goddess would have compelled all Olympus to address her as Mrs. Vulcan.

And so, towards the end of December, Sophy left Bobby in the care of Charlotte and Harold Grey, and went to desolate, far-western Ontowega. After six months of that desolation she would be free again. It seemed incredible. She did not go alone, however. Susan Pickett, a second cousin of whom she and Charlotte had been very fond since childhood, went with her. Miss Pickett was a delightful spinster of fifty. She had not married, simply because she had never loved a man enough to want to marry him.

No one ever called Susan Pickett "Cousin Susan" or "Aunt Susan." She was "Sue" to all who loved her, young as well as old. She was a tall, vigorous woman, deep-breasted, and of perfect health. Her thick, brown eyebrows were masculine, her large, well-shaped mouth feminine. Her eyes, deep-set, grey, and humorous, might have been either a man's or a woman's. Eyes of this type—when they are kindly affectionate, as in Sue Pickett's case, are the sign of a big, impersonal humanity. It was never necessary to have Sue "on one's mind" even for a moment. She was always occupied in some way, and always serenely content. This is why Sophy ventured to ask her to share with her for six months the abomination of desolation called on the map of the United States Ontowega.

During the first stages of the long, tiresome journey Sophy was conscious only of a heavy, dull weight of determination and flat sadness. She hated the smell of train-smoke. Now it seemed as if this rank, clogging smoke trailed over the whole landscape of her life, past and future. She sat drearily, hour after hour, watching the telegraph poles snatch up the sagging wires as they flew past. The threads of her own life were like that, she thought—dark strands strung from one bare pole of fact to another, endlessly, monotonously. The bare poles had once been trees—living, joyous things. So had the bare facts of her life. Now lopped, stripped, rigid, they hemmed her in, guiding the thread of her destiny to some dull, conventional end—some mechanical fixture in a bleak station to which this hard, beaten road of divorce was leading.

After certain matters at Ontowega had been settled, they found that they could go to the Black Hills of Dakota without disturbing the course of events. They both loved riding. The lawyer told them that there was capital riding about the Black Hills. The place he suggested was called Bear Spring.

The world without lay in great curving swathes of white, pricked out by green-black pines as in an old Japanese print.

On the third day came a bundle of letters forwarded from Ontowega. The two that Sophy kept for the last were from Bobby and Amaldi. How strange it seemed to see the Italian stamp in the snowy wilderness of Bear Spring! And that seal with its arms and motto —"*Che prendo—tengo*".... In a flash there rose the memory of the struggle between Loring and Belinda for Amaldi's ring.... How things could hurt one ... things like the impression of a seal. Then she opened Bobby's letter. At the top was written, "I did not let Mr. Grey see this letter. So please to excuse mistakes. R. C. C." Among other things it said:

> "Mother, since you went away, I have decided a important thing. I have decided to be an Author—like you are. I send you a poim. It is called 'Plantagenet.' Mr. Grey does not think my best is poertry. He likes the best what I wrote about 'A grey day.' Please tell me which you like best. It is most important, as I must decide as soon as possible if I will be a statesman or a poit.—A author anyhow."

"Plantagenet" began as follows:

"Richard of England, monarch brave,

Bold as the lion that haunts the cave,
Wielding thy battle-axe with a crash,
As into the foe thou dost boldly dash!"

"Oh, my darling little 'poit'!" murmured Sophy, as she read. But she did not think, from "Plantagenet," that Bobby would ever really be a "poit." The "Grey Day," however, was another thing. Sophy had a queer feeling about her heart as she read that.

> "The day is very still. It is grey and tired. It seems old as if the sun had risen a long time ago, and it is too tired to go on. It seems standing there before me so tired. The clouds hang in the air very still. The grey light creeps into the house, and the house is still like the day. All is still and grey, even my thoughts. Only the clock moves, and the fire. Only the fire shines in the greyness. I do not know why it makes me so sad to see the red of the fire in the greyness; I do not know why it is such a sorrowful thing to hear the clock ticking very slowly, or why the rustle of the fire makes me know I am lonely. If my dear mother was with me she could interprit it to me like dreams in the bible. But then if my mother was with me, I think this grey day would seem shining. I think the still would only be quiitness if my mother was with me."

As Sophy read these last words she raised them to her lips. It seemed to her that Bobby need not fear about becoming "a author anyhow." She could not think that it was only mother-love that made "A Grey Day" seem unusual to her.

Then she opened Amaldi's letter. Here, too, was an

unexpected pleasure. She had found his letters charming from the first, but in this one it was as if he had put aside a certain reserve that she had always noticed before. He might have been talking to her over a log fire at Le Vigne—— Or, no, she corrected herself with a smile—never had Amaldi "talked" to her with the ease, the fulness, the alternate gaiety and depth with which he wrote to her in this long, delightful letter. She sat holding it in her hand when she had finished reading it, trying to recall clearly his dark, irregular face and olive eyes—the sound of his voice. And she smiled again, thinking of the Corinthians' opinion of Paul: ".... His letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; ... but his speech is contemptible." "Dear Amaldi...." she thought, still smiling. "I wonder how it is that you are such a silent man as a rule, and yet can write such perfectly adorable letters?"

She put his letter with Bobby's and laid them both away. For a long time she stood at her bedroom window looking out over the snowy wilds towards the sunset. The afterglow burned red through the inky pines. The snow shone a queer, witch-like blue in the twilight. Sophy saw it all without seeing. She was thinking that there were beautiful things in her life still ... that she ought to be very grateful ... that after a while she ought even to be happy in them....

But as she gazed at the smouldering watchfires of the west, Bobby's words came back to her: "I do not know why it makes me so sad to see the red of the fire in the greyness...."

XLV

Sophy told Miss Pickett all about Amaldi. Sometimes she would read her extracts from his letters when they were unusually delightful.

One day, towards spring, when Sophy had been thus reading to her, she said thoughtfully:

"Sophy, child—you aren't afraid of preparing a new unhappiness for yourself?"

Sophy laughed out.

"Oh, Sue," she cried, "that's the first old-maidish thing I ever heard you say!"

"Old maids are very wise sometimes," returned Miss Pickett calmly. "The Delphian Oracle was an old maid as far as I can make out."

Sophy said in a disappointed voice:

"Sue ... don't you believe in friendship between men and women?"

"I certainly do. No one has stauncher men friends than I have."

"Then why on earth don't you think I can have them?"

Miss Pickett twinkled.

"'Twasn't a question of *them*," she said demurely. "There's safety in numbers. I was referring to this particular one."

Sophy said reproachfully:

"Sue ... do you really think I'm the sort of woman to

flirt with a man on paper, while I'm getting a divorce?"

Miss Pickett, still quite calm, replied:

"No, honey, you know I don't think so."

"Then what *do* you think?" demanded Sophy, beginning to bristle a little.

"I think," said her cousin, putting down her embroidery on her lap for a moment, and looking quizzical but profound, "that *sometimes* congeniality is more dangerous than passion."

Sophy returned her look a little loftily.

"Dear Sue," said she, "haven't you really taken in that all that side of me is dead ... quite dead?"

"No ... 'playing 'possum,'" flashed Miss Pickett.

"Oh, have your little joke by all means," said Sophy, smiling. "But after all it's '*my* funeral' as they say out here.... I suppose the corpse knows better than any one else whether it's dead or not."

"On the contrary—the corpse doesn't know anything whatever about it," said her cousin. "If you were really a corpse, my lamb, you wouldn't know it."

Sophy looked almost hurt.

"Won't you allow me to know about my own nature, Sue?" she asked.

Now Miss Pickett smiled.

"Nature," said she, "is as fond of revivals as a nigger."

On a hot, gusty, dusty day in summer, having

returned to Ontowega, they set forth with the lawyer to go before the Judge who was to give Sophy a decree of divorce. The little town looked more hideous than ever in the glare of summer. Such trees as grew along the board sidewalks were grey with dust. The pettish wind flung handfuls of grit into their eyes and nostrils. Sophy followed Mr. Dainton's tall, scraggy figure like a hypnotised "subject." She had but to follow that round-shouldered, obstinate looking back into the yellow-brick square of the "Town Hall" that loomed just ahead, and she would be free. That lank, black figure with its ravel of grey locks escaping from under a black "wide-awake" was the Nikè that led on to Freedom.

Emerald Dainton, the lawyer's little nine-year-old daughter, skipped at Sophy's side, clinging tightly to her cold, gloveless hand—for Sophy's hands were very cold though the thermometer stood at 85 degrees. Emerald had a "mash" on "pa's last divorce lady." That is what Emerald called Sophy in her thought. She was a shrewdly intelligent child, not unattractive, with the most penetrating green-hazel eyes that Sophy had ever seen. She shrank from these eyes, when they fixed consideringly on her face. She could feel Emerald wondering how and why she had come to Ontowega as "pa's" client. She had an insane impulse every now and then to ask the child her views on divorce. She was sure that she held views on the subject and that they would be crisp and to the point.

They entered the Court House, and Mr. Dainton showed the ladies into a dingy room on the left. Emerald skipped in also as a matter of course. There were some plain wooden chairs, a table, a stove, and in one corner behind the stove a horsehair sofa.

From one of the wooden chairs rose a mealy tinted but clever looking man of about forty. Mr. Dainton "presented" him as Mr. Wogram. He was Loring's representative. Mr. Dainton then excused himself for a moment. He returned shortly to say that Judge Boiler was just about to dismiss a case in the Court Room, and would be with them in a few moments.

A desultory conversation on politics then began between Mr. Wogram and Mr. Dainton. Sue and Sophy sat silently side by side on two of the wooden chairs. Sue had put one of her hands on Sophy's and was gripping it tighter than she knew. Emerald had retired to the horsehair sofa behind the stove.

There was a maple tree just outside of the window. An opening in its twigs and leaves made a ridiculous profile against the white-blue dazzling sky. Sophy gazed at this profile, until when she looked away she saw it swimming in green and red on the whitewashed walls. She thought in odds and ends. Then Judge Boiler entered and was introduced. He sat down finally before the bare table and assumed his air of office. He was a heavy, impassive looking man of fifty with a pale, dyspeptic skin, pale blue eyes and thick whitey-brown hair going grey.

Just as proceedings were about to open, Sophy noticed Emerald's little many-buttoned boots and red stockings protruding from behind the stove. She looked at Dainton and the blood swept over her face.

"Excuse me for interrupting ... but your little girl is still in the room, Mr. Dainton," she said.

The lawyer jumped up and drew a protesting Emerald from her horsehair coign of vantage.

"Please, pa ... *lemme* stay!" she whined. "*I* might have to get divorced some time. I want to see how you fix it up. *Please*, pa!"

Mr. Dainton whispered fiercely that he'd "smack her if she didn't shut up that minute." Father and daughter disappeared into another room. Then the father reappeared alone, and the case of Loring v. Loring proceeded....

When it was all over and Mr. Wogram had taken his leave with jerky bows to friend and foe alike, Mr. Dainton turned to Sophy, with a curious reminiscence of the facetious manner in which one addresses brides, and said:

"Allow me to congratulate you ... Mrs. *Chesney*!"

Judge Boiler did likewise.

Sophy had one dreadful moment of fear, regret, grief, distaste—the awful vertigo of the irrevocable. She tried to smile conventionally. Sue slipped an arm through hers, held her close without seeming to do so, and talked for her—nice, easy, well-sounding commonplaces. While she was thus talking, Mr. Dainton stalked to the inner door and, flinging it open, called jocosely:

"Come along in, Maldy. The knot's untied...."

Emerald sidled in, looking sulky but curious. She eyed Sophy a moment, then said in a loud whisper:

"Is she really divorced?"

"Sure thing," replied her parent

"You did it quick as that, pa? Truly?"

"Truly," said he.

"My!" exclaimed Emerald, overcome with admiration. "I guess it takes longer to hitch 'em up than to unhitch 'em, when *you* do the unhitching, pa!"

Then she skipped over to Sophy, and clung to her hand again. Her green-hazel eyes devoured the tall, pale lady's face. She was fairly a-quiver to participate in the emotions of the divorced heroine.

"Well...." she said. "Now you're *un*-married. Are you happy?"

Sue looked like a hawk about to pounce, but Sophy answered quietly:

"I really don't know, Emerald," she said.

"But you ain't *sorry* you did it, are you?" persisted the child.

This was too much for the patience of a childless woman. Miss Pickett took Miss Dainton by the hand and led her firmly to her father.

"Please explain to your little girl,", said she, "that there are some occasions where children should not be seen, much less heard."

Mr. Dainton admitted ruddily that "he guessed that was so." But he would have liked to shake the woman who had snubbed his Emerald.

The child pouted a while, then sidled up to Sophy again as they walked through the hot, gusty streets towards the hotel. It seemed impossible for her to resist the double fascination that Sophy exercised over her, as woman and as *divorcée*. Sophy let the child take her passive hand. She was hardly

conscious of it, so far was she in a world of alien thought.

Father and daughter escorted them to the Palace Hotel, where they said final good-bys. The two women went upstairs in silence. Without taking off her hat Sophy sat down, still in that brown study. Her eyes were fixed vaguely on the white satin "Regulations" over the door. Miss Pickett moved about, putting articles into her open trunk. They were to leave for Virginia on the midnight train. Every now and then she would glance at Sophy, but she said nothing.

Presently Sophy spoke to her.

"It's very painful ... being born, Sue."

"'Being born'?" said Miss Pickett, stopping on her way to the trunk with an odd shoe in her hand.

"Yes, Sue.... It's hard. It hurts.... Drawing in the first breaths hurts.... When I've breathed really deep, it will be different...."

"Yes— I understand, lamb," said Sue softly.

Sophy went on, her eyes still fixed on the white satin scroll.

"You know, Sue ... it's said that when one dies and wakes up in quite another state, one doesn't realise that one has died just at first. Well ... I feel something like that. I've come into a queer, new state of being. I can't seem to realise myself or anything just yet."

"Yes, dear," said her cousin, fitting the shoe into a corner of the trunk, and coming back to sit down near her. Sophy reached out one hand mechanically,

and Sue took it in both her own, with quiet, matter-of-fact affection. Sophy still gazed before her, seeing nothing.

"It's a queer thing to say, Sue," she continued after a moment, "but I don't think I've lived at all yet ... not really."

This *did* seem odd to Miss Pickett, but she thought it due to a certain inevitable old-maidishness on her part, and gave no sign.

"I'll try to explain what I mean," said Sophy. "I've loved love all my life. But love isn't given us just to love ... the love between two people—a man and a woman ... is only one tiny part of love. Yes...." She knitted her straight brows trying to bring her thought to clearness for the other. "That kind of love—if it tries to be an end in itself *has* to die ... to wither away. Or, if it does last, then the soul withers."

She smiled suddenly, turning her eyes on her cousin.

"I think the Serpent was really kinder to Adam and Eve, when he got them turned out of Eden, than Jehovah was when he shut them up in it," she said.

"How's that?" asked Miss Pickett, startled, for she was rather orthodox in her views on religious form, though her big heart made her more unconventional in practise.

"Why, just think of it for a moment," Sophy answered. "If the Serpent hadn't interrupted their *tête-à-tête*—there they would be to this day—wandering love-sick among fadeless flowers, with nothing, nothing, nothing before them but an eternity of love-making!" Her pale face alight with

mingled whimsicality and sadness, she added, leaning closer: "Sue ... I'll whisper you something.... *The Serpent was Jehovah in disguise, Sue!*"

A second later she said:

"Don't be vexed, dear, will you?... It's such a comfort thinking aloud to you like this...."

"No, indeed. Go on. I won't be vexed," Miss Pickett assured her warmly. "You always were an irreverent monkey—but then the Lord made monkeys. He knows how to allow for their antics."

But Sophy was intent upon her own train of thought again and only smiled absently at this indirect reproof.

"Two lessons...." she then said slowly. "It took two bitter lessons to teach me the truth about love—the sort of love that I always dreamed of as supreme—the love that is 'like an Archangel beating his iridescent wings in the void'...."

Miss Pickett could not follow the subtleties of Sophy's musing, she could only feel the pain that underlay it. She said gently:

"You mustn't deny love, honey, just because it's failed you. I don't ever want to see my child grow bitter."

"It's only one kind of love that I'm denying, Sue—not Eros, but Anteros ... the false god.... He comes in a lovely glamour. He's the rainbow on the foam of breaking waves. When the sea is still he vanishes. My bitterness is only against myself—for having worshipped a false god."

"Well, child—maybe you have. But thank the Lord! no mistake is final at your age...."

"My mistakes have been very final for me, Sue. I've laid all my frankincense and myrrh on the altar of Anteros, I've nothing to offer the true god. But there's my son ... my defeat shall make his victory. There shall be one man in the world who knows the true god from the false. Some woman shall be glad through my pain. Some day, when a woman loves my Bobby, she shall be able to say: 'This is my beloved and this is my *friend*!'"

Sue glanced quickly at her, but her expression was wholly unconscious. She was not thinking of Amaldi in that moment. She was only thinking that love to be real, to be perfect, to be lasting must include friendship, comradeship, understanding, mutual endeavour. That to retain its fulness it must give out to others besides the one, give incessantly, untiringly, without stint, without grudging. That instead of raising magic walls of enclosure, it should level all barriers.

She took another tone suddenly.

Colour came into her face. She looked with darkened eyes at her cousin.

"Sue...." she said. "The fact is that all these years I've been nothing but a miserable happiness-hunter!"

"Nonsense!" said Miss Pickett.

"Just that ... a happiness-hunter," repeated Sophy.

"Well ... and what is everybody else doing but hunting happiness, I'd like to know?" retorted her cousin. "Even the martyrs were after it! If they hadn't found happiness in martyrdom they wouldn't have sought it, you may be sure. Don't be morbid, child, for goodness' sake!"

"I'm not morbid. And what you say is true in a way. But there is selfish happiness and unselfish happiness, and what I've wanted was the selfish kind. I wanted love *all to myself*. What do I know of life really?... What do I know of what's going on in the real world?... Oh, 'it is good for me that I have been afflicted!' It is something, at least, that I can say that from my soul—with all my might. It is good ... it is *good* for me.... I'm glad the Serpent has come into Eden.... I'm glad that I've eaten of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil!... Now I'm going out into the wilderness of life, and I'm going to learn how to live. I'm just born, but I'm going to 'put aside childish things' ... that toy called happiness, with all the rest!"

Miss Pickett gazed at the ardent face, with affection. Then she smiled wisely.

"Perhaps, honey," she said, "you'll find happiness in doing without it. At any rate—you seem right happy at the prospect of not being happy."

Sophy rose and, kneeling down beside her, leaned her head on that kind breast.

"Do you know, Sue," she said dreamily, "after all, it's rather wonderful to feel that one has done with love, and yet finds life worth while."

"Is it, dear?" said Sue.

"Yes, it is. You know Socrates was glad when he had passed the age of love. Now I understand why that was. I never did before."

Sue Pickett said nothing, only stroked the dark head upon her breast. But a rather cryptic smile stirred her lips. She was thinking that from all she had read and

heard, two beings could hardly differ more essentially than Sophy and the Sage of Athens.

XLVI

Sophy spent the rest of that summer and the following winter at Sweet-Waters. She did not wish to go among people so soon after her divorce, besides she felt the need of self-adjustment to her new relations with life.

That sense of being unreal in a world of unreality, which she had mentioned to Susan Pickett on the day of the divorce, lasted for some time. Then, in the early autumn—in her favourite month of October—began a recrudescence of the imperishable passion for life as opposed to mere existence, that lent her always the elemental charm of fire. Many natures shine in the great dim of circumstance, but with light differently derived. Some are, as one might put it, phosphorescent. In others one divines the pinch of star-dust in the clay—still luminous, still perfervid, as when the cosmic nebula first spun the white hot core of things. It was this mystic fire that glowed again in Sophy, burning clearer for the ash beneath it, even as the humbler, yet still sacred fire of hearths, burns clearer in like case. It was as if in resigning her desire for one supremely personal love, Love itself had drawn nearer. Motherhood meant for her now, not only her feeling for her little son, but an aching towards all unmothered things. It was not *welt-schmerz*, this feeling—*welt passion* rather.... She

was like one who has lived for years in a lovely, doorless, painted house, lit by perfumed candles—then one day steps through a sudden break in its wall to face the tremendous sea. Yes—life lay like that before her—perilous but to be drowned in rather than left unessayed—unsailed. The cosmic romance was upon her. She no longer belittled romance to a love-tale—rather it was the adventure of a creative god—Zeus as Poet. And this new, impassioned desire to live fully, largely, universally, so confused her in the beginning, that she hardly knew where first to turn—so vast were her ignorances—so clamorous the wave-like voices that called from every side.

She felt a great thirst to know more of the vital questions of the day. She awoke to the fact that the time was in the throes of parturition. Something huge, cyclopean, was being born. Change already stared iron-eyed from the cradle of the twentieth century and hammered with fists of brass. Now was nascent its twin Disorder. She read until her brain reeled and her heart ached. Giddy and downcast, she bared her mind to the bludgeonings of tremendous questions which she could not adequately comprehend. Then common sense—kind old nurse—whispered soothingly: "'Seek not out things that are too hard for thee.' There is a glory of the stars of Political Economy, and another of the moon of Poetic Faculty. Thou shalt comprehend by intuition what will never be given thee by ratiocination. For 'if a man's mind is sometimes wont to tell him more than seven watchmen that sit above in an high tower,' a woman's heart can divine the very stars above the tower and draw down influences as sweet as those of Pleiades for the sustainment of her spirit."

So Sophy left off trying to understand clearly all the

"ologies" and fly-wheel within fly-wheel movements of the day, and contented herself with a general apprehension of the *zeitgeist*. She decided that these gigantic sociological and political questions were for her what the higher mathematics are to the humble arithmetician. She could comprehend that a fourth dimension might exist, but not in what it might consist. It consoled her to remember that in the higher mathematics of existence as of numbers there was an "incalculable quantity." The bigger brains, then, paused at a point higher up, just as hers paused at one lower down.

Then again woke in her the desire to create in her own world of poetry.

All these struggles and hopes, and glees and failures —all this turbulence of her new-straining self, she poured out in her letters to Amaldi, and he answered them in kind. Almost every day they wrote to each other. It seemed incredible to her that her life had once been empty of those letters to which she now looked forward every day as to the simple necessity of food and drink. Never once did he fail to respond to the mood or need from which she wrote—and with so fine, so just a discernment that sometimes he seemed to answer thoughts that she had not written down, but that had been in her mind when she was writing. So exquisitely true was this communication of their minds and natures at a distance that sometimes she almost dreaded meeting him in actuality again. Would not the charm vanish with nearness? She felt that she could far better miss his bodily presence from her life than those wonderful, satisfying letters.

The spring came and with it a new shock for Sophy. She was writing in her old study one March morning when Harold Grey entered with the day's paper in his hand. What he had come to show her was the notice of the death of Lord Wychcote.

Sophy took the paper from him, feeling quite dazed. She grew pale as she read. The notice stated that Viscount Wychcote had died in his sleep at his country seat, Dynehurst, on the night of the second of March. The news had been wired to the *Times* as being of interest in connection with the divorce of Mrs. Morris Loring, whose son, by her first marriage with Lord Wychcote's younger brother, the Hon. Cecil Chesney, would now succeed to the title—etc., etc.

The shock was a double one to Sophy, for in addition to her sincere affection for Gerald, there was the question of the allowance which he had renewed immediately after her divorce. Now this allowance would most probably be stopped. She had no idea whether Gerald had been in a position to leave her anything, or whether, in case the property were all entailed, she would be still given an allowance, as Bobby's mother and guardian. In case she had to depend entirely on her own slender income, she did not see how she could manage to live in England. She supposed that a sum would be apportioned for Bobby's education, but even that was only a surmise.

Within a few days, however, came a full letter from Mr. Surtees. He explained to her that the bulk of the Wychcote property was entailed, but that certain property which had been left to the late Lord Wychcote in fee simple by a maternal aunt, had been willed to her (Mrs. Chesney) by his lordship. This

property consisted of the town house in Regent's Park in which Mrs. Chesney had formerly resided, and a small estate in Warwickshire, called Breene Manor. The Manor house was in good condition, though not of great size. It was a Tudor building and stood in grounds thickly wooded. The situation was salubrious and the view fine, but there was no income from the estate, as Miss Bollinghame, the relative from whom the late Earl inherited the property, had sold all but a hundred acres of the original lands. He wished to explain to Mrs. Chesney, however, that the trustees of the Wychcote property were empowered to advance sums of money for the education and maintenance of her son, and that the money for maintenance would be paid to her as his guardian, in order that she might keep up a position suitable for the young peer. Mr. Surtees ended by venturing to express to Mrs. Chesney his opinion, as the legal adviser of the family, that it would be well for her to come to England with her son as soon as possible.

From the receipt of this letter until two months later, when she was settled at Breene, Sophy moved again in a world of unreality. The quiet of the lovely old house and its surrounding woods and gardens helped to restore her to her normal state once more; for she found Breene a place after her own heart, strangely familiar, as though she had visited it before in dreams. As Mr. Surtees had said, the house was Tudor, but it had been added to and altered during so many other epochs, that it had ended by having a flavour and architecture all its own. For some years it had been leased, and the great walls of yew that enclosed the lawns were smooth and massy from constant clipping. It stood in a crescent of beech woods. Scotch firs towered behind it. To the south

lay rose-gardens sloping to an oval pond.

And this adorable old place was her own. Sophy could scarcely believe it. The first three weeks of her return to England had been spent at Dynehurst with Lady Wychcote. Those had been gloomy weeks indeed, for in addition to the natural sadness of the situation, there had been inevitable friction between her and Lady Wychcote on the subject of Bobby's future. Sophy had known of course that this must come, but she had hoped that it would not come so quickly. Lady Wychcote was intolerant of the idea that Bobby should become a writer. Sophy firmly maintained that the boy should choose his own career. Both women controlled their tempers, but there had been some sharp passages of arms between them. When Sophy went to her room the second night at Dynehurst, she thanked Gerald, as though he had been alive and could hear her, for having made it possible for her to live in a house of her own with her son, apart from his grandmother.

While she was at Dynehurst, Olive Arundel had helped Miss Pickett to get all in order at Breene—for Susan had consented to come and live with Sophy for the next few years.

It was quite wonderful to drive up to the old Manor house in the late April afternoon, and find Susan standing in the open doorway to receive her. Behind her the light from a fire of beech logs flickered over the dark wainscoting. Candles and lamps were lighted. The tea-table stood ready. This was home—her home and Bobby's—this lovely, dignified old house with its sheltering yew hedges shutting out the world until she should need it once again.

XLVII

The only regret that Sophy felt for not living part of the time in London was on account of her friendship with Amaldi. It would have been so much easier for her to see him constantly had she been in town. But then Breene was not so far away. He could easily spend a day with her now and then. Susan's presence would make such visits perfectly proper. In his last letter he had said that he would be in England about the end of April. The symphonies that had met with such acclaim in Dresden were now to be given in London.

Sophy looked forward with more and more of that odd mingling of dread and pleasure to seeing him again. She had found the attempt to realise ideals but a tragic business. And the ideal that she had of their friendship was very high.

But from the first day that Amaldi spent with her at Breene, she knew that her doubts had all been unfounded. Their friendship when together again was more perfect than ever, for the slight constraint that she had so often felt underneath his spoken words seemed quite gone. He talked with her now almost as freely as he had written in those letters that she so treasured. And there was something different, also, in his look, his voice, a naturalness, as it were a relaxing of some inner tension.

She did not realise that never before had Amaldi known her as a free woman. Always before she had belonged to some one else. Now she was her own. What she gave him no one else had any right to. The relief and the joy that he had in this knowledge made him seem another man even to himself at this

time. It was enough for the time being to realise the inviolateness of all her sanctities. This realisation was so wonderful that it stayed for a while the sharp urge of love, and filled the vacancies of absence with a sense of triumph.

As for the little household—Sue Pickett, Bobby, Harold Grey—they all liked Amaldi heartily. And as other friends, both men and women, often "spent a day" at Breene with Sophy, Miss Pickett had no cause to worry over "appearances," as she had frankly feared that she might have to. Still ... Sue was not *quite* easy in her heart over the situation. As she had declared, she did believe in friendship between men and women—but not so very much in a friendship between a man and woman as young and attractive as these two.

Then one day something happened to make her really apprehensive. It was about the end of June. Amaldi and Sophy were in the rose-garden. Through an archway in the yew hedge Susan could see them as she sat with her embroidery under one of the big beeches on the lawn. Sophy was cutting roses. As she cut them she laid them in a basket that Amaldi held for her. The sunlight on her thin white gown, and the red and pink and yellow roses that kept tossing into the basket, gave an effect of light-hearted happiness. Sophy's black sash only heightened this impression. It was as though grief had shrunk to the size of a narrow riband.

And as Sue sat there thinking this, she heard the chugging of a motor, and there was Lady Wychcote sweeping round the lawn, all in black from top to toe, the reverse, as it were, of that bright, sun-washed picture framed by the yew hedge.

Susan had not met Lady Wychcote before, but she guessed in an instant who it was. She went forward, her back pringling with the consciousness of the sunny tableau upon which it was turned.

Lady Wychcote was inclined to be gracious. She had heard of Miss Pickett from Sophy of course. So very good of her to take pity on poor Sophy's solitude. And just as she was saying this, she caught sight of the two in the rose garden. Susan knew that she had seen them by the sudden stiffening of her figure, even before she lifted her *face-à-main* in that direction.

"Who is that with Sophy?" she asked rather abruptly.

"Oh ... an old friend," replied Susan, and the moment the words were uttered she wished them back. They sounded excuse-making somehow. She added quickly: "The Marchese Amaldi."

"Ah?... 'An old friend'?" repeated Lady Wychcote. "I've not met him I think. What did you say the name was?"

"Amaldi.... The Marchese Marco Amaldi...."

"Wait a bit...." said Lady Wychcote. "Though I don't know him, the name seems familiar." She repeated it once or twice: "Amaldi ... Amaldi...." Then she looked quickly at Susan. "Is he by any chance the man whose music has been so much discussed this season?"

"Yes—the same," said Susan.

"Ah ... now I place him. They were talking of him at dinner last night. He has an impossible wife, it seems, that he can't get rid of."

"The Marchese is separated from his wife. There's no divorce in Italy, I believe," said Susan.

"That must seem odd to an American," observed Lady Wychcote in her dryest tone.

Susan resented this tone and the remark, but made no reply.

Her ladyship was again looking towards the garden through her *face-à-main*.

"He's a very good-looking young man, is he not?" she said at last.

"Yes," assented Susan.

"He comes quite often I suppose?"

Susan looked straight at her.

"What would you call often?" she asked.

"Ah—you're annoyed," said Lady Wychcote coolly; "but the fact is, that a young woman in Sophy's position can't be too careful. In England, among people of our class, there's still a strong feeling against divorce. As an American you could hardly realise how deep-rooted this feeling is. I think it right to tell you of it."

"Thanks," said Susan. She turned towards the rose-garden. "If you will come with me...." she suggested, moving forward as she spoke.

But Lady Wychcote made no move to follow her.

"By the way, do you happen to know where my grandson is?" asked she.

"With his tutor. They've ridden over to Carbeck

Castle. A picnic with Lady Towne's children and Mrs. Arundel's little boy. But if you'll follow me, Lady Wychcote, I'll go and tell Sophy that you're here...."

"No. Wait, please," said the other quickly. "I'd like to talk a bit more with you first."

Susan drew forward a wicker chair. Lady Wychcote seated herself, and Susan, following her example, took up her embroidery again. But her fingers felt very nervous. It seemed to her that she had never heard those two in the garden talk and laugh so gaily and incessantly.

"You know Mrs. Arundel, I believe?" now enquired the other, in her chill, brittle voice.

"Yes. She kindly helped me to get this home ready for Sophy."

"You like her?"

The question was a sneer.

"Very much," said Susan rather sharply. She flushed with vexation as she spoke.

Lady Wychcote noticed this flush and divined its cause, but continued with undisturbed composure.

"I'm sorry to seem captious," said she, "but I confess that I'm sorry to hear you say so. In my opinion, Mrs. Arundel is not at all a fitting friend for my daughter-in-law, especially in her present position."

Susan remained silent. She felt too irritated to trust herself.

"I see that you resent what I say," Lady Wychcote took it up again. "But you're probably unaware that

Mrs. Arundel's looseness of morals is a matter of common knowledge."

Susan put down her embroidery.

"I don't know anything about that, Lady Wychcote," said she firmly. "I only know that she's been very, very kind to Sophy. I think, if you don't mind, I'll call Sophy now. I'd rather you said these things direct to her."

She rose as she spoke, and went off to the garden before her ladyship could protest.

"Hateful, hateful woman!" thought Susan as she went; "... ready to think evil of every one." But all the same she felt uneasy and perturbed. Suppose that Lady Wychcote should use that acrid tongue of hers in starting gossip about Sophy? But then she would hardly care to do such a thing in regard to the mother of her only grandson! Still—one never knew how such spiteful natures would act. Susan felt thoroughly upset.

She was somewhat reassured by the calmness with which Sophy took the news of her mother-in-law's unexpected visit.

"Motored over?" said she. "Then she must be stopping with the Hiltons. But I thought she wasn't going there until July."

Susan was further relieved to find that Lady Wychcote was very civil indeed to Amaldi. She seemed to find him interesting. They talked together quite a while. When she was leaving, she said to Sophy:

"You must let Robert come to me for a day, while I

am with Mary Hilton, Sophy. I shall be there a week longer." Then she turned to Amaldi.

"While you are stopping in the neighbourhood," said she, "it would be very kind of you to come and let me hear a little of the music that every one is talking of, Marchese. My mourning keeps me out of town this year."

Amaldi said that he would be delighted to call on her ladyship, only that he was not stopping in the neighbourhood, and was returning to town that afternoon.

"Ah?" she said, with a look of faint surprise. And this "Ah?" renewed all Susan's uneasiness. To her it seemed so plainly to say: "What! you come all the way from London to call on my daughter-in-law? Then things are even more serious than I thought."

That evening, after Amaldi had gone, she told Sophy bluntly of her misgivings. Sophy was annoyed but not apprehensive.

"She dislikes me, Sue, and she has a bitter tongue—but somehow I don't think she'd go as far as *that*...."

"Why not?" asked Sue, who was beginning more and more to think that in any matter Lady Wychcote would go just as far as she chose.

"Well ... after all I'm Bobby's mother.... Why should she slander her only grandson's mother? What possible good could it do her?"

"I don't know," Susan said uncertainly. "But somehow I feel afraid of her ... for you...."

"Oh, I've taken care of myself with her ladyship before now!" retorted Sophy lightly.

Susan still brooded.

"I'd be awfully careful, Sophy, child, if I were you."

"How 'careful'—old Mother Misery?" smiled Sophy, slipping an arm about her shoulders.

Susan looked straight at her as she had looked at Lady Wychcote that morning.

"I'd be careful about ... Amaldi," said she bluntly.

Sophy's arm dropped. Rather coldly she said:

"In what way?"

"I think ... perhaps ... yes— I think you'd better not let him come here so often, honey."

Her tone pleaded for indulgence, but was also firm with conviction. Sophy was still rather cold in manner.

"You mean you think I'd better sacrifice a beautiful, harmless friendship to the whim of a sour old woman?" asked she.

Sue didn't retreat.

"I think you'd better not give that 'sour old woman' the least scrimption of cause to gossip about you," she replied.

"You'd have me mould my life on Lady Wychcote's ideas?"

Susan put her hand very lovingly on the dark head.

"Now, lamb ... don't be huffy with your old Sue," she said. "I only want you to be very, very careful how you cross that old tyrant's prejudices.... I've one of

the strongest feelings I ever had in my life that you'd regret it."

Sophy looked at her with grey eyes dark and defiant.

"Sue...." she said, "I'll never, never, never give up one atom of my friendship with Marco Amaldi for anybody or anything."

What more could Susan say—at least just then. She went to bed a very disturbed, unhappy woman.

Towards the end of the week Sophy sent Bobby over to the Hiltons' for a day, as she had promised. He returned that evening in quite an agitated state of mind. He rather enjoyed being with his grandmother occasionally. As he told Sophy: "I don't like Granny much—but I almost love her sometimes—when she's telling me 'bout father, and what a great man he would have been if he'd lived—and what jolly things all my grandfathers did for England. I think Granny's something like machinery. You're awful interested in it ... but you don't want to get too near to it."

This evening the cause of his excitement was shown plainly by his remarks to his mother when she went in to "tuck him up."

"I tell you what it is, mother," said he. "It's a awful responsibility for a chap having not to disappoint his mother or his only gran'mother, either of 'em. Now I was just thinkin'—Granny's so set on my bein' a statesman—and you'd like me to be a great writer. Well— *I might be both!* Dizzy was, you know. Don't you think if I was a great novelist and Prime Minister, both at once, that would be a solution?"

Sophy hugged him and replied with perfect gravity that she thought it would certainly be "a solution."

"Well, I'm glad," sighed Bobby, settling back upon his pillow. "'Cause if you *hadn't* thought so, I don't think I'd have slept a wink to-night. I'll write Granny first thing to-morrow. She's leaving after lunch. She told me to be sure to tell you so you'd send your letters to her at Dynehurst when you wrote."

But three days later, about six o'clock in the afternoon, a motor from the Hiltons' swept again round the lawn at Breene, and in this motor was Lady Wychcote.

This time, it happened to be Sophy and Amaldi who were sitting out under the big beech. Bobby was there, too. He was leaning with both arms on Amaldi's knee, and looking up eagerly into the young man's face. Amaldi had been telling him some of the adventures of Orlando Furioso.

This time Amaldi had not come down from London for the day, but had also motored over with Olive Arundel from her country place some fifteen miles distant. Susan and Olive were in the house, superintending the hanging of an old print that the latter had brought over for Sophy's writing-room.

Sophy was frankly surprised to see her mother-in-law.

"Why, I thought you were at Dynehurst!" she exclaimed. "Bobby sent you a letter there yesterday."

"No. Mary persuaded me to stop on another week. I came to bring Robert a book I promised him."

"Oh, thank you, Granny!" said the boy. He held up his cheek to be kissed, received the rather forbidding looking volume that she held out, and retired soberly with it. It was called *Lives of Noted Statesmen,*

Condensed. Bobby could not quite make out whether it meant that the lives or the statesmen were condensed. In any case it promised to be but a dull exchange for the adventures of Orlando. And then it was always so much jollier to be told a thing than to read it.

Lady Wychcote said affably to Amaldi:

"I shall flatter myself that if you'd known I was still here you'd have come to play for me while you were in the neighbourhood, Marchese."

"I should have been only too happy," replied he. "Perhaps you will allow me to come to-morrow?"

"What! All the way from London to call on an old woman?— Ah, that's very charming and Italian of you, I must say...."

"I'm stopping with the Arundels just now," said Amaldi. "But I should have been delighted to come from town to play for you." Like Susan, he found something perturbing in Lady Wychcote's manner. He could not define it, but he felt uneasy. There was a something underneath that very affable tone.... He thought her singularly *antipatica*. Perhaps that was it.... Yes ... it must be that.... She was *antipatica*.

On this occasion her ladyship did not leave before Amaldi as on her last visit. She remained until he and Olive Arundel had gone. Then she said to Sophy: "By the way—could I have a few minutes alone with you?"

"Of course," said Sophy.

She thought it was to be the usual thing about Bobby's education, which Lady Wychcote did not

think sufficiently strenuous and political. But her mother-in-law had quite another matter in mind.

They walked off together down one of the beech avenues, and Lady Wychcote began without preamble.

"My dear Sophy," said she, "you will probably be very angry, but I feel that I must speak. Your friendship with Mrs. Arundel doesn't at all do you justice...."

"Please don't say anything against Olive," put in Sophy quickly.

"Very well. But you know my opinion on that subject already, so after all it isn't necessary. I was thinking of her chiefly just then in connection with the Marchese Amaldi."

Sophy merely looked at her with an inquiring expression.

"I mean that it seems to me doubly unfortunate that he should be such a friend of hers also," continued Lady Wychcote.

"Please explain what you mean by 'doubly unfortunate,'" said Sophy.

"I shall—very frankly. Your position as a *divorcée* is a very difficult one, and I think that your rather intimate friendship with the Marchese will make it still more difficult."

"You are certainly frank," said Sophy, white with anger. "But you must allow me to be the judge of my own conduct."

"The world constitutes itself judge in such cases," retorted her mother-in-law. "Now pray try to take my

words as I mean them. I haven't the least desire to pry or meddle. I am merely calling your attention to what others might think if they chanced to come here twice within a week, as I've done, and each time found that young Italian with you. There would be comment—and not kindly comment either, you may be sure of that."

"Oh," exclaimed Sophy, exasperated, "what a low way of thinking most people have!"

"Yes—the average mind is not exalted in its views," assented the other calmly. "That is what I wanted to remind you of."

Sophy stood still and looked into her eyes with a proud look.

"No breath of scandal has ever touched my name," she said.

"I'm quite aware of that, my dear Sophy," replied Lady Wychcote. "My only object was to help you to prevent such a thing from ever happening."

"It's very kind of you, I'm sure," said Sophy, speaking with difficulty.

The older woman answered with considerable amiability:

"No. You don't think it kind of me. And I quite understand that you resent what you think only tiresome meddling on my part. But I meant it well. Believe me or not, as you choose. Of course, as you said, you must be the judge of your own conduct. Only"—she gave her a very shrewd look indeed —"don't forget, pray, in case a ... some ... unpleasantness should occur, that I tried to forewarn

you."

Whiter than ever, Sophy said in a low voice:

"I shan't forget."

"Then that is all. I won't annoy you with the subject again."

"Thanks," said Sophy.

They walked back to the house, and Lady Wychcote commented on the charm of the old grounds, and the advantage that it was for Bobby to have such healthful surroundings, but Sophy said nothing whatever.

XLVIII

It seemed intolerable to Sophy that Lady Wychcote should have taken such a view of her friendship with Amaldi and ventured to speak with her about it. Not that for a moment she felt any anxiety in regard to what "people" might think and say. It was only by chance that Amaldi had come twice to see her within so short a time. Usually there was at least a fortnight's lapse between his visits—sometimes more. But Lady Wychcote's view of the whole matter had left a smirch on what was so clean and fine. The bright mirror of friendship had been breathed upon. The image in it was blurred by this evil breath. And though she gave no hint of what had passed, or what she was feeling, Amaldi knew quite well that something had disturbed her. He kept this knowledge

to himself, however. What she did not give him freely he did not want. And alas! he wanted so much that she did not give him in any wise. His first delight in feeling that she was wholly her own again had died down. This masque of friendship, in which she was whole-souled and he half-hearted, became an anguish. He doubted his strength to keep it up. Sometimes he thought that it would be more endurable to blurt out the truth and go into banishment. He felt often that he would prefer the violent, final wound of severance to the long, eked out pain of being near her only as a friend.

Then one day in August he went to Breene, and as soon as he saw Sophy felt sure that some crisis was upon them both.

In fact she had just received the following letter from Lady Wychcote:

"My dear Sophy, you must pardon me for breaking through my resolve, this once, and alluding to a matter which I had seriously intended never mentioning to you again. Clara Knowles came to call on me to-day. As you probably know she has one of the most venomous tongues in England. She had barely said 'How d'ye do' before she flooded me with enquiries as to who was the 'foreigner that was making such running with Sophy Chesney.' (I quote her own elegant expressions.) She said that 'The Barton-Savidges' (a family also famed for scandal-mongering) 'vowed that he was always either turning in at the Breene lodge gates, or coming out of them.' Olive Arundel they said was 'gooseberry.' She asked if it were true that he was a bigamist. And whether you really belonged to a 'free love league' in the States as she had heard. I will not quote more of her

disgusting jargon. I only write this much of it, that you may see my apprehensions on your behalf were not without reason." The rest of the letter was confined to inquiries about Bobby, and suggestions as to a special method of German, which had been recommended to her by an ex-Secretary of Foreign Affairs, whose grandson was, at sixteen, proficient in four modern languages, etc., etc.

This letter filled Sophy with rebellious anger, yet at the same time she realised that it had to be considered seriously. The most painful part of all was that she felt that she must speak about it to Amaldi. Despite all her natural independence, she could not defy conventionality to the extent of allowing their friendship to give rise to such odious gossip. And she thought how strange and almost tragic it was, that the only breath of scandal that had ever touched her should be caused by the one perfectly clear, passionless affection of her life.

She told him of the letter as they walked in the beech wood beyond the garden.

"It's only what we might have foreseen in this crowded, narrow-minded place!" she ended bitterly.

Amaldi, who was stripping the fronds of a dead leaf that he had picked up, kept his eyes on it. He did not say anything for a second or two, then he observed in that level, withheld voice that she knew meant intense feeling:

"I'm afraid we might have expected it in any place."

"Oh, Amaldi!—no!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"I'm afraid so," he repeated.

They were seated now on a felled log. Through the incessant quivering of the nervous leaves they could see the gleam of the pond sunk in wreaths of loose-strife—the "long purples" of Ophelia's garland. It was all white and blue with the August sky. Except for the sound of blowing leaves the wood was very still. This stillness seemed to make it all more embarrassing and hateful somehow. Sophy sat chin on hand, staring at the shining pond. Other things that must be put into words were impossible to utter just then.

Amaldi broke the silence.

"I suppose," he said in that expressionless voice, "that we shall have to stop seeing each other—for the present at least."

This was just what Sophy had shrunk from saying. She answered very dejectedly:

"I ... I suppose so. Yes ... it's the only thing to do of course." Then she broke out in her impetuous way: "Oh, how hateful and unnecessary it all is!—how humiliating—and how sad.... I *did* think that friendship would be left me...."

There were tears in her voice. Amaldi turned suddenly and looked at her. The moment that she saw his eyes she knew what was coming.

"I've failed you, too," he said. "It isn't friendship that I feel for you...."

As her eyes fell away from his, he added passionately: "How could it be otherwise?... How could it be?..."

And all at once it was revealed to Sophy that he was

right—that she had been blind and mistaken once again to an almost incredible degree. She sat dumb with pain, knowing less than ever what to say. And her pain told her that he was very, very dear to her, and yet that she recoiled from the mere idea of love more violently than ever. But there was no half way here, she must renounce him if she could not return his love.

Amaldi went on:

"It had to come. I meant to tell you. I hoped that I would be strong enough ... but I'm not. It's beyond me.... I can't endure it—this being near you ... knowing you are free ... loving you ... loving you ... having only your friendship. No man could endure it ... no real man...."

He broke off. The next instant he said, "Forgive me. It seems brutal to speak so ... so bluntly—but at least there must be truth between us."

Sophy said in a choked voice:

"If you think all the suffering is yours ... you ... you are mistaken, Amaldi."

"Forgive me...." he repeated.

"And ... and...." she stumbled on, "you speak of my being free ... but even if ... if things were ... different ... you are not free...."

"Do you mean if you ... loved me?" said Amaldi.

"Yes," she murmured, colouring deeply.

He flushed, too, then paled.

"In that case I should soon free myself," he said.

Sophy glanced up at him in amazement, then down again.

"But ... there is no divorce in Italy...." she stammered.

"An Italian can be naturalised in Switzerland and divorced there," he rejoined, steadying his voice with an effort.

All at once her face quivered, she put up her hands to hide it. Then she whispered brokenly:

"You would do *that* for me?"

"It would be nothing ... if you loved me," he answered.

There was silence for a moment or two. Then it broke from him again.

"I couldn't go on acting to you ... lying to you...."

"Oh, I know ... I know...." she answered.

Suddenly he was on his knees beside her. He caught her hands and held them to his breast.

"Can't it ever be different?" he was stammering. "Can't it ever be different? Some time ... after years maybe?... Is there no love in you for me?... None at all?"

But as he knelt there beside her stammering with the ardour of his long suppressed love, it was Loring that Sophy thought of—Loring who had also knelt beside her in desperate appeal. She blanched with the confused, humiliating pain of it.

"Oh, don't you see ... don't you see," she pleaded. "I haven't any love to give.... How could I have?..." She drew away her hands and pressed them to her own

breast. "I'm like a dead thing...." she said desperately, "dead ... cold...."

He rose and walked away from her, stood thinking for a little, then came back. Still standing, he looked down at her bent head.

"Tell me this at least," he said, "if we had met ... at first ... before things happened in both our lives ... do you think that you might have ... cared for me?"

Sophy did not answer at once. Her past was rushing before her. Then she sprang impulsively to her feet.

"Yes, Amaldi, yes...." she said. "When we were both young ... if we had met then.... Oh, how beautiful life could have been for us!"

Amaldi started forward, then drew back. His eyes confused her. She stood there, rather overwhelmed by her own outburst, looking down again now at the tip of one shoe which she moved nervously from side to side among the last year's leaves. He said in a low voice:

"That makes it easier to say 'good-by' ... and harder. I...."

He stopped short. She forced herself to ask for how long he meant to be gone.

"I think a year ... two years, perhaps, would be best," he answered heavily. The next instant he put it more lightly: "I've always wanted to travel for some years in strange lands. I might come back a more satisfactory 'friend' ... who knows?"

"Don't...." said Sophy, blind with tears now.

She could never remember clearly how they parted.

He promised to write her of his plans as soon as he had decided on them. Walking back through the garden, they met Sue Pickett and Bobby. They were not alone again until he left for London.

XLIX

The next two days passed very unhappily for Sophy. She ached with the ice of her flesh and the wild flame of her spirit. Some part of her being was knitted so closely with Amaldi's, that this tearing asunder of their lives caused her anguish.

On the morning of the third day, however, something happened that gave things a sharp wrench in a new direction. Sophy had always been very indifferent about reading newspapers. So the morning papers were always laid at Susan's plate. They chanced to be breakfasting alone, and as Sue was glancing over the *Times*, she flushed suddenly and an exclamation broke from her.

"What is it?" asked Sophy, deathly afraid, she knew not of what.

It had to be told. Susan bungled it so, that Sophy caught the paper from her and read for herself. This was the item:

> "A very shocking accident occurred last night in front of White's. The Marquis Amaldi, a distinguished Italian nobleman, well known here in both social and musical circles, was struck by a motor car as he was crossing the

> street. He was unconscious when he was taken to his lodgings, which, fortunately, are near by in Clarges Street. The friend who was with him would not allow him to be removed to an hospital. Later reports say that the Marquis has recovered consciousness but that his injuries are serious."

Sophy laid down the paper without a word, and her face terrified Susan.

"My dear ... don't go thinking the worst," she stammered. "You know how newspapers exaggerate!"

"Not in England...." said Sophy dully.

Then she caught her breath. It was as if she had shot suddenly to the surface of some black pool, and gasped in air again.

"Will you go with me to London?" she asked in that dead voice, keeping her eyes on the paper.

Susan went pale.

"Oh, child!... *Think* a minute...." she protested.

"Well ... if I must go alone...." said Sophy, and as she spoke she got to her feet.

"No, no!—You shall never go alone, Sophy!"

"Then you'll come?"

"Yes," said Susan despairingly. She felt there was no use in arguing it, yet as she went upstairs with Sophy to change her gown, she tried once more. "Sophy, darling— I know— I understand how you feel," she said. "But think, dear—think what it would be if some one saw you ... there.... If it got to Lady

Wychcote's ears.... Oh, child!... I'm so mortally afraid of some dreadful tragedy coming out of all this for you...."

"Don't you think the tragedy's dreadful enough as it is?" asked Sophy rather wildly. She looked for a moment as if she were about to break into crazy laughter. Then she held her face tight in both hands.

"Go and dress...." she muttered thickly after a second. "Go and order the carriage.... There's a train in twenty minutes.... It will take us more than ten minutes to drive to the station...."

The two women reached Amaldi's lodgings about eleven o'clock. His Milanese servant, Piero, opened the door. He looked grave and rather worried, but for the first time hope glimmered in Sophy when she saw his face.

"The Marchese...?" she managed to ask.

Her voice was like the shadow of a voice. Piero said that Don Giovanni was asleep under an opiate. The doctors had just gone. They did not think the injuries as serious as they had thought last night.... But Sophy was scarcely listening.

"'Don Giovanni'?" she repeated haltingly.

"*Si, Signora* ... the brother of the Marchese. He arrived in England for a short visit only yesterday morning. Eh, Santa Maria! ... a sad visit it has proved...."

He begged the ladies to be seated while he went to tell his master of their coming.

As he left the room, Sophy turned to Susan. "Sue...." she said. "Forgive me ... but I must see him alone ...

just for a few minutes. I won't be long."

"But, Sophy...."

"I won't be long, dear, I promise ... only a few minutes ... but I must.... I must see him alone ... just at first...."

She was so determined that poor Susan felt she had no choice. She went out into the hall, misery and dread in her heart—not for anything that she feared between Sophy and Amaldi—she knew them both too well for that—but lest some malevolent eyes might have seen Sophy go in ... might watch for her coming out.

Sophy had not mentioned their names, or given any cards to Piero, and he was too discreet a person to ask questions. When, therefore, he announced to Amaldi that there were visitors for him, he said merely, "*due signore*" (two ladies).

Amaldi came in to find Sophy standing alone in the middle of the room, her hands locked tight together, and her eyes fixed on the door by which he entered. The next instant he was close to her, and she was faltering out:

"I thought you were ... dead.... Then I knew...."

"What?... You knew ... what?" he said dazedly.

She kept her eyes on his—they looked scared and brave and piteous at the same time.

"That I ... cared for you ... more than I knew...."

Things went black before Amaldi for a second. He had been through a hideous night with poor Nano. He had seen him lying on the pavement drenched

with blood—dead to all appearance. Then had come the long hours of waiting for the doctors' verdict. Then the shock of hope after the long vigil. Now this....

He mastered himself, thinking that he could not have taken her meaning rightly.

"It was ... like you ... to come...." he said almost stupidly. He felt stupefied, not equal to grasping the situation fitly.

But now Sophy held out her locked hands to him. Her white face flushed and quivered.

"Marco ... don't you understand?" she whispered. "I ... I want you to know ... that I...." She caught her breath. ".... It's ... it's ... love, Marco...."

A profound instinct told him not to touch her. The black mist closed down again for an instant. His bewildered, haggard face went to her heart. Close to him, trembling, her eyes still courageous and timid at the same time, she laid one hand upon his breast.

"Dearest," she said, "don't look like that ... as if you couldn't believe me ... you'll have to be very patient with me...."

She put down her forehead suddenly on the hand that still rested against his breast, and began to cry softly and restrainedly, like an overtaxed child. Then his arms went round her, but very lightly, as if she were indeed a wounded child that he was afraid of hurting.

"Forgive me.... I can't help it...." she kept murmuring. "To find you alive ... alive...."

The words choked into sobs. He stood holding her in

that light, gentle embrace silently. He could not have spoken though both their lives depended on it. Presently she lifted her head from his breast and glanced up at him. His face awed her. There was a look on it that made it quite beautiful and rather strange. The look of one who sees with other than bodily vision.

When she said timidly a moment later that she must be going now, he did not try to detain her, only lifted the hand that had lain upon his breast, and held it to his lips, then to his eyes a moment.

In some natures tenderness springs from passion; in others passion can only flower from tenderness. Sophy was of the latter type. With all her capacity for suffering, she could never have felt the excoriating pain of the being bound by sensual fascination to another whom it knows to be despicable. This quality in the very essence of her nature was the secret of her ardent ventures in love and her equally ardent recoils from it.

But though her present love for Amaldi was all tenderness there was in it also such anguish as passion sometimes brings. Pure as it was, almost mystic in its exaltation, it yet shamed her to herself. Was she then the sort of woman who loves, and loves and loves indefinitely? She fought her way out of this doubt, only to stand confounded and miserable before the bald fact that she had had two husbands, one of whom was still living, and yet, that in a future no matter how vague and distant, she contemplated taking another. "It must be a long, long time...." she had written Amaldi after those moments in Clarges

Street. "Years and years, perhaps. It isn't that I shrink from you, my dear one—oh, you know that!—but from the thought of marriage with any one. I can't help it, dearest. I told you that you would need all your patience with me—— Yes— I shall try you sorely I'm afraid. I wonder—but no—when I think of your love for me, I feel that I have never before known real love. And see how selfish I am with you! This is your reward—a cruel egoist, who can't give you up—who can't give you herself. That is the truth, Marco. It isn't that I will not— I *cannot*. Besides——"

Here she had laid aside her pen in despair. It was the thought of Bobby that had come to her. How tragic and ridiculous to think of giving her son two fathers besides the real father who had died when he was a baby! Yes, this thought was nothing less than hideous. The absurdity in it was grim as the *risus sardonicus*. And yet—and yet—— Like poor Desdemona she perceived here a divided duty. This duty to her son was tremendous—yet was there not also a duty towards the man who had loved her for long years, whom she had told that she loved in return? Perhaps, when Bobby had grown up—— Yes, that would make things different. But could any man be constant for all those added years—had she a right to ask such constancy? And even then—to take a third husband! The words of Christ to the woman of Samaria came back to her: "*.... Thou hast well said, I have no husband. For thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast, is not thy husband.*"... Five husbands or three ... what real difference was there? She felt stunned with self-abasement and misery. A voice within her kept crying: "Too late! too late!" But when she thought of her life without him it seemed vain and empty. Even the thought of her son could not fill that void.

Nano Amaldi's injuries proved far less serious than was at first believed. Within ten days after his accident he was able to travel, and he and Marco went together to stop with their mother on the Brenta, near Venice—where she had taken a friend's villa for the months of September and October.

From this place Amaldi wrote to Sophy, asking her if it would not be possible for her to come to Venice during the autumn. His mother longed to see her, and people could hardly talk if they met occasionally under such circumstances. He also told her in this letter that Barti, the family lawyer, had gone to Switzerland to inquire about the formalities necessary for the divorce.

Sophy had intended going to Italy in September. Now it seemed to her that there could be no objection to her choosing Venice as a stopping place. She longed to talk with the old Marchesa almost as much as she longed to see Amaldi. To talk with his mother would lift some of the load of doubt and pain from her heart, she thought.

But when she mentioned this plan to her cousin, Sue looked anxious. She was thinking of Lady Wychcote —of what she might think and say when she heard that Sophy was going to Italy. Her native shrewdness would lead her to surmise something very like the truth, Sue felt sure, while her dislike for Sophy would cause her to put the worst construction on it.

However, to her great relief, Lady Wychcote took the news of the projected trip to Venice with composure. She was even affable about it and said in a letter on the subject that she envied Sophy the pleasure of

seeing Venice for the first time, and of being out of England during September. But as Susan pondered this letter afterwards, something in its very affability made her nervous. It struck her as odd that Lady Wychcote, after having called Sophy's attention so insistently to the danger of possible gossip about her and Amaldi, and now knowing that there actually had been gossip on the subject, should suddenly hear without protest of any kind that Sophy intended going to Italy. If Susan had been aware of the fact that Lady Wychcote also knew of Sophy's visit to Amaldi's lodgings, she would have returned to America rather than have gone with her to Venice.

Lady Wychcote did know of it, however, and from a sure source—from her own brother, Colonel Bollingham, a retired and grouchy old Anglo-Indian, who had always taken Sophy at his sister's valuation and had no more love for her than had her ladyship.

He had chanced to be passing on the other side of the street when Sophy and Susan got out of their cab before Amaldi's lodgings. His sister had talked with him about her fears in that regard. The accident, of which he had read that morning, caused him to put two and two together—making a round dozen, after the custom of his type of arithmetician.

"The little hussy...." he muttered, as the two figures disappeared within a house opposite. "'Clarges Street'.... So it was, b'gad!"

He posted forthwith to Dynehurst with this news. After the first start of surprise at his disclosure, her ladyship showed a calmness that quite outraged him.

"Gad!... Cissy!... You take it damn coolly, 'pon my word!" said he.

"I am thinking," replied Lady Wychcote quietly. "It requires a great deal of thought ... such a thing as you have just told me, James."

"The devil it does!" exclaimed the irascible Colonel. ".... Bundle her out on the double-quick, say I! What the deuce!... Is a woman like that to have the upbringing of your only grandson?"

His sister regarded his inflamed countenance with lenient sarcasm.

"'Bundling out' is doubtless a simple matter in the army, James," said she. "But you wouldn't find it quite so simple in this case. The Court would hardly deprive a woman of the guardianship of her child because she'd been seen to go ... *with another woman* ... to inquire after an injured man ... ostensibly a friend ... who may or may not be her lover...."

The Colonel bumbled like an angry hornet. "Who's this other woman, anyhow?" demanded he. Then answered himself as crusty old gentlemen so often do. "In my opinion she's only a common...." The Colonel's language became very Anglo-Indian indeed.

But Lady Wychcote succeeded in calming him down and finally persuading him that her method would be the wisest and surest.

It was on a day all magical with shine and storm that Sophy journeyed to Venice across the Lombard plain. As they neared the sea one-half the sky was thunderous blue, one-half like golden crystal. Green marsh lands spread in gentle melancholy beneath. Suddenly two orange sails in sunlight unfurled their

burning petals against the green. And these great, burning sail-petals, drifting slowly along hidden waterways across the sad, green reaches, lent a thrill as of the passionate mystery of the sea to the tranquil inland.

There was more pain than joy for Sophy in this beauty. One should first see Venice with first love in one's heart, not third love, she told herself bitterly. And she was glad that she had written Amaldi not to meet her. As much as she longed to see him, she was relieved to think that she would have some hours in which to adjust her mood to this rather overwhelming loveliness before seeing him again. As they went up the Grand Canal towards the Rio San Vio, where she had taken a flat, the Vesper bells began to ring. A feeling of sadness, almost of apprehension, stole over her. The clear, liquid voices of the bells seemed warning her of something. She began to wonder if she had been right to come to Venice....

But the next day when she saw Amaldi she was glad again. This love that he gave her was very wonderful. She remembered, wincing, how she had once longed for Loring to give her a love like that of the old Romaunts. Now this love was really hers. Yet she felt that she was cruel to accept it—taking so much yet willing to give so little; for when she saw Amaldi this first time after telling him that she cared "more than she knew"—she realised that what she offered him was indeed the shadow of a flame. And yet ... she could not give him up. This shadow was, after all, cast by a flame. But she shivered, thinking of the dreary service of patience that she demanded of him.

Amaldi on his side, however, was quite content for the present with the fact that she loved him—that this love had been strong enough to cause her to tell him of it. He had that genius of passion which knows how to wait. When the right hour struck he would wait no longer, he told himself. He did not believe for a moment that years would have to pass before Sophy would come to him as his wife. He did not wish things different. It would have repelled him if Sophy could have shown passionate feeling for him so soon after her second unhappy marriage. But some day——

Barti was still in Switzerland. There were some points that needed clearing up, he wrote, but he and the Swiss lawyer Beylan, thought that all could be arranged. He expected to come to Venice very shortly.

After she had been three days in Venice, Sophy went by gondola up the Brenta with Amaldi to see his mother, who had been confined to the house for some time by an attack of rheumatism. Sue and Bobby were with them. The boy seemed as fond of Amaldi as ever, yet every now and then when he thought that others were not noticing, he looked at the young man with a grave, pondering look. He was not jealous of him, yet as much as he liked him, he was hoping that "Mother wouldn't have him round too much." It was so jolly when he and mother went for larks quite alone.

From the moment that the Marchesa took her in her arms and kissed her as a mother kisses her daughter, a weight seemed to fall from Sophy's heart. There was something in the kiss so natural, so warm, so consoling. It said better than words could have done,

"I understand. I approve. Be happy, my dear—be happy."

She held the Marchesa very tight—his mother who might some day be her mother. Tears sprang in spite of her. The Marchesa kissed away these tears.

"It will all come right, dear—*Speriamo bene*!" she murmured, smiling.

But the next day something occurred that cast a shadow over all. Susan received a cable from America telling her that her only sister had died suddenly. As this sister was a widow and left three little children Susan felt that she must go to America at once.

When Sophy returned from seeing her cousin off for Genoa, a profound, desolate sadness overcame her—a sense of apprehension. The old adage kept going through her mind: "It never rains but it pours." She could not get away from the idea that other painful things were going to happen. Besides, she loved Sue dearly, and missed her, and would miss her more and more. The thought of a paid "companion" filled her with distaste. Yet she couldn't now stay on in Venice for some weeks, as she had meant to, with only Bobby and Rosa. Harold Grey had been ill with influenza and would not join them until October; and all the more when he came would she need some woman to play propriety.

Intolerant and careless of the world's opinion as she was too apt to be, she felt that it would not do for her to remain all alone in Venice with Amaldi as her only acquaintance there. But then she felt that she *must* stay till Barti came. She couldn't leave Marco anxious and harassed with doubt, for during the last

few days she had come to the conclusion that he was far more anxious about the divorce than he would admit to her.

.... Rain was falling. With slim, grey-white rods it beat the surface of the water. She could see it rushing like a host with lances down the Grand Canal, past the palace of Don Carlos. Her heart grew heavier and heavier.

Amaldi, who had insisted on accompanying Susan to Genoa, returned two days later. Something preoccupied and sad in his manner struck Sophy.

"What is it?" she urged. "You are troubled. Tell me."

He confessed at last that he was a little worried at Barti's delay. He feared that there might be some serious doubt about the final issue of the question.

"Barti's a good soul," he ended. "Almost too soft-hearted.... I can't help feeling that he's rather shirked telling me things, perhaps ... that he's still shirking. I can't explain this delay on his part, in any other way...."

He broke off and they looked at each other rather blankly. And it was as they were silently looking at each other in that sorrowful, baffled fashion that Rosa ushered in Lady Wychcote.

As Sophy went forward to greet her, the old adage again began its thrumming in her mind: "*It never rains but it pours.... It never rains but it pours*...."

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Had Susan been present, she would have felt very apprehensive at the pleasant, matter-of-fact way in which her ladyship greeted Amaldi. But Sophy was simple-minded enough to be greatly relieved by it. She explained about Susan—that Amaldi had just returned from seeing her off for America. Lady Wychcote seemed really shocked to hear of Miss Pickett's trouble.

"And what a loss to you, too!" she said. "I can't conceive of anything more odious than having a hireling for a companion. Of course you will have a companion...?"

"Of course!" said Sophy.

Then her ladyship explained how she came to be in Venice. Her brother, Colonel Bollingham, and his wife had persuaded her to join them at a moment's notice.

Sophy felt that now Susan was gone, she ought to ask her mother-in-law to stop with her. She did so. Lady Wychcote said thanks—but that it would hurt poor dear Mildred's feelings to be *planté* like that.

"However," she added, "if you're going to be here longer than a week, I might take advantage of your offer. James and Mildred are going to Bordighera next week ... and I detest Bordighera...."

Sophy replied, with a hesitation in her heart which she did not think apparent in her voice but which Lady Wychcote discerned there, that she had intended stopping for at least three weeks longer—but now that Sue had gone she thought of returning

to Breene in a few days.

"If you would stay with me, though," she ended, "then I shouldn't feel that I had to hurry off."

"Thanks," said Lady Wychcote. "I'll let you know later."

She left a few minutes afterwards. Amaldi left with her. He disliked her as much as Susan did, and felt that he must be very careful not to give her a wrong impression of his relations with Sophy.

Later, when Sophy came to reflect, she felt as apprehensive about her mother-in-law's sudden appearance in Venice as even Susan could have wished. She knew that unlike so many of her compatriots, Lady Wychcote did not care a fig about Italy. On the contrary, she was in the habit of extolling France as a far more delightful place in every way.

During the following week Sophy was very careful not to see Amaldi often, and went about a good deal with Lady Wychcote. Barti had not turned up yet.

The days passed in this rather dreary fashion, until the time had come for the Bollinghams to leave. They were to set off Tuesday and on Tuesday afternoon Lady Wychcote was to come to the Rio San Vio to stop with Sophy until they both returned to England.

On Sunday Barti arrived in Venice. He was a short, rotund man of about sixty, with a grizzled black beard, and the grey-blue eyes under black lashes that one sees so often in clever Lombards. He loved the "*ragazzi* Amaldi," as he called them, as if they had been his own sons. Marco had confided to him his

reasons for wishing to be divorced. He had spoken in a rather dry, curt fashion, but Barti realised fully what this passion must mean to him. Marco had always been his favourite of the two "boys," and men of the type of Marco did not change the views of a lifetime except for the most vital reasons.

As soon as Amaldi saw Barti, he knew that the lawyer had no very reassuring news to give him. They met at Barti's hotel in his bedroom so as to be quite private.

"Well?" said Amaldi.

Barti began skirting the subject from different points of view. It seemed that in Switzerland, at that date, proceedings for divorce on the ground of adultery had to be brought within six months of the knowledge of the fact. So that Amaldi would not be able to obtain divorce in respect of his wife's original misconduct with her first lover. He could, however, obtain the divorce in respect of any subsequent misconduct of hers if proceedings were instituted within six months of such misconduct becoming known to him.

Here, Amaldi, who had been very pale, flushed darkly. He parted his lips as if to speak, and the old lawyer said nervously:

"Wait ... wait just a moment, *caro mio* ... there are ... er ... other difficulties...."

Amaldi kept silence. He sat looking out of the window, and now his face was quite impassive; but it hurt Barti to see the strained quiet of that impassive face. These "other difficulties" that he had to tell of were even more painful. He went on to state them as

rapidly and clearly as he could. In any case, as they knew already, in order to qualify for a divorce in Switzerland Amaldi would have to become a Swiss citizen. To do so, he would have to get the consent of the local authority and the State authority. The first was comparatively easy, the second exceedingly difficult to obtain. As Marco might remember, a famous Italian author had attempted to divorce his wife in this way, but the Swiss Government decided that they would not let their citizenship be obtained for such an object.

Amaldi here interrupted quietly.

"Then, my dear Barti," he said, "I have only to thank you for all your trouble. I don't see that we need discuss the matter any further...."

"*Pazienza.... Pazienza!*..." murmured Barti. "On the contrary ... there are many things to consider...."

"I don't see...." Amaldi began rather vehemently.

"*Prego* ... but *I* see.... You must allow me," returned the other. "This is painful, I know ... for me as well as for you...." he added, with some feeling.

Amaldi said in a different tone, but without looking at him:

"Yes. I know it is. Forgive me. Go on."

Barti then said that it might be possible for the citizenship to be obtained without the disclosure of its object, though this would be extraordinarily difficult.

"In fact," he wound up, "I am afraid that in your case it would be practically impossible. The head of a noble Italian family does not apply for Swiss

citizenship without some very unusual object, and in my opinion the authorities would be sure to demand for what object the Marchese Amaldi wished to become a Swiss."

Amaldi got to his feet this time.

"Then, really...." he began.

"*Caro* Marco ... I beg of you to let me finish," pleaded Barti.

He, too, was pale by now, and he snatched off his eyeglasses, breathing nervously upon them, and squinting slightly with his short-sighted eyes, in the stress of the moment.

"Switzerland is not the only country in the world," he hurried on, polishing and repolishing the glasses as he spoke, very glad not to be able to see Amaldi's set, white face more clearly. "I have made inquiries, and it seems that in Hungary...."

"'*Hungary'!*" echoed Amaldi. He gave a short laugh. "But I beg your pardon. Go on, please...." he said gravely the next moment.

"And why not Hungary?" Barti demanded, with a show of impatience which he was far from feeling. "For my part, I think I should prefer a Hungarian citizenship. It seems that in Hungary there is a process of adoption...."

Again Amaldi echoed him.

"'Adoption'!" he exclaimed, with even more emphasis than before. "My dear Barti, excuse me—but I hadn't realised that the thing would be ridiculous as well as humiliating."

Then he checked himself, walking to and fro in the small room several times. The other sat watching him in silence.

Presently he stopped in front of Barti and looked down at him with a rather wry but affectionate smile.

"Forgive me, dear Barti," he said. "You've gone to no end of trouble for me, and I act like a bad-tempered *tousin*. Will you please go on about ... Hungary?"

Barti rushed into suggestions now. He wished, he said, with Amaldi's consent, to go forthwith to Hungary and make a thorough investigation of the legal questions involved.

"*Ma!*... Go if you think best," Amaldi said, when he had ended. Then added with irrepressible bitterness: "After all, what difference does it make to what country I sell my birthright?"

"*Caro mio ... caro mio!*..." muttered the old man, much upset.

"You understand, Barti," returned Amaldi quickly, "I am quite determined to be free if possible. I...." he hesitated, then went on emphatically: "I count it a small price to pay. What makes me bitter is that an Italian should not be able to free himself from a worthless woman in his own country. Yes, Barti, that makes me bitter, I confess."

They spoke together a few moments longer. When Amaldi left, it had been decided that Barti was to leave for Buda-Pesth that night.

LI

On the same afternoon, Amaldi sent Sophy a note, saying that he had some important things that he would like to talk over with her, and asking if she would not go with him again by gondola up the Brenta to see his mother.

"I feel," he ended, "that we could talk so much more quietly in the old garden there. Here in Venice there is always some interruption, and Lady Wychcote comes to stop with you on Tuesday. Then, too, it would be such a happiness for Baldi to see you again in this way. We could be back in Venice by six o'clock."

Sophy thought this over. She felt that she could not refuse, and yet she hesitated. But she knew that Barti had returned. She was sure that it was about the divorce that Amaldi wished to talk with her. What had Barti said? Was the divorce in Switzerland impossible, after all? And as this doubt came to her she knew for the first time how much she really loved Amaldi. The dreadful sinking of her heart when she faced the thought that he might not be able to get free made her decide at once to go with him the next day. And she would not take Bobby with her this time. He was all agog over a lesson in rowing that Lorenzo, the first gondoliere, was to give him to-morrow. She would keep him with her until she and Amaldi started at twelve o'clock; then he and Rosa could spend the afternoon with Lorenzo.

She sent word to Amaldi by the messenger who brought his note that she would be ready to go with him next day at noon.

He did not tell her of what Barti had said, and she did not ask him until they were alone in the garden of Villa Rosalia.

When he told her about the possible alternative of Hungary, she gave a cry of pain.

"I can't bear it.... I can't bear it that you should make such sacrifices!..." she stammered.

"When a man loves as I love you, there aren't any sacrifices," said Amaldi.

"Ah, don't talk that way!" she urged. "As if I didn't know what it all means to you...."

"I doubt if you know what *you* mean to me ... quite," he answered.

The smothered passion and sorrow in his voice shook her to the heart. She tried to speak, and began to cry.

"Forgive me ... forgive me!" she sobbed. "I used to be so proud of not crying. It's the tragedy of it all.... Our love is such a tragedy!..."

Amaldi looked at her a moment, his face set. Then with a quick, almost violent, gesture he took her in his arms. "You shall not say that our love is a tragedy...." he muttered. But she sobbed on:

"It is ... it is!... Oh, why couldn't we have known each other ... from the first!..."

"But you love me ... now?"

"Oh, you know it ... you know it!..."

He put his hand up suddenly and turned her face to his. It gave him a strange thrill to feel her warm tears on his hand. He looked down into her eyes, and

there was something imperious and fateful in this look.

".... *Really* love me?" he said.

Her "Yes" came in a whisper.

He kept his eyes on hers another second, then bent his mouth almost deliberately to hers.

".... *Sei mia moglie ... sei la mia vera moglie*...." (Thou art my wife ... thou art my real wife....), he kept whispering brokenly after that deep kiss. She clung to him in silence. Yes, she too felt that she belonged to him as she had never belonged to another; yet, to her, this was the supreme tragedy. With her heart at home on his—with all herself at home in him—she knew at last the love in which flesh and spirit are one essence—in which God the fire and God the fuel are one. But to know such love only after having passed through the nether fires of other loves—was not that the tragedy of tragedies? She would not have been true woman had she not felt it so, and he would not have been true man if, even in that hour, the memory of those other loves had not wrung him. But while it was the woman's way to confess this sense of tragedy, it was the man's way to deny it stoutly. So he told her over and over with passionate insistence that she had never known real love—that the great fire of his love would consume even the memory of her mistakes—that the past was nothing to him and should be nothing to her in the light of the present.

They sat there, locked in each other's arms for a long time. The sun was westering. The shadows of the cypresses lengthened along the grass until they seemed to leap softly from the river brink into the

water.

When they went back to the villa, they found old Carletto preparing to serve tea in the columned portico. The Signora Marchesa was just about to descend, he told them. She called from above as he finished speaking:

"*Hé,* Carletto!... Go tell the Signora Chesney and the Marchesino that tea is ready...."

"We are here," said Amaldi, going towards the staircase. "Wait ... let me help you...."

The Marchesa was coming down very slowly, one step at a time, leaning heavily on a big, ebony cane. The rheumatism in her knee was much better, but she was still very stiff. She called out in her jolly, plucky voice as he began mounting towards her:

"But just look how cleverly I manage by myself!..."

As she said this, she planted her stick on the marble floor of the first landing. Amaldi was within a yard of her—Sophy watching from the hall below. It all happened in a second. The stick slipped ... the Marchesa, who had leaned her whole weight upon it for the next downward step, was thrown head first against the opposite wall. The sound of her bare forehead against the marble of the wall was horrible. Then Amaldi had her in his arms.... Sophy and Carletto ran wildly. It seemed as if she must be dead. They could not realise that such a crashing blow could result in anything but death.

In a few moments the whole villa was in confusion.

Amaldi and his man Piero carried the Marchesa to her bedroom. Sophy directed the frightened maids what to do. Amaldi sent Piero to Cortola, the nearest town, for a doctor. All the time that Sophy was working with Amaldi over the unconscious form of his mother, a stupid voice kept dinning in her mind: "*It never rains but it pours.... It never rains but it pours....*"

It was nearly an hour before the Marchesa regained consciousness. Her mind became clear in an astonishingly short time, but she was suffering frightful pain in her head. Fortunately, almost at the moment she opened her eyes Piero came back with the doctor from Cortola. After a careful examination, he assured them that there was no concussion of the brain, and that if the Signora would remain quietly in bed for a few days, all would be well. It was nearly ten, however, before they became satisfied that her condition was not dangerous.

Sophy insisted that Amaldi should send Carletto back with her to Venice and himself remain with his mother. He would not consent to this. The physician was to spend the night at the villa. The Marchesa was sleeping quietly now under a strong sedative. Her faithful old *cameriera* of forty years' standing was at the bedside. He was not willing for Sophy to take the journey back without him.

At half-past ten they walked once more through the old garden. The soft night was wonderful with stars. Carletto went ahead carrying a candle. His knotty fingers, through which the flame shone in gold and reddish streaks, and the silver outline of his hair, glided forward mysteriously against the purple bloom of the night. On the river bank, they saw the

glow of a lantern where the gondolieri were getting things in readiness. Then the brazen beak of the gondola gleamed suddenly.

When they entered it and the gondolieri began to row, it seemed to Sophy that the quiet river, veiled in darkness like the stream of fate, was gliding with them to some appointed end. A feeling of presage welled in her. She shivered and drew closer to Amaldi.

The night was hushed and grave. The banks stole by soft with grass or the brooding dimness of foliage. The fields were quiet as sleep. Against the violet dark rose sometimes the roofs of thatched cottages and now and then a lighted window shone out—the watchful, steadfast eye of home.

The gates of the first lock opened—the gondola floated in. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, they began to sink with the ebbing water. Little by little, the trees, the houses, the tranquil fields slipped from view. Now they were in a dark well, as in a tomb together. A strip of starry sky shone above. They looked up at it without speaking. The dark lock was like their present—the strip of sky with its secret writing of stars was like the far hope that glimmered for them above the gulf of years....

The gates unclosed again; they glided out once more upon the Brenta, and more than ever it seemed to Sophy like the hidden stream of fate, bearing them to an appointed end.

LII

When they turned into the Rio San Vio, it was nearly one o'clock. Glancing up at the windows of her flat, Sophy saw that the little drawing-room was lighted. Some one came to one of the windows and looked out between the slats of the blinds as the gondola stopped before the house—Rosa, probably—poor soul, sick with anxiety!

Amaldi stepped ashore and held out his hand. They went together into the small court and began to mount the stairs leading to her flat. The stairway was enclosed and very dark. On the first landing was a window through which shone a faint gleam of starlight. He stopped and took her in his arms, but very tenderly. He felt her weariness and apprehension. His passion curbed itself to her need.

"When shall I see you again?" he whispered.

She whispered back:

"I will let you know.... I will write."

Suddenly she started. Amaldi, too, looked up at the dark stairway.

"I heard a door open.... We must go...." she murmured.

"Wait. Let me go first," he said, taking out a box of matches. "These will be better than nothing...."

He mounted slowly before her, lighting the little wax-matches as he went. It seemed to her that the stairway was endless—she was so tired! She dragged herself up, watching his face and figure spring out in the orange wax-light against the darkness, then fade

again as the light died down. Now she could not see him. Then again came the spurt of bluish flame deepening to orange, and again she would see his slight, strong figure and the clear-cut mask of his face.

As they turned the last landing, and went up the flight leading direct to her apartment, they saw that the door was open and Rosa standing with a candle at the top of the stairs. She gave a cry of joy as she caught sight of Sophy—and came rushing down to meet her. Oh, the Madonna and San Guiseppe be praised! Oh, what had happened? She and Miladi had been *so* afraid—so terribly afraid!...

As she was speaking, a tall figure appeared in the open doorway. Sophy's heart seemed to lose a beat. Lady Wychcote acknowledged Amaldi's greeting, then called to Sophy:

"Are you really unhurt?... I fancied all sorts of horrid accidents...."

Sophy answered in the natural voice that astonishes one's self at such moments:

"Yes. I'm quite all right, thanks. But there *has* been an accident...."

"Ah.... I felt sure of it!" said Lady Wychcote.

All three entered the drawing-room. Rosa had rushed off again to tell the other servants of the Signora's safe return. Amaldi felt that he must not leave too abruptly. Lady Wychcote's unexpected presence at the flat struck him as not only unfortunate but very singular, even ominous. Why had she come, then, a day before she was expected by Sophy? One who wished to surprise another in some overt act would

follow just such a course. And as he looked at the cold, composed face that now wore an expression of polite interest he felt a stir of fear. What was the real woman cogitating under that civil mask? What was her real feeling towards Sophy? Whether grief had sharpened his perceptions to an unusual acuteness, or whether to-night some unusual force went out from Lady Wychcote, it would be difficult to say—but a conviction as strong as the conviction of his own existence seized him—the conviction that this woman was Sophy's enemy—implacable, ruthless, willed to it with all her being. And as he thought of what a clever, unscrupulous tongue might make of Sophy's being with him at such an hour of night, he felt cold with dread and anger. It seemed too horrible that the cruel past should reach out to her even from the shadow of death. First the brutal son—then his mother. It was as if Cecil Chesney grasped at the issues of her life, even from the grave, through the cold will of his mother.

In the meantime, Sophy was describing the Marchesa's fall to Lady Wychcote, who listened with that expression of civil interest, and now and then an interjection of conventional regret.

The more Amaldi reflected, the more sinister the whole situation seemed to him. But he was quite powerless. He excused himself in a few moments, saying that he must get back to the villa as soon as possible. Lady Wychcote murmured some expressions of formal sympathy. Sophy gave him a cold, rather rigid, hand. Her eyes looked blank, like the eyes of a puppet.

He went out sick at heart with impotent love and wrath.

When he had gone, Lady Wychcote said to Sophy:

"You look rather ill. Don't you think you'd better have something to eat ... some wine, perhaps?"

"Thanks, no. I'll just go to bed. Sleep will be the best thing for me."

"But you don't look as if you would sleep much," returned Lady Wychcote. "You seem terribly overstrung...."

"Yes. It was a horrid thing to see!" Sophy answered. In her mind the senseless, chaunting voice had begun again: "*It never rains but it pours.... It never rains but it pours.*"

Rosa came running back. She, too, pressed her mistress to eat and drink.

"No. I only want to lie down ... to be quiet, Rosa."

The kind soul, full of affectionate concern, threw an arm about her in order to sustain her better.

"Good night," Sophy then said. "I'm sorry to have to leave you at once, like this.... But I'm really worn out...."

"Just one thing before you go," returned Lady Wychcote, following as they went towards the door. "I'd like to explain my unceremonious descent on you.... James and Mildred decided to leave Venice this afternoon instead of to-morrow. So, as I knew you were expecting me to-morrow, I thought it couldn't really make any difference to you if I came a day sooner. I hope it hasn't inconvenienced you in any way...?"

"Not in the least. How could it?"

"Thanks very much. I hope you will feel rested in the morning."

"Thanks. I'm sure I shall."

Sophy moved on again. She felt that if she did not soon reach her bedroom she would drop to the floor in spite of Rosa's supporting arm.

But now Lady Wychcote was speaking again. She had followed them out into the corridor.

"Oh ... by the way ... I'm sorry to detain you, but I want to mention something about Robert...."

The spent life in Sophy leaped like flame in the draught of a suddenly opened door.

"Yes?" she said.

"The poor boy was so upset by your being so late that I promised him a trip to the glass-works to divert him."

"That was very kind of you," murmured Sophy.

Lady Wychcote continued:

"So, if you've no objection, we are to go to Murano rather early to-morrow morning.... A sort of all-day affair. We'll lunch there...."

"No, of course I don't object. I think it's very kind of you," said Sophy.

"Then ... good night," said Lady Wychcote.

Through the haze of fatigue and misery that clouded her, Sophy felt something peculiar in the tone of this "Good night." But then her ladyship's voice often took a peculiar tone in speaking to her. She was too tired

to analyse this special shade of expression.

A great sigh of relief escaped her as she found herself in her own room.

"*Chut!*" whispered Rosa, smiling wisely, her finger at her lips. Then she lowered it and pointed to the bed under its tent of white mosquito netting. "*Guarda!... povero angelotto!*" (Look! ... poor little angel!), she murmured. "He wouldn't sleep till I let him come into his dear mamma's bed...."

As Sophy saw through the mist of the white curtains, the little sturdy form and dark-red curls of her son, all her being rose in a great wave of love and anguish. And borne forward as by this wave, she went and looked down on him. He lay prone, hugging his pillow to him with both arms, as if in her absence he would at least make sure of something that had been close to her. And not even on the day when he had been born to her with anguish had she felt such a throe of tenderness.

She turned away after a moment and let Rosa help her to undress; then as soon as she was alone blew out the shaded candle and stole again towards the bed.

A clear September moon had risen. It shone in upon the veiled bed and made it gleam mysteriously—made it look like a shrine. The curtains had a holy whiteness in the moonlight.

Sophy went and knelt down beside it, and as she knelt there Bobby stirred, lifted himself on his elbow.

"Mother...?" he said.

"Yes, darling. I'm here ... just saying my prayers."

He gave a little smothered whoop of joy, and scrambled to the edge of the bed, dragging up the netting that divided them. He shook the loose folds down behind her, and threw both arms around her neck, hugging her head tight against him. The warm, lovely perfume of a sleepy child enfolded her. It was like the very essence of love enfolding her.

She had to explain everything to him before he would let her go. Then he began pleading: "Don't send me back to my room *right* away, mother.... I know it was rather girly of me to come and get in your bed like this.... But Rosa's a good old sort. She won't peach on me.... And I think it's rather natural, a chap being a bit girly about his mother when he thinks things might have happened to her, don't you?"

Sophy said that indeed she did, and that he should stay with her till morning—that it made her feel ever so much happier and safer to have him near her. Bobby snuggled down blissfully, keeping her hand in both his.

"After all," he said, "though I'm not grown, I'm the only *man* you've got.... It's nice to have a man awfully anxious about you, ain't it, mother?"

"Ah, yes, indeed it is!" she murmured.

He was silent for a few seconds; then he said:

"I *am* the only man you've got ... really, ain't I, mother?"

Sophy's heart stabbed. She put her other arm about him.

"Yes, Bobby—yes, darling," she said, holding him to

her.

"I like awfully being your only man," he murmured. "I ... I like the 'sponsibility."

"Dear heart!..." she murmured back, her lips on his curls.

He gave another of his snuggling wriggles of content, and was silent again. She thought he was dozing off, when he said suddenly in a by-the-way tone:

"I say, mother—is Marchese Amaldi married?"

Sophy's heart stabbed again. Why did the boy ask this?

"Yes, dear. Why?" she said.

"Oh ... nothing in particlar," replied Bobby, his voice more off-hand than ever. "I just wondered...." Then he remarked, still in that casual way:

"You haven't told me yet what kept you so late, mother."

Sophy told him, and as she spoke she kept thinking: "He has been worrying about Amaldi. He has been thinking of me and him together." And this idea was full of bitter pain to her—the idea that her little son might have been troubling over the possibility of her marriage with yet another man!

And, in fact, this thought had harassed Bobby for the last two days. It had embittered even the joy of his first lesson in rowing a gondola that afternoon. When Sophy had not returned by six o'clock, as she had said that she would, dreadful surmises had taken hold of him. Perhaps she was so late because she had decided suddenly to be married to the Marchese.

Perhaps she would come back with him and say: "Bobby, this is your new father." The mere idea had filled him with a blackness of resentment and jealousy. Not until Sophy had replied that Amaldi was already married had this feeling subsided, though his joy in having his mother again with him, safe and sound, all his own for the time being, had made him put it aside for the first few moments. But boyhood is terribly reserved in some things. The rack could scarcely have brought Bobby to confess his apprehensions to his mother.

Too excited to sleep, and wishing to get away from the subject of Amaldi, he began to tell her all about the projected trip to Murano.

"Do you think you'll feel well enough to come, too, mother?" he wound up.

"I'm afraid I'll be too tired, dear. But well see...."

"Of course, I wouldn't *have* you come if you felt tired; but it won't be half so jolly without you."

"We'll see, sweetheart," Sophy repeated. "I'll surely come with you if I'm able to...."

He rushed off into an eager description of Venetian glass-blowing.

"And they make *every* sort of thing, mother.... They even make stuff for dresses.... Oh, mother.... I'd love to buy you a spun-glass gown! 'Twould be like a sort of foggy rainbow—don't you s'pose so? I wonder if I could get glass slippers to go with it?... Wouldn't you like a glass gown, mother? You'd look just like a princess in the Arabian nights! You *must* have one!..."

He chattered like this for some time. Then just as she

thought he was falling asleep, he roused.

"I say, mother dear.... Don't let Harold Grey know I got in your bed to wait for you.... He's an awfully set chap ... he'd think me so beastly soft. You see, *his* mother's always had his father to look after her.... So he couldn't understand how I feel about you ... being your only male relative, and all that...."

Sophy promised, kissing the red curls again for good night.

He was quiet for about five minutes; then once more he roused.

"I've just had such a stunning idea, mother," he announced. "I want us to write a book together ... when I know a bit more rhetoric, of course. But we might both be thinking up a subject. Wouldn't it be jolly to have our names printed together like that on the first page?... 'What-you-may-call-it ... by Sophy Chesney and her son Robert Cecil Chesney....'"

"That's a beautiful idea, darling; but I'm afraid your name would have to be signed Wychcote...."

"No.... I *choose* to have it Chesney for our book. I am a Chesney, too, ain't I?"

"Yes, dear; but...."

"Just for our book, mother," he pleaded. "There they'd be—our two names—close together—long after we'd gone.... Isn't life a rummy thing, when you come to think of it, mother?"

"Yes, dear. But try to go to sleep now...."

"All right-o...."

He snuggled closer, settling himself with a deep breath of determination. But suddenly he exclaimed:

"Just *one* thing more.... What do you think of 'Spun Glass' for the title of our book, mother?"

"Well, darling—that would depend on what the book is to be about...."

"Oh ... about life in general!..." said Bobby largely. Then with the quick drowsiness of healthy childhood he fell fast asleep before she could answer.

But Sophy lay long awake. It seemed to her that life clung about her like a strong, dark web, meshing every natural movement of her heart. The idea of thrusting another man into her son's life—another "father"—became more and more painful to her. The idea of giving up Amaldi was unendurable. The idea of his giving up his country for her sake revealed itself suddenly as a sacrifice too terrible for her to accept.

The more she struggled for some egress from the clogging meshes, the tighter they closed about her. At dawn she was still wide awake, but when Bobby and his grandmother set out for Murano at eight o'clock she was sleeping like one drugged.

LIII

She did not wake until eleven, and by the time that she was dressed it was after twelve. Recalling what Lady Wychcote had said about lunching with Bobby

at Murano, she thought for a moment of going there and trying to find them in time for luncheon. Then she recoiled from the idea of being with her mother-in-law for several hours. But she was too restless to read or go out in the gondola. Rosa told her that Lady Wychcote had gone to Murano by steamer.

She decided finally that she would take a long walk among the little by-streets of Venice and have luncheon at some small *ristorante*, all alone. She went out into the soft brilliance of the September day, and the very radiance of the sunshine had a curious melancholy for her mood. It was a relief to her, after crossing the ugly iron bridge over the Grand Canal, to find herself in the shadowed by-ways. Now and then, through a gate in some wall, a plot of flowers laughed out at her, or she saw the flicker of sunlit green high above. But the shadowed water ran darkly, and the smell of the cool, dank streets was like the breath of sleeping centuries. She came to the portico of an old church, and went in. The fumes of incense brought back that day in London, so many years ago, when she had gone to see Father Raphael of the Poor. She bent her head, standing all alone in the dark, quiet church, and her heart hung leaden in her breast. Even Father Raphael could not have helped her now, she thought ... for there seemed to her no clear way of right and wrong here. All was subtle, inextricably tangled—a maze of approximations, instincts, conflicting duties, inclinations.

She roused, glanced listlessly at the paintings over the High Altar, then went out again. She stood a moment in the street before the church, considering her next move. She was now not far from the Piazza San Marco. She recalled a little place in the next Rio

where she could get a simple meal, and had taken a step forward when a burst of laughter made her look round. Her heart was jumping fast—that laughter was so painfully familiar—like the whinny of a young mare in springtime. Then she saw. Three people—a man and two women—had just turned the corner, about twenty yards away, and were coming towards her. The girl who walked a yard or so in advance had burnished, ruddy hair. She swung her white *beret* in her hand as she walked, and her blowing white serge gown moulded her handsome legs and vigorous young bust. The man's gait was rather sullen, the elder woman's frankly protesting.

"For goodness' sake, have some consideration for *me*, at least, Belinda!" she called fretfully. But in reply the girl only laughed her careless, whinnying laugh again.

Sophy had just time to spring back behind the dark columns of the porch before they could recognise her. She had been as if paralysed just at first. She squeezed in among the columns, with a feeling of sick faintness. Now they were at the church door ... they paused.

"Now here's where I balk!" rang out Belinda's voice. "No more rotten old churches in mine to-day, thank you. Come along, Morry."

"But, Belinda— I really need to rest a moment!" protested Mrs. Horton.

"You can rest all the time you're eating your luncheon," replied her step-daughter. "Come along, Morry!"

Sophy thanked Heaven that she was not called upon

to hear Morris's voice. He was evidently sulky about something. He made no reply. Mrs. Horton grumbled a little, calling Belinda "selfish." Again Belinda laughed. Then the three went on up the narrow, twisting Rio.

Sophy, trembling all through, leaned there against the columns, with eyes closed. Round and round in her mind the old adage went humming: "*It never rains but it pours.... It never rains but it pours*...."

She remembered that Loring and Belinda had been married last May. She felt ashamed and sick for herself, for them, for life, for human nature, for the whole social scheme, for civilisation.... Everything seemed to her like a sickness in that moment. This life that the world crawled with was like the swarming of maggots in a cheese.... She hated herself —she hated the existing order of things. She understood the darkest throes of pessimists and cynics in that moment. And under it all her heart burnt fiercely with the supreme pang of the proud, chaste being, who has yielded to lesser loves before the one, great, real love has been revealed.

Sophy went back into the church and stayed there a long time. She felt faint and ill. She was grateful for the quiet darkness in which she could sit still without attracting attention. At last she went out into the street again. When she reached the Piazza, she took a gondola and returned to the Rio San Vio. She had forgotten that she had not lunched. She looked so pale and strange that Rosa exclaimed when she saw her. She lay down on a sofa in the little sitting-room and let the kind soul bring her a cup of hot tea. This

revived her a little, and by and by as she lay there she fell asleep. It was nearly six o'clock when she waked. Her eyes and the back of her head ached dully; but she felt that she must refresh herself and change her morning gown before Lady Wychcote came back with Bobby. She bathed her face and eyes, put on a tea-gown, and returned to the drawing-room to wait for them. Taking up a book, she tried to read, but found that she could not command her attention. It occurred to her that she ought to write to Amaldi, but this also she found impossible. She could not write to him on the same day that she had seen Loring for the first time since her divorce. Then suddenly memories of Cecil began to haunt her. Incidents of their early love-days together came back to her with words and looks distinct as reality itself.

She went and leaned on the little balcony. The sun had just gone down. Air and water were suffused with the afterglow. High overhead, the Venice swifts flew shrilling as with ecstasy. Their musical arabesques of flight patterned the upper blue like joy made visible. Some dementia of supernal bliss seemed to impel them. The fine, exultant, piercing notes were like showers of tiny, crystal arrows shot earthward from the heights of heaven.

Sophy stood gazing up at them, and the mystery of their joy, and of her pain, filled her with a new aching.

She leaned there until the afterglow had died away; but it was not until seven o'clock that she began to feel anxious. By the time that it was nearly eight and Lady Wychcote and Bobby had not come, she was greatly alarmed, and this alarm swept away all lesser considerations. She sent a wire to Amaldi, saying:

"*Bobby and his grandmother went to Murano this morning. Expected to return at six. Not here yet. Fear some accident. Will you come and advise me.*" Then she had a consultation with Lorenzo, the first gondoliere, a quiet, capable man of about forty. She thought of going herself to Murano to make inquiries, but it would take a long time by gondola. Could Lorenzo think of any way of getting there more quickly. Lorenzo said that his cousin Ippolito had a steam-launch in which he took out pleasure-parties. He might try to get that; but then he must remind the Signora that the glass-works at Murano would be closed at this hour. It would be very difficult to make inquiries. Why did not the Signora go to the Questura for aid? The police might be able to think of some way in which to get at the people of the glass-works.

An idea came to her suddenly. She wondered at herself for not thinking of it before. She would go to the hotel at which Lady Wychcote had been stopping. It was quite possible that they might know something at the office. She might even find Lady Wychcote herself. Yes—she was quite capable of doing an inconsiderate thing like this for her own convenience. She might have stopped there for tea on the way back, and, feeling tired, might have lingered to rest a while, not troubling to send Sophy word. Yes, yes. It might very well be like that. Sophy had ordered dinner for half-past eight that evening out of consideration for her mother-in-law's habits. It was now only ten minutes past eight. Lady Wychcote might consider it quite sufficient if she arrived in time for dinner.

LIV

Sophy ordered the gondola, took Rosa with her, and went to the Grand Hotel.

The head official at the bureau looked rather surprised by her questions. Lady Wychcote? No, her ladyship was not there. She had been there that morning, however. She had sent a message late the night before—after twelve o'clock, in fact—to tell them to keep her luggage at the hotel until further instructions, instead of sending it to 35 Rio San Vio next day, as she had at first ordered.

"To keep her luggage?" Sophy interrupted blankly.

"*Si, Signora.* But I was about to explain," answered the clerk. "This morning, about nine, Lady Wychcote came again with her railway tickets so that we might check her luggage straight through to Paris...."

Sophy turned white.

"You must be mistaken!..." she said.

"*Ma, no, Signora—scusi.* ... I am not mistaken," said the clerk decidedly. "The tickets were through from Venice to Paris. Her ladyship wished her luggage sent by the ten-thirty train this morning. I think that she herself left by that train also. Shall I send for the head porter? He will know."

"Yes, please," Sophy managed to murmur. She sank down into the nearest chair.

The head porter came shortly. He had just returned from the station. Yes. Lady Wychcote had left that

morning on the through train for Paris.

Sophy could not articulate for a moment. Then she said, her lips stiff and dry:

"Was she ... was she ... alone?"

The porter replied that Miladi had been alone when he last saw her, as she had insisted on being taken to the station an hour before the train left. But that the tickets were for herself and her maid. So that he supposed that the maid had joined her later. There happened to be no other guests leaving on the through train for Paris that morning, and as Miladi had insisted that he should not wait, he had returned to the hotel. Miladi was very positive.

"You are sure there was not a ... a little boy with her?" Sophy asked.

Yes—the porter was quite sure that there had been no little boy with Miladi.

Sophy's mind was working in terrible, clear flashes.

She turned to Rosa, who stood a little apart, rather scared, feeling that something puzzling and dreadful was in the air, but only understanding now and then a word of the English in which all were speaking.

"You said that Lady Wychcote took her maid with her this morning, didn't you?" Sophy asked.

Rosa replied that Anna had certainly started for Murano with Lady Wychcote and Bobby.

It seemed to Sophy that she saw it all now. Her mother-in-law, afraid of being traced too easily if she kept the boy with her, had left him somewhere with Anna until a few minutes before the train started.

Anna was a clever, middle-aged Yorkshire woman who had been with her ladyship some twenty years. She could be trusted to hold her tongue and act intelligently in such a case. She was, oddly enough, devoted to her mistress, and would never have thought of questioning her commands, no matter how singular they might have appeared to her.

And yet—could Lady Wychcote really have dared to kidnap the boy—for it was nothing less than kidnapping if she had taken him away with her in that determined, secret fashion. But why? What excuse could she give? And had she really done it! And, if not, where was Bobby? Where was her little son at this late hour of the evening? She felt quite crazy and witless for a few moments. What to do? How to act? And time was going. If Bobby had really been stolen from her, then she must follow on the next train, if possible. But where? Where would that relentless old woman take him? If she (Sophy) went to Paris—she would have no further clue on reaching it. Lady Wychcote might go on to England; she might not. And why? Why?

Suddenly she knew. In a searing flash she knew just why it was that Lady Wychcote had taken the boy—and that she had surely taken him. She remembered that strange tone in her voice last night, when she had spoken with her after Amaldi had left. Yes—that was it! She had thought the worst of her late return in company with Amaldi. She would give that as her reason for taking away the boy—his mother's unfitness to be his guardian.

Something wild and potent sprang to life in her. She got to her feet. She looked like another woman. Now she was asking when the next through train left for

Paris. At ten o'clock, they told her. It was now twenty-five minutes past nine. She might make it if she went straight to the station in the gown she wore, without stopping to get even a small travelling-bag. But no—she was not sure enough that that was the best thing to do. The through tickets that Lady Wychcote had bought to Paris might be only a blind. She must be very certain when she acted to act in the surest way. A favourite saying of Judge Macon's came into her mind. "Be sure you're right—then go ahead." Besides, Amaldi might be at the Rio San Vio by now. He would be sure to advise her in the sanest, most clear-sighted way. He was the very man to stand firm in a crisis, not to lose his head. Then, with a hot recoil of shame, she thought of what she must tell him. She had not yet taken in what all this might also mean to her and Amaldi. She could think only of Bobby, bewildered, unhappy, rushing away from her on the night express to Paris in company with the bitter old woman who had always hated her. She recalled the feeling of his strong little body as he had snuggled close to her last night. A fury of impotent love and rage shook her. The gondola seemed to crawl over the light-jewelled water of the canal, though Lorenzo and Mario were sending it along at racing speed. A gaily lighted barge filled with singers and musicians passed them.

As they turned into the little Rio, by the Palace of Don Carlos, another barge began burning Bengal lights. The dark, narrow water-way, with its crowding houses and little bridges, flared red before her as in some operatic scene. Why were things always so brutally ironical? Why should there be a festival in Venice on the night that her boy had been stolen from her?

When she reached her flat she found a wire from Amaldi, saying that he would take the train from Cortola to Venice, and be with her by ten o'clock. It was the quickest way that he could reach her. As she put down the telegram she heard his voice on the stair, speaking to Lorenzo. Then he came in alone. He took her in his arms, held her close a moment, then led her to a sofa, and sat down beside her, keeping her hands in his.

"Now tell me," he said.

She told him everything. As she spoke he kept muttering, "What infamy!... What infamy!..." He was as convinced as she was of the truth of her conjectures.

Her dark, tortured eyes made him wince with a double pain. It was only her son that she was thinking of in those moments, not of him, her lover —not of what this parting would mean to him and her. "What must I do?" she kept asking him. "What must I do next? Ought I to have tried to catch that ten o'clock train? Tell me, Marco ... for God's sake, tell me what I'd best do...."

"Wait, dearest...." he said. "Give me time to think...."

He sat frowning down at the floor for a few moments. Then he turned to her. He asked her about the Wychcotes' solicitor.

"Do you think this Mr. Surtees is really your friend?" he said when she had told him all about her relations with the old lawyer.

"Yes. I'm sure he is," she said positively. "Why?"

"Because, in that case, it seems to me that the best

thing would be for you to wire him to meet you at Folkestone. You can then give him the true facts and ask his help—before trying to see Lady Wychcote."

"You think she's taken Bobby to England, Marco?—You feel sure of that?"

"I don't think there's a doubt of it. She will go straight to Surtees with her story; of that I feel positive."

Sophy coloured painfully.

"You mean that ... that she would want him to speak to ... the trustees?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," he assented. What he really thought was that Lady Wychcote would want to have the matter taken at once before the Court. But he could not bring himself to tell her this. Her shamed flush had hurt him horribly. It was intolerable that this revengeful old woman should have the power to sully and cloud their relations. Then fear seized him. What if Sophy were mistaken about the solicitor? What if he were a tool of Lady Wychcote? The possibilities that this idea disclosed appalled him. He went as white as Sophy had gone red.

"What is it? What are you thinking of now, Marco?" she urged anxiously, scared by his expression.

"I was thinking how you could get to England in the shortest time," he answered. "It's very vital that you should get there as soon as possible."

"Yes, yes. By that first through train to Paris to-morrow morning."

"No. You needn't go to Paris," said Amaldi. "It will be more direct for you to go from Venice straight to

Boulogne via Laon. You'll save several hours by taking that route."

"Oh—thank God!" she stammered. Then she caught up his hand to her heart. "How good you are to me! Don't think I don't realise it—your unselfishness.... You think only of me—and I can't think of anything but my boy ... of how frightened and wretched he must be.... It's not that my love for you is any less than my love for him ... but he's so little ... he's my only son ... he needs me so...."

Amaldi felt like crying out, "And do I not need you?" but he choked down this cry. What meaning had the love of lovers for Rachel mourning her children? He drew her to him and kissed her loosened hair very gently.

"This is Bobby's hour," he said. "I can wait for my hour."

He left not long after, so that the servants might have no cause to gossip. It had been decided between them that he would attend to everything for her and that she and Rosa would be ready to leave by the morning train.

"I will send men to fetch your boxes at nine," he said. "Your maid can go with them. I will take you to the station myself."

"Thank you ... thank you, dearest...." she said.

Suddenly he caught her in his arms as on the day before in the Villa garden.

"Don't forget that you are the blood of my soul...." he said in a strangled voice.

She sobbed out his name—put up her arms about his

neck. He kissed her rather wildly and went without another word.

That strange phrase of his rang in her mind all night, mingled with her frantic, confused thoughts of Bobby —and anguish of dread about what Lady Wychcote might say and do before Mr. Surtees could hear the true facts.

Amaldi had spoken in Italian as he nearly always did in moments of great feeling. She could hear his choked voice saying those strange, intense words ... "*sei il sangue del anima mia*"—the blood of his soul ... she was that to him. And yet, as she lay on the bed that Bobby had shared with her only last night, she felt as if her son were the true blood of her own soul ... that if she lost him by any dreadful, unspeakable chance—her soul would bleed away ... there would be no love left in her for any one.... And she began to reproach herself bitterly through the endless, sleepless night. She had been wrapped up in her own life ... she had not thought as she should of the precious little life derived from hers.... She should have foreseen. Knowing Lady Wychcote as she knew her, she ought to have had such a possibility as this that had happened always before her.

Then again she would think of Amaldi with a throb of pain and yearning. How pale he had looked ... how worn. She could not sleep. Her head and heart both were burning. Now Loring's face came before her. It blended with Amaldi's, blurring it, blotting it out. Now it was Cecil who looked straight at her with hard, angry eyes. "Where is my son, eh?... What have you done with my son?" he seemed to say.

She rose from the bed finally, lighted a candle and began to pack her travelling bags. As soon as

daylight came, she asked Rosa to make her some coffee. Then, in spite of the woman's protests, helped her with the other packing. Once when they were folding Bobby's little garments, she put down her head on Rosa's shoulder and began to sob. Then she controlled herself again. She would need all her strength for the hours and days that lay before her.

LV

Later in the morning, when she was on her way to the station alone with Amaldi, it was even worse, but she had no temptation to cry now. This new pain that had sprung suddenly to life in her had the searing quality of hot iron. She kept stealing glances at his face, as he sat beside her in the gondola looking straight ahead, his under-lids drawn slightly up. It gave him a queer, short-sighted yet uncanny look, as though he were trying to focus some apparition of the future. He was thinking:

"If she has to choose between me and her son—she will choose her son."

Sophy was thinking:

"How long will it be before I see him again?... What if I never see him again?" She felt as if some inner force were tearing her in two. She had just begun to realise that in finding Bobby again she might lose Amaldi.

She put her hand on his.

"Marco...." she whispered. Her voice was full of fear and pain.

His hand turned under hers, clasped it tight. He looked at her but said nothing.

"I'm afraid...." she whispered again. "Not only about Bobby ... about us...."

"I know," he said this time.

He tried to think of some words of comfort, but they would not come. He was obsessed by the suffocating pain of his desire to help and guard her in this dreadful crisis, and the knowledge that the only thing he could do for her was to keep away, to let her take that long, anxious journey alone. At the time when she needed him most he could do nothing. His love was powerless. It was because of his love that this dark thing had come upon her. He said at last, rather mechanically:

"When you see the solicitor, things will clear, I feel certain.... You'll write me as soon as you've seen him?"

"Yes ... yes," she answered eagerly. "And you ... you'll write to me ... every day, won't you?... That will be my only comfort ... my only...."

She choked and could not go on.

He asked her where he should address his letters, and she answered "to Breene."

"They will be forwarded to me wherever I am ... you see.... I don't know yet where I shall be ... just at first...."

Again she broke off.

They had reached the station. It was now a quarter to ten. Only fifteen minutes more and they would be parted—for how long?

But even for these fifteen minutes they could not be together. Amaldi had still to see to things—to find out whether her luggage was all on board. She watched him as he went to and fro with his light, nervous step. It was all so unreal. Even he looked

unreal. She could not see his face plainly at this distance. She tried to recall it, and it frightened her when she found that she could not imagine it clearly though she had looked at it so often and so earnestly during the past hour. Would she be unable to see his face in her thought when they were really parted? Then she began to watch the station clock. Only ten minutes more now—only nine ... eight——

He came back with a *fachino*, who gathered up her bags, and went off towards the train with them. Seven minutes now....

She sprang to her feet.

"Let us walk together...." she said, "somewhere away from all these people...."

They went slowly down the long station, beside the rails over which her train would soon be rolling. Their white, drawn faces would have attracted more attention were not such faces often seen at railway stations. One or two people gave them a passing glance of curiosity. About them sounded voices and footsteps, trundling wheels, sharp whistlings, the clang of testing hammers, the stridor of escaping steam, all made harsher and more echoing by the vaulted roof and stone walls of the station.

He offered her his arm, and she clung to it faint with pain. The clattering, grinding, sibilant din added to her misery. The acrid smell of coal-smoke recalled hateful memories. She had so many things she wished to say. They jostled in her mind. She could not choose which one to say first. And with him it was much the same. Then he murmured something that she could not catch. She clutched his arm, saying, "What is it?... Tell me again.... I didn't hear."

The scream of an engine drowned her voice. They heard the guard's whistle. People were scrambling into the carriages. A fat man in plaid trousers was running ridiculously, his bag banging against his legs. People laughed. Amaldi was helping her into a carriage. The guard slammed the door. She stood at the window and reached out her hand to him. He grasped it, looking up at her in silence. Then the train began to move. He walked beside it for a little way. The rhythm of the wheels quickened. The trucks began their clangorous, jerky sing-song. The closely clasped hands were drawn apart. She felt the rushing air chill on her hand that was still warm from his. She sank back, pulling down the brown travelling veil that she had thrown back for her last look at him. With closed eyes she tried to recall his face, and, as before, in the station, it refused to come clearly to her. Mile after mile she sat there without stirring, and it seemed to her that she must have cried out with the sharp misery of it all, but for the motion of the train which seemed in some inexplicable way to dull the edge of her suffering. When the train stopped at some station she could scarcely endure the sudden stillness. Then when it rushed on again, again in that odd way, her pain became once more soothed.

But after half an hour or so this haze of stupefaction lifted, leaving her face to face with clear agony once more. It was the thought of her son that racked her now ... her little son, flesh of her flesh, heart of her heart. What must he, too, be enduring?—he who had once begged her never to leave him again, "for Jesus' sake, Amen." She could see his little, pale face upturned to the car windows at Sweet-Waters station and hear the tremble in his voice. She felt as though a knife were being turned round and round in her

breast. Then black fear seized her again ... fear of what it might be in Lady Wychcote's power to do against her—what she might have done already. Would Mr. Surtees really be her friend? Would he believe her? Would all those strange men believe her story? Would she have to tell it to them face to face? — Perhaps go into Court?

She clenched her hands in her helpless anguish until they ached and burnt.... O God!... God! Suppose that some ill had come to him. Suppose she were never to hear that eager, strong little voice again.... She stood up suddenly to her full height. People in the carriage stared at her. She dropped back again wondering if she had cried out....

About sunset the train began to mount the Gothard. Now she was in the grip of a new horror—the memory of the last time that she had taken this journey. She could see, as if it had been yesterday, Gerald Wychcote's thin, frail figure looking so much frailer than usual in its unaccustomed black—that awful, oblong black box guarded by Gaynor in the luggage van—the box in which Cecil travelled like goods on a goods train.... Now it was for Cecil's son that she was taking the dreadful journey.... Again it seemed to her that she saw his angry, hard blue eyes staring at her and heard him saying, "Where is my son, eh? What have you done with my son between you—you and your latest lover?"

She grasped her head in both hands, wondering if the wild pain in it meant brain fever....

It was drizzling next morning when they reached Boulogne, but the sea was calm. She looked hungrily at the grey curtain of mist that shut out England.

The crossing was short. And yet it seemed to her an eternity before the steamer docked at Folkestone. Had Mr. Surtees received the telegram that Amaldi had sent for her night before last? Would he be there to meet her? Her heart beat to suffocation, as she leaned over the taffrail staring down at the crowd below. Then it gave a sudden leap—— Yes—there he was. His prim, kindly old face was anxiously upturned. He was looking for her just as she was looking for him. She waved to him ... called his name. A few moments more and she was beside him. She tried to speak, but no sound came from her white lips. He hurried to tell her what he knew that she was trying to ask.

"Your son is with Lady Wychcote at Dynehurst, Mrs. Chesney," he said. "I saw her ladyship yesterday."

Sophy staggered. The old lawyer offered his arm. He looked almost as pale as she did. He wanted to fetch her a glass of brandy, but she would not have it.

"I shall be quite right ... quite right in a moment," she kept gasping. She bent her head as she walked beside him, struggling with a desire to burst into inane laughter. Hateful throes of hysteria convulsed her throat. She overcame them by a violent effort of will that left her feeling weaker than ever. She clung blindly to Mr. Surtees' arm, stumbling now and then.

"I reserved a compartment in the London train," he told her. "Do you wish your maid to go with us, or in the next compartment?"

"Not with us," murmured Sophy. "I wish to talk with you quite alone."

She regained her composure little by little, and as

soon as the train was under way turned to him and said in a firm voice:

"Mr. Surtees—what did Lady Wychcote say to you about me?— What reason did she give for abducting my son?"

The solicitor flushed and his eyes fell away from hers.

"If you will excuse me a moment, Mrs. Chesney," he answered, "there is a paper in my bag that I would like to show you. I ... a ... have embodied in writing the gist of her ladyship's ... a ... remarks."

He opened a small black bag as he spoke and took out a legal looking paper. He half unfolded it, glanced nervously at its contents, then hesitated.

"It is most painful to me to have to submit this document to you, Mrs. Chesney," he said, distress in his voice. "I beg you to believe that I have never had a more painful duty to perform."

"Thank you, Mr. Surtees," said Sophy. She changed colour cruelly, but her tone was still firm and quiet. "Let me see it, please...."

He gave her the paper, and looked away from her while she read it.

It stated that the Viscountess Wychcote alleged that her daughter-in-law, the Hon. Mrs. Cecil Chesney, widow of the late Hon. Cecil Chesney, etc., etc., was an improper person to have the care of the young peer, her son, Viscount Wychcote, as she, Viscountess Wychcote, believed that Mrs. Chesney had committed adultery with the Marchese Marco Amaldi. Then followed Lady Wychcote's reasons for

so believing, and for the first time Sophy learned that Colonel Bollingham had seen her enter Amaldi's lodgings in Clarges Street the day after his supposed accident.

She sat motionless for some time after reading this accusation, then she spoke to the solicitor:

"Mr. Surtees...." she said.

He turned unhappily.

"Mr. Surtees," she repeated, looking straight into his eyes with her own so passionately intent and still, "I am going to tell you the whole truth—so help me God."

She lifted her right hand slightly as she spoke, her eyes fixed on his. He bent his head mechanically as if acknowledging her oath. Then clearly, slowly, pausing now and then to command herself, Sophy told him the whole story of Amaldi's love for her and hers for him. The old lawyer sat listening intently. After the first few moments he forgot his distressing embarrassment in the deep human interest of the story that was being unfolded before him. As Sophy drew near the end and told of the bad news that Barti had brought from Switzerland, and of how the accident to Amaldi's mother had made her so late in returning to Venice, of how she had found Lady Wychcote there a day before her intended visit, and of all that she had endured next day when she feared at first that some dreadful accident had happened to her son—as she told all this very simply, very movingly in plain, quiet words, the sedate face of Mr. Surtees grew first discomposed then rather grim.

Sophy ceased. The whispering roar of the heavy

English train filled the silence for a little. Then she said:

"Do you believe me, Mr. Surtees?"

He answered gravely, even solemnly.

"I do believe you, Mrs. Chesney."

At this Sophy broke down, and hiding her face from him cried bitterly.

LVI

It was most distressing to Mr. Surtees to see this tall, dignified woman collapse into such a bitter abandonment of weeping. He had even a secret affection for Sophy after his prim fashion. As poor Bobby would have said, it made him feel "rather sick" to sit there helplessly watching her. He had an almost irresistible impulse to put his hand on her shaking shoulder and pat it gently. Only the habit of a decorous legal lifetime restrained him. He fidgeted nervously with his glasses and the paper that she had handed back to him, began to mutter such words of consolation as he could think of.

"My dear lady ... my dear lady.... Compose yourself.... We shall find a way out.... I have suggestions ... yes, suggestions...."

Sophy reached out one hand to him blindly, her face still hidden. He took it gingerly but tenderly in both his own. Nature overcame decorum.

"My poor, poor child...." he said shakily.

As a staunch Conservative and member of the church of England, he had not approved of Sophy's divorce. In theory he was much shocked by the fact that she should have contemplated a third marriage. Yet, as she herself told it, her story took quite another aspect in the old lawyer's mind—seemed, in fact, the most natural and inevitable outcome of circumstances. The circumstances he still disapproved of, while sympathising, against his judgment and much to his own astonishment, with the romance that had resulted from them. And he felt highly indignant at the course pursued by Lady Wychcote.

When Sophy was calm again, he asked leave to tell her some of the "suggestions" to which he had referred.

"Tell me first of all how to get my son again," she urged. "What must I do to get him back at once, Mr. Surtees? I will not stop at anything ... no! not at anything!" Now she was all fierce and strong with maternity again. Her eyes blazed from her swollen lids, giving her ravaged face a wild, piteous look.

"If you should insist upon regaining possession of your son by legal proceedings," answered Mr. Surtees, "you would have to apply to a Judge at Chambers for a writ of *habeas corpus*, demanding his production before the Judge and an order that he be released to you his mother and guardian. But if you will allow me, I think I can suggest a better way than taking this distressing matter before the law.... I would suggest...."

Sophy interrupted him breathlessly.

"But that paper ... the paper you showed me just now. Isn't that to be shown in Court—to a Judge!"

Mr. Surtees hastened to reassure her.

"That is not a legal document strictly speaking," he said quickly. "It is merely my memorandum of the affidavit that Lady Wychcote wishes to present—to the Court. I have taken no steps whatever as yet. I felt it necessary to delay this deplorable matter as much as possible—certainly until I had seen you, Mrs. Chesney. Now if you will allow me ... I really think that you will find my suggestions of value...."

Sophy listened in silence while he told her of the solution that had occurred to him. In the first place, that the matter should be kept out of Court, he considered vitally important, for although the application would be heard in Chambers at the first instance, either party dissatisfied with the Judge's decision might appeal and then the matter would become public. Now what he suggested was that he should accompany Mrs. Chesney to Dynehurst, and that she should demand a private interview with Lady Wychcote in his presence. After what Mrs. Chesney had confided to him, he thought there could be no doubt of a private settlement of the matter. That the mother of the Marquis Amaldi would be willing to witness in Mrs. Chesney's defence was a most important fact; also the circumstance of her having been accompanied by Miss Pickett when she went to inquire for the Marquis after his supposed accident. Then, too, the stainlessness of her reputation in the past would undoubtedly weigh considerably with the Judge in his estimate of the case. Altogether, everything pointed to the likelihood of a decision in favour of Mrs. Chesney against her

ladyship, should the matter be brought to law. So that when Lady Wychcote had been made to understand this, he thought that she could scarcely refuse to deliver up Mrs. Chesney's son to her.

"You don't know her, Mr. Surtees," here broke in Sophy, white and hard. "You don't know to what lengths that woman is capable of going...."

"I am not entirely ignorant of her ladyship's ... a ... characteristics," replied her solicitor somewhat tartly. "But in this instance I think that I could present the case to her so that she would a ... see its a ... rationality."

Sophy brooded a moment. Then she said:

"And if she would not listen ... if she insisted on proceeding against me!"

"Then," replied Mr. Surtees, "she would have to state formally in her affidavit the sources of her information. An affidavit would also be forthcoming from the person or persons who could *prove* the alleged ... a ... misconduct, or the circumstances from which the misconduct could be proved. If the Judge believed her ladyship's story he would order your son to be handed over to her. If he disbelieved it he would order him to be delivered up to you. I think there is little doubt which story he would believe, Mrs. Chesney. Besides, the abduction of a child is an utterly illegal and reprehensible act—no matter what the motive. A court of morals would look at the motive of course, and so Lady Wychcote's abduction of your son being prompted by her affection for him, would be judged differently from a like case in which base or sordid motives were the cause. But I do not think that her ladyship's act would be regarded by

any Judge as other than highly reprehensible. This fact, taken with the rest, may well cause her ladyship to reconsider."

Sophy still brooded, her eyes on the streaking fields. The stilted legal phraseology seemed part of the grim unnaturalness of everything. Suddenly she flashed round on him.

"Which way can I get my boy the sooner?" she said.

"By allowing me to go with you to Dynehurst; I am convinced of it," he replied without an instant's hesitation. "Days might elapse if you took the other course."

"Very well," she said, "I will go with you—by the first train that we can take."

It was about nine o'clock when they reached Dynehurst station. They had to wait there half an hour for a fly. It seemed to Sophy as if this half-hour of waiting would never end. Then when they were once more on the way again, the lean hacks plodded at a snail's pace over the sodden roads. For the last twenty-four hours it had been raining heavily, now the air was moistened by a Scotch mist. Sophy sat forward on the musty seat, her hands gripped together, thinking of those other times she had driven to Dynehurst through the night—first as a bride—then as a widow, with her husband's body following in that huge, oblong black box, that now lay in the crypt of the little chapel.... When they drove past the chapel a fit of shivering seized her. She set her teeth to keep them from chattering. Now

the cliff-like house loomed. She saw the files of lighted windows, but the nursery was at the back, she could not see if there were still lights in his window. Her heart began a sick throbbing. Was he asleep, her Bobby, her little son? Or did he lie awake, wretched, unhappy, wondering about it all—longing for her so that he could not sleep? She wanted to cry out to him that she was coming. She could scarcely wait for the fly to draw up at the front door. Before Mr. Surtees could assist her, she was out and up the steps. She rang twice. Rage woke in her as she stood waiting for admittance into the house where her son was shut from her as in a prison. She trembled with her pent anger more than she had trembled in passing Cecil's tomb. Then a footman opened the door. She stepped past him without a word, and ran towards the stairway.

Mr. Surtees hurried after her.

"Wait ... wait, Mrs. Chesney ... be advised ... I implore you...." he panted.

But Sophy did not even hear him. Her son ... she was going to her son ... that was all that she knew or felt in that moment.

She had not mounted five steps before she saw Lady Wychcote and Bellamy coming down.

She stopped and threw back her head with a fierce gesture.

"I've come for my son," she said, her eyes on Lady Wychcote's. "Where is my son?"

Both Lady Wychcote and Bellamy stood staring down at her without a word, and something in their faces made her suddenly shrivel with fear. She reached

them in a bound or two, seized Lady Wychcote's arm, holding her as in a vice. Her wild look went from one pale face to the other.

"What's the matter? What have you done to him?" she gasped. "Where is he?"

She loosed Lady Wychcote as suddenly as she had seized her. Now her frantic, asking fingers grasped Bellamy.

"Is he ill? Is he ... dead?" she stammered.

Then with the same violent quickness she released Bellamy also before he could reply. Leaping past them, she ran towards the nursery.

Bellamy caught her up.

"Wait, Mrs. Chesney ... wait...." he implored as the old solicitor had done. "He's not in the nursery.... He is in ... in his father's room.... Wait a moment.... Let me explain ... for the boy's sake."

He had ventured to take her arm, and held her back somewhat as he hurried beside her.

"Bobby is not well...."

She stopped short—spun round in his hold.

"Is he dead? Is he dead? Is he dead?" she kept muttering like an automaton.

"No ... no. Only a bad cold ... from exposure.... Rather feverish.... You mustn't excite him, though.... Mustn't rush in on him like this.... Sit here a moment, Mrs. Chesney.... Recover yourself.... Let me explain."

Like an automaton she sat down in the hall chair that he pushed forward. He could see the beading of

sweat about her eyes and lips as she looked up at him.

He galloped his explanation, bending over her, speaking in a low voice, and glancing now and then at the door of Cecil's old bedroom near which they were.

"The little chap got lost in the Park last night ... was some hours in a pelting rain ... d'you see? He's in no immediate danger ... but he has pneumonia ... is feverish. We mustn't startle or excite him—d'you see?"

She sat staring up at him out of a dead face in which the eyes looked startlingly alive. Then she rose, said in a flat, quiet voice:

"Yes ... I see. Now take me to him."

LVII

Bellamy went ahead and opened the door carefully so as to make no sound. She stood a moment on the threshold looking in. Cecil's bed faced her, and in it lay his son, propped on pillows to help his difficult breathing. His grey eyes were wide and bright and unfocused—his cheeks scarlet. On the sheet before him lay some bits of silver money and a few bank notes. He fumbled with them incessantly. He was saying in a thick quick, little voice:

"A first-class ticket.... A ticket to London.... A first-class ticket to London, please.... I have the money ...

here's the money.... I have the money.... A ticket to London...."

Sophy clung to the jamb of the door. She could not move. Bellamy put his arm round her. The nurse, who had been sitting by the bed, rose and came forward.

Suddenly the boy cried out piteously: "Oh! it's getting wet ... it's melting ... my money's melting...."

The nurse flew back to him.

"No, dear, no," she reassured him. "Here's your money all nice and dry. Here's your ticket to London. You're going to London...."

"No, no! ... It's all melted ... it won't buy a ticket.... I can't find her.... I can't get to her...."

Sophy sank down by the bed, and took the hot little hand in both her own.

"I'm here, my darling.... I'm here...." she said in a voice of wonderful quiet. "You won't need to go to London to find me, dearest.... See, I'm here...."

The brilliant eyes fixed on her anxiously. "... Mother?" ventured the perplexed voice, faintly hopeful. Then again that piteous wail broke from him. The little hand jerked in hers trying to release itself. "You're not my mother ... my mother's in Venice.... I'm going to her.... Where's my money? Where's my money?"

Sophy dropped her face upon the bedclothes. The nurse and doctor stood by in silence. Bobby fumbled with the money. He began again: "A first-class ticket, please.... A ticket to London.... A ticket to London.... I've got the money ... here's the money...."

The anguish of remorse and love were rending her, but outwardly she was as calm as the two professionals who stood and pitied her.

She looked up at last. She said to Bellamy:

"You can trust me. I am quite controlled. But...." She gasped in spite of her furious will. ".... don't let *her* come into this room."

"No, she shall not. Don't be afraid," Bellamy said soothingly as to a child. "I will go and see to it. Nurse Fleming here will aid you in every way. Bobby likes her...." he added, then left the room.

Now the boy was turning his head from side to side on the pillow.

"It's jolly hot in here ... it's too hot ... it's too hot...." he kept muttering. Then he called out fretfully: "I'm thirsty!... I want some water!"

Nurse Fleming gave him some chilled water in a spoon. He was quiet for a second or two. Then he began again in that thick, quick little voice:

"A ticket to London, please.... A ticket to London.... I'm her only man.... She said I was.... *He* ain't her man ... he's married.... I'm glad.... I don't want a new father.... I hate new fathers.... Mother dear, I'm your man.... Don't marry anybody.... I'm your man...."

Sophy began whispering softly, her face close to his:

"No, sweetheart. You're my only, only man.... I'm not going to marry anybody, my darling. Bobby.... Bobbikins ... it's mother talking to you ... mother.... My little man ... my only little man...."

He seemed to recognise her for an instant. "Mother!...

Let's begin our book.... Once upon a time.... No, that's silly.... It was glass ... glass ... a glass book.... Put our names together ... print them.... No.... I want a ticket to London, please.... A ticket to London...."

In the meantime, Mr. Surtees and Bellamy were talking very seriously to Lady Wychcote. Her ladyship was badly frightened. It did not take them long to bring her to a reasonable view of the question at issue. If her grandson should die, she could not but realise that his death would be laid to her account by others, though her own angry thought insisted that his mother would be really the one to blame. Then, too, she loved the boy, as has been said, far more than she had ever loved her own sons. She quailed inwardly with pain when she thought of the shriek of terror with which Bobby had greeted her a little while ago when she had entered the room with Bellamy. "Don't let her get me!... Don't let her take away my ticket!" he had screamed. For with the strange inconsistency of delirium he had recognised his enemy at once, though his mother's presence had been unable to soothe him. Lady Wychcote had been compelled to withdraw, lest the child should go into convulsions from his frenzied fear of her.

She sat subdued though haughty while Mr. Surtees pressed home the facts that he considered would militate against her should she persist in her struggle for the sole guardianship of her grandson. Bellamy, in whom she had confided when he was called to Bobby's bedside, was strongly of the solicitor's opinion.

They both agreed in thinking that Lady Wychcote's case would be as good as lost before being presented. Besides, after laying before her every other circumstance in Sophy's favour. Mr. Surtees assured her that the Judge would be certain to demand a private interview with the boy. In that case Bobby's absolute devotion to his mother would have the greatest weight with the Court. And—her ladyship must pardon him—but after the events of the last two days, she could hardly expect that her grandson would reply as ... a ... favourably when questioned about his feeling for her.

They expatiated on the way that the boy had come to be in his present serious condition. The proud old woman sat listening with a face as grey as flint and as hard. But she was suffering as she had not suffered before in all her imperious life. Bellamy wound up by saying: "I regret having to distress you, Lady Wychcote; but the boy's condition is much more serious than I would admit to his mother. In fact he is very dangerously ill.... But even if he recovers, you would scarcely like, I presume, to have your part in the matter brought up in Court."

Lady Wychcote swayed on her chair.

"'If he recovers'...." she repeated thickly. "Is there danger ... of ... his ... dying?"

"Grave danger," said Bellamy.

Lady Wychcote fainted for the first time in her life.

When Bellamy thought of how poor Bobby had come to have pneumonia, he did not wonder that his

grandmother should faint on hearing that he might die. It had happened in this way:

To all the boy's frantic inquiries when he found that he was on the way to England without his mother, Lady Wychcote had always answered in some such words as these: "You must trust me, my dear. You will understand some day, but now you must submit to my judgment without questioning. It is best for you and for your mother that you should come with me. I cannot tell you anything more at present. Be a good boy. After a while you will be very happy I am sure."

She told him frankly, however, that they were going to England.

When he asked if his mother knew, if she would come, too, very soon, Lady Wychcote had replied: "She will know shortly. I do not know what her plans are."

Then Bobby gave way to such rage as his grandmother had not witnessed since his father's childhood. He was like a demon. He tried to jump from the window of the carriage—fought with her and the maid till their gowns were torn and he was in a state of collapse. When he recovered from this he took refuge in utter silence. He would not eat or drink—would not move—crouched white and stony with closed eyes. When they reached Boulogne they had to get a man to carry him. But now his eyes were open. They looked fierce and animal-like. He himself looked like some savage, trapped little animal with a red mane. As he caught sight of the channel steamer and realised that he was to be carried aboard of it, he began to fight again. The man had difficulty in mastering him without hurting him. Lady Wychcote

explained that the boy was temporarily insane and that she was taking him to England for treatment. Bobby shrieked: "You lie! You lie! You've stolen me! She's stolen me from my mother!"

It was the first time that the determined old lady had ever felt really afraid. She almost lost her head for a moment; but, fortunately for her, it was at this moment that Bobby collapsed again, as he had done in the railway carriage.

All the way from Dover to London he crouched again, motionless, with closed eyes. But now he was thinking—wildly yet rationally. He must escape somehow and get back to his mother. To escape he must put his grandmother off her guard. He must pretend to "be good." His pockets were full of money. He had taken from his little "bank" that morning the savings of two months. He had taken out all the money he had, because he wanted to buy his mother a glass gown if possible. There were in his pockets some English shillings and half-crowns, some silver *lire*, some five *lire* bank notes. It seemed quite a fortune to him—certainly enough to pay his way back to Venice. But how to get away from his grandmother? The only thing to do was to pretend to "be good" and wait ... and watch his chance. Then, too, he must keep strong. Now he felt very faint and sickish from hunger. He unclosed his eyes, looked at his grandmother, and said slowly:

"I've decided to behave. I'd like something to eat, please."

Lady Wychcote could have shouted with relief and joy. She would have kissed him, but he fended her off.

"Please ... I feel rather un-affectionate," he said. Something in his voice and look put the old lady at her proper distance. She could not meet the boy's eyes comfortably.

She said with great meekness for her: "Very well, Robert. But I am pleased to see you act like a man."

Anna opened the luncheon hamper and he ate a sandwich and drank some coffee and milk. The food sickened him suddenly. He could not eat more though he tried. He then sat quietly looking out of window till they reached London. Mr. Surtees met them at the station. He looked very much surprised when he saw Bobby. Lady Wychcote made him a significant gesture, and he did not express the surprise he felt. Also he thought that the boy looked ill. Bobby walked around and slipped his hand in the old solicitor's. He and Mr. Surtees had not seen each other often but they liked each other. Bobby's brain was racing. "Shall I tell him? Shall I tell him?" he was thinking. Then something in him said, "No." That Mr. Surtees would have to do as his grandmother wished him to—at least now. Perhaps later he could see him alone. They went to Claridge's. His grandmother and Mr. Surtees were alone together for a long time. Bobby was left upstairs in another room with Anna. She tried to coax him to talk with her but he had relapsed again into resolute silence. Then his grandmother came up, and told him that they were going to Dynehurst at once, and that he should have a new pony, and any kind of dog that he liked.

He said, "Thank you," civilly, but nothing more. His face had reddened as his grandmother spoke—with pleasure she thought. Yes ... ponies and dogs were a sure way to a boy's heart. She felt quite complacent

and encouraged. The boy would be easier to manage than she had dared hope, after the frightful incidents of the journey.

Bobby had flushed because when she said that they were going to Dynehurst that afternoon, the thought had leaped to him: "I can get out of the house to-night, and buy a ticket to London at the station." Once in London he thought that it would be easy to get back to Venice. Perhaps Mr. Surtees would be his friend. Yes, he had better trust Mr. Surtees. But again, no—he was not sure about that. What he was sure about was that he could get out of the house that night and find his way to the station. It did not occur to him that the station-master might be unwilling to sell him a ticket to London.

That same night—the night that Sophy spent so miserably on the express that was taking her to him—he managed to dress himself and find his way out of the huge house without rousing any one. One of the housemaids had been sent to stay in the dressing-room next his, but she was a sound, healthy sleeper, and did not hear the boy's cautious movements. He crept downstairs in his stocking-feet, boots in hand. His overcoat had been put away. He went out into the dark, chill, misty night, dressed only in thin serge. At first he could see nothing, then bit by bit the shrubbery and trees revealed themselves ink on inky-grey. The crunching of the gravel helped him to find his way. His heart thumped sickeningly but high. He was free, free! On his way back to his mother. When he had groped some fifty yards from the house, he sat down on the ground to put on his boots. As he laced them he looked wrathfully back at the black mass of the grim old house. Two lighted hall windows in the floor above, and the lighted

glass above the front door, gave it the appearance of a huge staring face, with luminous mouth and eyes. It seemed glowering at him like an ogre. He scrambled up, feeling rather queer and little in the lap of the dark, empty night, then trudged sturdily on, guided by the crunching of the gravel, as he strayed to right or left.

All at once, the trees began to sigh and creak—big drops struck his face—at first spatteringly, then thicker together. Within half an hour of his leaving the house, a heavy, wind-swept rain was pelting down; ten minutes more and he was soaked to the skin.

Now it was that he began to fear for his money, which was more than half in notes. He clenched his hands tightly over as much of it as he could grasp, and plodded on determinedly. But the steady pelting of the rain bewildered him. He wandered from the driveway—tried to find it again, with hands and feet this time. Blown twigs and leaves began to strike him. He walked against a tree—clung to it a moment, panting. Then groped his way on again. But now he was hopelessly lost in the big Park. A great, soggy mass of bracken stopped him. He skirted it—walked against more trees. He would not admit in his fierce, dogged little heart that he was lost. He kept rehearsing what he would say to the station-master: "A first-class ticket to London, please. Here's the money."

For nearly three hours the boy groped and stumbled in that maze of trees through the driving rain. For some time he had been saying earnest little prayers:

"Our Father who art in heaven ... please help me to get back to my mother. Our Father ... please. Our

Father ... please...."

When they found him he was lying unconscious on the sodden grass under an elm—both hands clenched fast upon as much of the notes and silver in his pockets as he could grasp.

When he had been put to bed, and roused at last he was delirious. He began calling frantically, "My money! my money!" They gave it to him. Then had begun that monotonous chant of: "A first-class ticket to London, please.... A ticket to London.... Here's the money.... I've got the money."

This was why Bellamy did not wonder that Lady Wychcote fainted when he told her that Bobby might die.

LVIII

And now Sophy descended into the darkness of darkness where death and remorse sit brooding together—that vasty cavern of uttermost black gloom which underlies the Valley of the Shadow. Faith does not walk there nor hope. There a thousand years seem not as a day, but a day seems as a thousand years.

As she watched beside her son, she felt a more rending anguish than when she had given him birth, for now her soul was in travail of him. She who had

given him life might now have given him death. If he died it would be she who had killed him. "Happiness hunter ... happiness hunter...." her own phrase rang in her mind.

And this was what her son had come to, while she was absorbed in hunting happiness....

She would not leave him now even long enough to change her clothes. Nurse Fleming brought her some fresh linen and a dressing-gown to the bedside, and put them on her as if she had been a child. She submitted quietly. The nurse unbound her hair, brushed and plaited it, then made her take an easy chair that she rolled up.

When Bellamy entered again Sophy roused from her tranced watching long enough to ask him to get Anne Harding if it were possible. He went at once to do so.

There was no night or day to Sophy now. The grim, candle-lit hours went by monotonous as a linked chain paid out of darkness into darkness by invisible hands.

Then came intervals of horror—struggles for breath. Wild shadows on the ceiling as nurse and doctor fought together with that other Shadow.

Anne Harding came. Sophy stared at her blindly, and said: "I thought you'd come, Cecil...."

Then after many days, each as a thousand years, a voice came through the smothering blackness in her mind. It said:

"He will live.... He's past the crisis...."

The blackness closed in again.

She came to herself on the bed in Cecil's dressing-room. There was an old etching of Magdalene Tower on the wall at the bed's foot.

She thought: "What a pity to call it 'Maudlin' instead of Magdalene...." Then everything weltered in on her at once—waves, wreckage, as of a world after flood. She was on her feet. She was in the other room. Anne Harding and Bellamy had hold of her. Her head felt hollow and very light. Her voice sounded light and piping in her own ears.

"Tell ... tell...." she was saying.

Anne Harding put her finger to her lips—glanced towards a smooth white bed. There was a little round of sunlight dancing on it. "Ssssh...." whispered Anne. "He's asleep.... We mustn't wake him. You've been very ill yourself, but our little man's doing finely."

They helped her to a chair beside the bed—Cecil's old leather armchair. Anne Harding could see his huge form in it as he used to sit glowering at her between the reduced doses of morphia. It gave her an odd feeling to put Sophy in that chair, and tuck a rug about her.

They all three sat in silence watching the sleeping child.

Sophy whispered once, with her avid eyes on the little, sunken face:

"Is he really only ... asleep?"

For answer, Bellamy lifted one of Bobby's hands and laid it in hers.

"He's so sound it won't wake him," he reassured her, smiling.

And for Sophy the warmth of that little hand was as the warmth of her own soul's blood.

For a long, long time she sat there with inner vision fixed on the beautiful and terrible star that had risen in the dark night of her soul—the star of a destiny as stern and far more ancient than that foretold at Bethlehem: the star of primordial and eternally recurrent sacrifice ... of the crucifixion of the mother for the child. And a woman if she be so lifted up shall draw all women to her and to each other—for this is the dark yet shining law, whereby the individual's loss is the gain of the whole race.

When Bobby at last opened his eyes they rested on his mother's face. She hardly dared to breathe, it was so wonderful to see those grey eyes looking into hers with recognition. And the boy, too, was afraid to stir or speak lest his mother's face should vanish or change into some dreadful difference as it had vanished and changed in the dreams of fever. But as she knelt, holding his hand against her breast, gazing at him out of the eyes that meant all love to him—a little stiff, wistful smile parted his lips.

"Mother ... dear...." he whispered.

Then Sophy put her cheek to his. He felt the soft glow of her sheltering breast.

"Hold me fast ... don't leave me...." he murmured.

"Never, my darling ... my only man ... never, never again...."

"Our Father...." stumbled Bobby, ".... thank you ...

ever so much...."

Then he drowsed off again.

A week later Sophy was sitting beside him as usual, and again he was sleeping. It was drawing towards sunset. A lovely glow filled the sky and lighted the yellowing trees in the Park.

Bobby waked suddenly and, gazing out of the window near his bed, pleaded:

"Mother ... I *do* so want to smell the out of doors.... Couldn't you open this window?"

Sophy called Anne Harding, who was in the next room.

"Do you think we might open it?" she asked, after telling her what Bobby wanted. "It's so mild to-day—like St. Martin's summer.... He wants it so much...."

"Of course we can," Anne answered cheerfully. "Dr. Fresh Air's the best doctor of 'em all."

She raised the sash and went back into the other room. Doctors and nurses left those two alone together as much as possible.

The mild air, sweet with fading leaves and bracken, stole softly into the room.

"How jolly...." breathed the boy. "It's like fairies touching me...."

He turned his face towards his mother.

"Come lie by me, mother ... like that night in Venice,"

he said.

Sophy lay down beside him and took his head upon her arm. Bobby sighed deep in the fulness of his content. "I feel so jolly safe this way," he murmured. They rested quietly in each other's arms, looking up at the soft gold of the September sky. As on that day, nearly eight years ago, when Cecil had been laid in the chapel crypt, the yellow leaves drifted down, gently turning in the delicate air. The fallowed earth gave forth a fresh, pleasant smell. From the pasture lands below came the lowing of the Wychcote herd. Now a flight of homing rooks streamed across the sky.

"Oh, how jolly ... how jolly it all is," breathed the boy. "I'm glad I didn't die.... What a jolly noise the rooks make, don't they, mother?"

"Yes, darling," she answered him.

But what she heard and saw, high, high above their clamorous winging, was the ecstatic shrilling of the Venice swifts, and their impassioned arabesques of flight like joy made visible—like a joy above, beyond —far, far removed....

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SHADOWS OF FLAMES: A NOVEL ***

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