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THE SISTERS

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The Rich Woman

The Beautiful Miss Burroughes

THE SISTERS

by

ANNE MEREDITH

FABER AND FABER LTD

24 Russell Square

London

*First published in mcmxlviii
by Faber and Faber Limited
24 Russell Square London W.C.I
Printed in Great Britain by
Purnell and Sons Limited
Paulton (Somerset) and London
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**For
PEGGY
with love**

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Section One—END OF A CHAPTER—was contributed by William Marston, one time resident at Northweston, from his childhood's recollection of The Sisters, and is intended as an introduction to their history.

END OF A CHAPTER 1912

1

The building was called the Old House and as a boy I believed the name derived from the age of its occupants. There were three of these, all women, all incredibly aged to a child, and all perpetually dressed in black. It was easy to accept literally my mother's casual observation that they came from another world. Two of these, Janet Hardwick and Catherine (Cassie) Sorley were sisters, and rumour said that Cassie had been famous as the beautiful Miss Amberley before her marriage.

"It's easy to believe that even now," said my mother, but to us there remained not even the legend of beauty in the little plump face with its papery pink skin, the faded blue eyes, the white hair under the monstrous black hat. No-one even suggested that Janet Hardwick had ever been beautiful. In youth she must have had one of those plain rather patient faces that in age shrivel up into a hatchet grimness. She also had very large hands with knotted fingers. She was tall and thin like a darning-needle, and her hair was iron-grey instead of white like her sister's, though she was several years her senior. The third member of the household was the maid who had been with Mrs. Hardwick for half a century, in the years before she became a widow and shrouded herself in this secluded house with her sister, where no-one ever visited.

That was perhaps the main secret of their fascination for us. They were unapproachable. The village was full of old people of every class. Old Miss Bennett, whose head wagged from side to side when her patient nurse-companion pushed her out every fine morning; old Mr. Fotheringay, very sprightly, with bones as brittle as glass and a little sharp pointed face and an incurable roguishness of manner; old

Lady Drewe and her daughter who, though obviously younger, seemed to us children to be ageless, in the sense that, though we could believe that her mother had once been a girl, such a supposition in Agatha Drewe's case seemed fantastic. Then there were the old village women, some of them senile and bedridden, or crippled and carried out on sunny days to sit in the porch. And there must have been others who, despite advancing years, were sprightly in their ways, but whose very sprightliness saved them from the label of 'old'.

The sisters at the Old House were not to be classed with any of these. They were as old—at all events Janet Hardwick was—as Miss Bennett; they were as unapproachable as poor, feeble-minded Lady Drewe; but whereas in these cases we shied away from touch and contemplation alike, in the case of the sisters their very ancientness held fascination, the sort of lure witches and warlocks have for the unsophisticated young. One of the striking things about them was that they never abandoned the Victorian carriage. I don't know that they ever boasted they had never driven in a motor-car, but I am quite sure they never had. They had an elderly coachman who was also the gardener, and every fine morning in the spring and summer he drove them solemnly out for no purpose to no particular place. The shopping for the household was done by the servant, on foot, and she was as mysterious in her way as the others. Looking back, I think much of their mystery sprang from the fact that no-one appeared to know much about them, and they themselves never talked. At first people had expected that when the usual period of mourning was over—both went into deep black, we heard, after John Hardwick's tragic death—they would resume the normal social existence of their time. But the years went on and they neither laid aside their black garments nor re-entered the social field. They must, I suppose, have renewed their wardrobes at intervals, and Buckley, the postman, said that large boxes occasionally arrived from London; but towards the end of their lives, at the time when I remember them, these packages came with decreasing frequency and indeed they made no concessions to changing fashions. I think we

should have been disappointed, outraged even, if they had. Though we none of us knew them, we had a queer sort of pride in them.

I can appreciate now that, for all their silence and their remoteness, there must have been some quality about the pair that gave them distinction. Otherwise, we should never have noticed their existence and it was extraordinary how they obtruded themselves into quite everyday conversation. I remember once asking my father if they were very poor, too poor to replace the out-of-date carriage with a car, and employ a separate man as a gardener, and he said, "I believe they're rolling. John Hardwick came into money from an uncle shortly before his death."

"Then why do they stick to their carriage?"

He gave me an odd look. "Presumably because they prefer a carriage."

"But it's so slow."

"I daresay they don't object to that."

"A car would get them there so much quicker," I persisted.

"Where's the hurry? There's only one place ahead of them, that's the grave, and I never knew anyone anxious to reach that destination."

His words alarmed me. I had a terrifying vision of the two old women begging the coachman to slow up the pace of the fat old horses, tighten the reins, put off for as long as possible the inevitable moment when they must reach the end of their journey.

No-one seemed to know any more about them than we did. They were both widows, we heard, and clearly they were devoted to one another. For they were always together, in the carriage, in the garden, even standing for an instant at a window looking out on the world they seemed to have fore-sworn. To have seen one without the other would have been as strange and as alarming as seeing some friend walking in the sun and casting no shadow. We wondered what they spoke of when they were alone. But perhaps they were beyond speech, their thoughts meeting without the need of words, all their memories of more than thirty years identical. Or did they brood on the past when they were young women,

radiant with hope, taking their lovers, setting out down new paths? I would try to think of them like that, but always they appeared to me as old, silent and changeless.

When they went out they always took the same route, up the hill, past the park, skirting Hammer Wood and home by the churchyard. I supposed they chose that road to accustom themselves to the idea of their last resting-place.

A remark made by my mother when I was ten years old remains in my mind.

"Of course, she's been dead for years," she said. "You've only got to look at her."

It was many years before I understood that she was speaking, not of Janet Hardwick, but of her younger sister.

2

I have said that they received no visitors. This was not absolutely true. One other habitu6 of the household there was, an old retired lawyer called Gladstone, who lived in a much smaller house near by, a bachelor attended by a married couple almost as old as himself. Most days this old gentleman would push open the heavy gate of the Old House and march stiffly up to the front door. The servant would admit him without demur, he would vanish within. After about an hour he would emerge, the same wooden expressionless figure, pass through the gate and return to his own cottage. We had, of course, our own speculations about him. He had been in love with one of the sisters, she had preferred someone else, and he had remained unmarried for her sake, while some element of that faded romance lived on like a faint glow of lamplight in a dark house, the sole illumination of his days.

After I went to school I thought less about them; in fact, during terms, I hardly remembered their existence. But when I came back, the household loomed as large on the horizon as it had ever done, its members looking precisely the same as last year or the year before, their habits unchanged, always emerging in fine weather to take the air in their fantastic carriage, seen now and again walking stiffly up the path, stooping to remove some faded blossom—I never

recall seeing them carry a living flower—and then vanishing behind their front door and being instantly enveloped in mystery.

Once, when I was twelve years old, they went away for a few days while painters and paper-hangers took possession of the house. This happened during the school holidays, and I and two companions evolved a scheme for getting inside the place and satisfying our curiosity. By this time we were prepared for practically anything. Perhaps, we thought, the bodies of the husbands had been embalmed and were kept in some upper room; we could imagine the old women creeping in night and morning to keep their horrid vigil. Patiently we waited our opportunity. It was possible to get into the garden from the rear, though none of us would have dreamed of such an impertinence when the owners were in residence; but one summer evening we found that the workmen had forgotten (or omitted) to close the shutters. The big drawing-room had French windows opening on to the lawn, and even if we could not force an entry we could peer through the glass and see if the room looked like the rooms of our friends and neighbours.

I can't pretend to explain what we expected to find; only I know that if there had been nothing unusual it would not have allayed our fears in the least. The mystery would have remained under the surface. In those days workmen stayed on the job as long as it was light, and shadows were falling as we made our way stealthily through the hedge and into the small orchard that footed the lawn. There was a curious shadowiness about the garden and each was glad that he had companions. We hurried through the garden as rapidly as possible and made our way inside the house without any difficulty, the French windows being unlatched. Once within the room we hesitated. We were now actually inside Mystery House, and not one of us but would have given half a term's pocket-money to be safely on the further side of the hedge.

Geoffrey Tite, the bravest of the three, said—and it was, I suppose, our imagination that made his voice sound changed and unfamiliar—"Well, now we're here we may as well make a job of it. If there is anything upstairs . . ."

"It'll be locked up," said Thomas Pringle, my other companion. "They wouldn't leave anything for the painters to see."

"We ought to make sure," Geoffrey insisted, and we crossed the floor of the big, shadowy drawing-room that appeared strange to us because there were no photographs anywhere. In our own homes photographs predominated. Father, mother, their parents, ourselves in infancy and childhood, aunts, benefactors, wherever you looked their earnest gaze met yours, so that no room ever seemed quite unpopulated. This absence of pictures, should have made the drawing-room of Mystery House seem unoccupied, but it had the reverse effect. Our hearts were thumping and bumping as we crossed the carpet and opened the door into the big hall, that was so high the ceiling was out of sight. Across its width was another room, and it was the courageous Geoffrey who pushed past us and flung open this door also. By this time I think we were prepared for anything—a body, a mysterious voice uttering warnings, even a fireplace swinging slowly outward to reveal some indescribable horror, but what we actually saw was a white lifesize figure apparently moving towards us. With a smothered shriek Thomas and I turned tail and fled. Pell-mell, we encumbered one another in our haste to get through the French windows, and went tearing and sobbing through the orchard, until we gained the blessed refuge of the distant hedge. Then we stopped to do necessary repairs. We looked as though we had been involved in some gigantic rag, hair and clothes dishevelled, shoe-laces unfastened, faces smeared and blackened by the branches of the trees through which we had made our reckless way. There was a path through the orchard, no doubt, but we had not stopped to find it.

Characteristically Geoffrey had remained behind. We waited for him for a long time.

"Perhaps IT's got him," quavered Thomas at last.

We knew we should go back and search for him, but we could not have retraced our steps for a king's ransom. But just as terror for his safety was beginning to take possession of us both we heard his steps coming through the long grass of the orchard towards us. He was not hurrying, he was not

panting; on the contrary he whistled softly, and as he joined us there was a faint smile of contempt on his lips.

"You silly asses!" he said. "You can stop shaking like leaves. A statue can't hurt you."

"A statue!" we exclaimed in unison.

"Well, that's all it was. I suppose you thought it was a ghost."

"It did look like one," protested Thomas. "Who was it?"

"Her husband, I suppose."

"Whose?"

"Mrs. Hardwick's. Life-size it is. What's more, there are photographs of him and her all round the walls, hundreds of 'em. That's why there aren't any in the other rooms. The place is like a memorial chapel."

"Golly!" muttered Thomas. "She must have been cracked about him. I wonder what happened really?"

That was what the village had been wondering since before I was born, but apparently no-one knew. By common consent we all set out for home, promising one another to say nothing of our adventure. But I gave the secret away in my sleep. In my nightmare I was again in the house, but alone this time, creeping through a darkened hall, compelled against every desire to open that door, knowing that horror lurked on the further side. And as I opened it I felt the handle grasped and the door pulled back from me. I tried to unloose my grip but it was impossible. I was being dragged by some invisible presence on the other side into the room. I caught a glimpse of something white and screamed.

My screams brought both parents into my room and, sobbing, incoherent, I gulped out the truth. They reacted very differently. My father was furious at what he called a heinous breaking of the law and he went straightway downstairs to fetch his crop and give me a sound flogging.

"Do you realise you could be sent to prison for what you've done?" he demanded as I writhed and moaned under the heavy blows. "As it is, if anything's missing you'll probably be held responsible." He laid on harder than ever.

Later my mother came up bringing a glass of milk and a plate of cheese-cakes. She sat by my bed and told me my

father only had my good at heart and one day I should realise that. When I had eaten three of the cheese-cakes and felt somewhat restored in confidence she evinced an astounding curiosity about the house and our excursion.

"What made you want to go there at all?" she enquired.

I found it difficult to satisfy her; we had, I suppose, wanted in part to achieve the adventure of getting inside a house about which so much was speculated and so little known. We felt there must be something strange about it, something, therefore, worth discovering. And probably we were intrigued by the exclusiveness of the occupants. Other local houses were either open to our parents and ourselves or, at least, the facts about them were common knowledge. I tried to explain that we wanted to solve a mystery.

"There's no mystery about it," said my mother in a common-sense voice that did not deceive me in the least. I knew that like everyone else in Bury Green she wondered intensely about the house and its occupants. "They're just two poor old souls left behind by life."

Left behind. I pondered the phrase. It might quite as well, thought I, be that they were one step ahead of us. Surely a household that had demonstrated it could get along so well without most of the normal human contacts was more likely to be civilised than ourselves. But I had the wit not to put that into words.

"And what did you see that frightened you?"

"I thought it was a ghost. But, of course, it wasn't. It was a statue. All the same," I added staunchly, "it did look jolly ghostly in that light."

"Whose statue?"

"His—Mr. Hardwick's. Oh, and thousands of photographs, all of him and her, none of old Mrs. Sorley or her husband. It is rum, isn't it?"

"Not really. It was Mrs. Hardwick's house."

"What happened to Mr. Sorley? There's no trace of him in the churchyard, though we found Mr. Hardwick's grave easily enough."

"Perhaps he died abroad."

"But you don't know," I insisted.

My mother tossed her head. "It was such a long time ago, much too far back for me to remember."

"How long?"

"Oh, thirty years. No, nearer forty. And they've been together all that time."

"Perhaps the two husbands were killed together—in an accident. Or perhaps they had a duel because one was in love with the wife of the other. Perhaps ..."

My mother put her hand over my mouth. "Perhaps the moon's made of green cheese. Go to sleep, Willie, and stop thinking about them. They're no affair of ours."

I shut my eyes, though I could not obey her instructions. How could I help thinking about them? I realised finally that my mother could be no use to me here; she knew no more than I.

3

School started again the following week and as usual I forgot Mystery House and its strange inhabitants, but during the first week of the holidays something happened that I never forgot.

It began by a report that the younger sister, Mrs. Sorley, had contracted pneumonia. That she was ill we knew, because of the doctor's carriage at the gate, but then she was, we understood, something of a *malade imaginaire*; she only had to have a cold for the doctor to be called in. This time, however, it was far more serious. A second doctor was summoned, and the car stood at the gate all night. The next day we heard that Mrs. Sorley was dead. For three days after that there was a constant furtive procession past the gate. All the blinds were drawn, the carriage drives were cancelled. Not one of us caught a glimpse of a human figure even at a window. The undertaker must have called, but he went like a ghost himself; the coffin, as was the decent practice of those days, was delivered after dark. We were able, however, to discover the day of the funeral. And I was seized by a fierce wish, crystalising into an intention, to be present at the burial. I had never been to a funeral, although my grandfather had died during the previous year. It had been my mother's father,

but she had not been permitted to attend. My father said cemeteries were no place for women. To my timid request that I should accompany him he stared and demanded if I had taken leave of my senses. Why, I had scarcely known my grandfather ... So he had gone alone.

Still, I had been provided with a black armband and a black tie and these I had worn for three months after the old man's death, and they were tidily folded away in my drawer upstairs. I resolved somehow to attend the old lady's funeral and fulfil an ambition I had cherished for months to see a coffin lowered into the grave and to crumble earth upon it before the hole was filled in. Two of my friends had recently attended the funeral of an aunt and had come back full of details about the ceremony.

The interment was to take place in the Bury Green Churchyard, just outside the town, where John Hardwick had been buried nearly forty years before.

On the night before the burial we experienced one of those relentless falls of snow that sometimes occur even in the south. We woke next morning to a world transformed; where, last night, had been hills, valleys, farms, now there was an unbroken sheet of snow stretching up to the skyline; it gave the world an appearance of strange anonymity. Hedges were cloaked, ditches filled in, trees bowed beneath the weight. With the snow came a bitter wind freezing everything it touched.

"There'll be skating at Lambtons this week-end," said my father. "You'd better get your skates oiled, Willie."

I said quickly I would do them that day. After breakfast I waited in an agony lest he had any suggestions as to my movements, but fortunately both he and my mother were engaged in their own thoughts and I was able to slip away unperceived. The funeral was to be at the village church at twelve o'clock. In my pocket were the armlet and necktie, and a black hatband my father had had for a similar occasion. Once out of sight of the house I put on these marks of funereal grief, and set off for the Old House. The Bury Green cemetery was nearly a mile away and I proposed to follow, out of sight, and come up in time for the ceremony.

I went, keeping a wary eye open for any of my companions who might spy me and want me to join with them in their pursuits, but to-day they were all snowballing or tobogganing or estimating the likelihood of the pond at Lambtons being frozen sufficiently by next day to hold skaters. The world, indeed, was curiously unpopulated. When I reached the Old House it looked as though here death had come into his own. The snow in front of the gate was untrampled, the flowerbeds were extinguished, the blinds still drawn. I heard the church clock strike the quarter and wondered how soon the cortege would start. Funerals have to proceed at a walking-pace and on such a day the old vicar would not want to be kept waiting. At last, from my vantage place behind a convenient clump of trees, I saw the hearse come into sight. We were a small community, not very prosperous, and not very forward in our ways. Other towns and even villages had a motor-hearse, but ours was still a high-swung carriage with great lamps in the front, drawn by black horses. There were two of these with long tails almost touching the snow, long, drooping, beautifully-combed forelocks and plumes on their heads. No matter how unobtrusively she had lived, Cassie Sorley was going to her death with all the pomp and trappings available. The hearse drew up at the door and the four mutes got out. They stood for a minute in the snow, slapping their black-gloved hands, looking, in their tall silk hats, like creatures out of a pageant. The snow was so thick they sank into it ankle-deep, and after a moment they went through the gate and up to the front door. As though someone had been watching through an invisible crack this opened at once and they went into the house. Before they re-appeared, a mourning carriage had arrived on the scene, followed by the four-wheeler belonging to Sam Barton, whose cab had been seen at every local funeral of importance for twenty years. Barton, who drove the cab himself, also wore a tall hat with a heavy crape band, and he and the driver of the hearse both got down rather creakily and carried on a conversation in low tones.

"No-one else?" enquired the driver, and Barton shook his slow old head.

"Kept themselves to themselves," he said. "Besides, most of the others must have gone before her. She was a good age."

"They never wholly let on," the driver allowed. "But I saw the coffin. Seventy-three."

"And her sister must be seven or eight years more than that. It's going to be mortal lonely for her now. Eight-and-thirty years." He turned and looked at the blank face of the house. "Yes," he agreed, "it'll seem queer. When Mrs. Barton died I couldn't seem to fancy the house again afterwards. It was as if she was watching—not a comfortable feeling, if you get me."

Before the driver could reply the front door opened and the mutes came out, carrying the coffin. One of them was much shorter than his fellows, and the long box tilted dangerously as they came down the short drive. When they had put it inside the glass coach the short one went back to the house and returned, carrying two large wreaths and a much humbler one, clearly the offering of the servant. No-one from outside had sent any flowers. When these had been placed on the coffin the mutes mounted, their silk hats in their hands, and the mourners came out. Mrs. Hardwick's face was invisible, covered by a thick black veil. I wondered if it was disfigured by crying, but it seemed unlikely that that thin wooden countenance could display anything so human as grief. She rested on the arm of the old lawyer, who wore a black suit, with an old-fashioned black silk hat with a curly brim, also decorated with a crape band, though a less striking one than that sported by the driver of the hearse. He handed her into the carriage, followed, and the door shut. Last of all came the servant, as heavily blacked-out as her mistress, except that she wore no veil. But her thick black coat descended to her ankles and she had a piece of black fur round her throat. Her black hat was piled with black veiling and crowned with an incongruous black cotton rose. She was to travel alone in Barton's cab. It seemed to me that the whole cortege had the appearance of a Christmas silhouette, such uncompromising blackness and whiteness and no tinge of grey except the sky, still heavy with unshed snow.

I waited till the hearse moved off and the one mourning coach was well on its sober way down the road before I stirred from my hiding-place. I was nervously convinced, even so, that at any moment the door of the coach would swing open and that alarming black figure, looking himself like a draped skeleton, would emerge and either order me home or pluck me within the cab and insist on my accompanying that terrifying gathering to the churchyard. At last, however, I reached Turners Lane unperceived. This constituted a short cut available to foot passengers only. I vanished into it with a heavy sigh of relief. The steeple of the church stood up faintly luminous against the grey sky. I now had to keep a weather eye open for any of my companions who might choose to be lurking here, but fortunately the lane led only to the church and to the big house, and offered no comforting distractions. Already birds were out, pecking industriously at the hardening surface of the snow, seeking water and food. A blackbird flew into a snow-laden tree, alighting with such force that some of the flakes were shaken off and slid down my neck. For, like someone with a guilty secret, I was walking with my head down, staring at the snow. I understood what makes an ostrich put its head in the sand. I had a similar conviction that if I saw no-one no-one could see me. When at last I looked up I seemed to be alone in a mysterious white world; snow capped the farms in the distance, hung heavy as mufflers over the low window-panes, obliterated all the familiar landmarks. I thought that all the life of the countryside in such weather was hidden underground where moles and ferrets and badgers slept warmly through the cold months.

I reached the church just as the hearse turned the corner and began to negotiate the steepest part of the hill. The mourners were too far off to identify me even if I were visible to them, and I slipped through the gate of the churchyard and concealed myself behind a particularly high and ancient stone that was familiar to us all.

For all its height and solidity it had been erected to a very

young soul. I knew the inscription by heart. It was carved deeply in the lichened surface and was indecipherable except in a good light. The words were carved with long S's and read:

*All ye who pass this way along
Think on how sudden I was gone.
God does not always warning give,
Therefore be careful how you live.*

It was erected to the memory of a child of seven.

I was crouching there, hoping the procession would not be long, for the cold was intense, when something happened that almost paralysed me with fright. Without warning a voice spoke from nowhere.

"Boy!" it called. "Boy!"

I could not move. I had an absurd hope that if I appeared deaf and unconscious I might by some miracle also become invisible.

The voice spoke again, more irritably now. "Boy!" it repeated. "Do you imagine I can't see you behind that stone?"

Terrified, I emerged. A black car was standing in the road. The door was held open by a liveried chauffeur, and an enormous old man with an unforgettable face, was leaning forward. He had a great thatch of white hair, startling blue eyes, a great nose that seemed to occupy half his face, a long mobile mouth.

"Well?" he exclaimed, as I stood gaping. "What's the matter? Never seen a man in these parts before?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to say I had never seen such a man as he in all my life. It was not only his size, though, since his weight was evenly distributed, he seemed big rather than stout. It was his air of rugged magnificence, as though he stood a step above the ordinary run of mankind and was well aware of it.

"Is this Bury Green Church?" he demanded in a voice that was like a gust of winter wind.

"Yes, sir." A sudden thought struck me. "Have you come for the funeral?"

He looked at me in the oddest way. "Is that why you're hiding behind that stone? Come on, boy. Open your mouth. You're not all zanies in these parts, are you?"

I gulped miserably that I'd never been to a funeral . . .

"You don't belong to the family, that's clear, or you'd not be skulking in this way. Did you know her?"

I shook my head. "No-one did. But they're ..." I hesitated, hunting frantically for the right word, "they're landmarks here," I brought out at last.

He said, looking at me with the same intentness out of those amazing blue eyes, "Just the pair—eh?"

I nodded again. And as if that confirmed some suspicion of his he nodded his great head also.

"Talk about the Rock of Ages," he remarked as if to an unseen audience, for clearly he was not speaking either to the chauffeur or to me. And he continued to mutter some language that I recognised as Latin. (Later, my father, who was the classics master at Bankswood, the boys' school five miles away, pestered me for anything I could remember, and from the uncertain fragments I offered him he built up the appropriate passage which, translated, read: He is like some rock which stretches into the vast sea and which, exposed to the fury of the winds and beaten against by the waves, endures all the violence and threats of Heaven and sea, himself standing unmoved.)

"Good," said the terrifying stranger. "No—don't go. I'm getting out of the car. She'll have one mourner at least."

"The others are on the way," I assured him quickly, and even as I spoke I saw the funeral cortege begin to top the formidable climb.

The old gentleman put a hand on my shoulder, disregarding the chauffeur's offer of help. "You can come with me, boy," he said. "No-one can challenge you then."

He volunteered no information as to himself, and I wondered if this could be the mysterious Sorley about whom nothing was known, not even if he were living or dead. There were some steps up to this entrance of the churchyard, and my companion had to mount slowly.

"A barbarous climate," he observed to me in a clear voice,

his eyes on the snow-laden clouds, the trees with their stark branches showing where the snow had been shaken off. "But it's odd how a man can't forget."

He stumped along beside me, leaning more heavily than ever. I could not have escaped even if I had wished. At the further end of the churchyard a gaping hole had been dug the previous day, and the upturned earth was already hidden by snow. To my surprise I now perceived two other unexpected mourners crossing the churchyard. These I identified as the lady of the big house and her unmarried daughter. I wondered why they were there, since it was impossible to suspect them of the vulgar curiosity that had impelled my presence, but supposed they had at some time made the acquaintance of the sisters and were taking this opportunity of showing their respect. The old gentleman looked as if he considered their presence here an impertinence. He was muttering again under his breath.

"Where the body is there shall the vultures be gathered together," he said, rather unfairly, I thought. The two ladies came reluctantly forward, Lady Mauleverer, immensely aged, leaning on the arm of a daughter who looked as though she could do with some support herself. An instant later the hearse and its attendant coaches drew up at the main gate of the churchyard. Out came the mutes like animals from their holes, to draw forth the coffin and, still balancing it unsteadily because of the disparity of their heights, to bring it through the lych-gate. For the first time it occurred to me that that box contained a figure I had grown accustomed to seeing, about whom I had often speculated, and it seemed the height of indignity to imprison her there, helpless, preparatory to sealing her down under the heavy churchyard clay. Next followed the mourners, the servant bringing up the rear with a pious expression on her worn face; the old lady and her daughter drew nearer.

My companion was muttering again. I decided he must live alone and be accustomed to providing his own audience.

"So that's what it comes to at the end," he said. "Six old fogies and a boy who probably never spoke to her in his life. And when you remember her, drawing men as the moon

draws the tides . . . Let's hope, for all the parsons tell us, she doesn't know."

I saw Mrs. Hardwick give a violent start at the sight of the old gentleman, as she lifted her veil, but the clergyman, who had waited till the last possible minute before joining the group at the graveside, had no mind to stand about in such weather and started the service immediately with a hymn which I knew well. We always had hymns at the graveside in those days in our parish, and for some reason Mr. Arbuthnot always inserted them before the reading began.

We must have sounded odd to any sensitive ear. My voice was just breaking, the old lady quavered, Mrs. Hardwick did not sing at all, old Mr. Gladstone made a buzzing noise and the only voice that was audible was that of the old man beside me. His soared up into that wintry sky, like a deep bass note of defiance.

*When our heads are bowed with woe,
When our bitter tears overflow,
When we mourn the lost, the dear,
Jesu, Son of Mary, hear.*

But, presumably because there was a Popish flavour about the last line, on this occasion we sang:

Jesu, friend of sinners, hear.

There were several verses and we sang them all. By the time they were over we were all chilled to the bone, and I could feel the great body next to mine shaking with the cold. But there was not a tear on any face except the servant's, and she wept discreetly. Janet Hardwick was hard as agate, the old lady was stiff with aristocratic ennui, the daughter looked vacant. Only in the old lawyer's face did I see anything resembling pity or tenderness.

The clergyman was now reading the burial service that I had never heard before.

"Come ye blessed children of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world."

I chanced to glance up here, and I caught sight of Janet

Hardwick's face. She had put back her veil in order to join in the service and her lips were moving. By chance, and not because I possessed any lip-reading faculties, I realised what she was saying. She was repeating the clergyman's words. Receive the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world. I thought, Perhaps that comforts her, and I remembered how I had heard my mother say, "I can't think what will happen to the one who is left."

It seemed to me that everything vital in old Mrs. Hardwick's life was being thrust down into the tomb. Then came the moment for which I had been eagerly waiting. The mutes lifted the coffin and began to lower it on a broad tape contraption into the earth. Something, I don't know what, went wrong, one of the tapes slipped or broke, and the body seemed to take a sudden downward plunge and the shortest of the four mutes nearly followed it. There was an instant of commotion while everyone peered into the grave, and I had a ribald conviction that, doubtless for the first time since she was born, the old lady was standing on her head. But I suppose they adjusted it, because a moment later they stepped respectfully back and the sexton offered a little pile of clay he had cleaned of snow to the mourners. Mrs. Hardwick hesitated, looking from the earth to her black-gloved hand, but the old lawyer rose to the occasion and after the dull thud of the clay **on** the coffin the old gentleman stepped forward and followed suit. With a courage I did not know I possessed I also stepped forward and, snatching a little earth, tossed it into the grave. I noticed that the hole was very deep, and vaguely I wondered who would lie on top of her in days to come.

As though he read my thought the old gentleman said, "I'll be lying there myself within the month if I stand about any longer," and replacing his hand on my shoulder he pushed me forcefully in the direction of the gate.

"**Well,**" said he, as we reached it, "now you know what a funeral's like. And if you take my tip you won't go to another **till you have to attend your own.**"

He drove off without another word and without a backward look.

I stole back to my hiding-place behind the tombstone for a final glimpse of Mrs. Hardwiek. Lady Mauleverer was saying something to her, condoling, no doubt, and the bored daughter waited with a rug over her arm, looking exhausted. The wind brought a word or two to my ears. Not for long. The daughter intervened and hauled her mother away. Mrs. Hardwiek and old Mr. Gladstone came slowly towards the gate. (The maid had disappeared earlier, presumably to prepare what were called funeral baked meats.) Talking intently, Mrs. Hardwiek came, not to the central gate where her carriage was waiting, but to the gate by which I lurked. So it was that I heard something never intended for my ears.

Mrs. Hardwiek turned to her companion and said in an odd low voice, "So he hadn't forgotten, not in forty years."

"It would be hard to forget her," said Mr. Gladstone, and she turned in a flash, as though she were a young woman again.

"You, too? Richard, I didn't know you . . . Is that why you've been coming all these years? Was it for *her*?⁹

Mr. Gladstone did not seem at all discomposd. He looked into her eyes and said sternly, "For both of you. You see, I knew the truth."

A long, hard breath came between her lips; I saw it form and dissolve on that iuy air.

"You knew? All these years?"

The old coachman came round the corner seeking her, but she paid no attention to his stammered entreaties. Even I had no thought for him. I was hanging on those incredible words falling like particles of ice on the frozen air.

"Yes, I knew," repeated the lawyer, and he began to urge her towards the steps. "I know that for forty years you've hated her heart and soul."

[END OF WILLIAM MARSTON'S NARRATIVE]

1912. AFTERMATH

On the night of the funeral the snow came down again with silent ferocity. Farmers moving restlessly and pulling aside blinds and curtains saw nothing but that dense whiteness, as though the whole sky were falling. For three days there was little abatement in the fury of the storm; roads were choked and impassable. The snowplough came out from Brunton, but one wheel became wedged in a ditch and it remained forlorn and useless, further blocking the road. In some places the fall rose to the height of the hedges; sheep that had not been folded already disappeared in the deep drifts. In the valley the snow lay against the little cottage windows as far as the eaves, so that here, where electricity had not been installed, lamps were kept burning all day long.

As fast as the snow was cleared it fell again, but on the third day it descended only in wavering flakes, and every able-bodied man and woman turned out to clear a road between the village and the farm dwellings. It was a great time for the boys who indulged in snowballing between bouts of work, and they went off, delighted with the prospect of digging out their less fortunate neighbours. In the minds of some was a secret feeling, amounting almost to a hope, that some old crone would be found frozen to death in her cottage, but the villagers had had the sense to keep good fires burning—for in that thrifty community there was always a fine supply of turf to be had for the cutting and carting—and the stone walls had kept out the worst of the weather.

Richard Gladstone made strenuous efforts to escape and pay his usual afternoon call at the Old House on the day following the funeral, but the bitter winds and the mercilessly drifting snow was too much for him. As fast as the snow was shovelled from his path the drifts gathered again, keeping him a prisoner in his own house, and Cassie Sorley had lain

in the churchyard for three days before he could struggle out of his door and push furiously at the gate of the Old House. Duncan, the elderly coachman and Kate Winter, who was robust for all she was turned seventy, and had a no-nonsense attitude to life, including the weather, had cleared the path, and great heaps of unmelted snow lay on the borders. Kate saw him by chance from a window, and so far forgot herself as to open the door before he could ring the bell, thus preventing her mistress, who seemed sunk in a strange stupor that was not without its violent moments, from realising that she had a visitor.

Kate, indeed, greeted Mr. Gladstone with an enthusiasm that startled him.

"Thank the Almighty you're back, sir," she said, taking his unfashionable black hat and severe black gloves. "I've been worried half out of my senses. I'd have made bold to come over for you myself, never mind the snow, but that Mrs. Hardwick wouldn't have it."

He looked at her sharply. "Is she going to refuse to see me after all these years?" he demanded.

Kate looked shocked. "Nothing like that, sir. But she said no-one should come here but of his own free-will. Mr. Gladstone's been coming for more than thirty years, I told her, it's not likely he'll stop now."

"What did she say to that?"

"She gave me the queerest look. And now he's stopped, she said. Doesn't that tell you anything?"

"Meaning she thinks I came for Mrs. Sorley?"

"She's not herself," pleaded the old servant. "You'll go in? I've sometimes wondered what she'd do without your visits. It's been a queer house all these years. There's times when I've thought I'd not mind a change myself, but then I remember what Mr. Hardwick used to say whenever he was away from her. I leave Mrs. Hardwick in your charge, Kate. Take good care of her."

The old man looked at her reflectively. "You were there that night, of course."

"You mean the night Mr. Hardwick died? Yes, sir. Though, to tell you the truth, I don't know a great deal of what

happened. Only we all heard the cry and the hurry, and then the fall and another cry worse than the first, and after that we all waited, we girls, huddled in the hall, till Cook came down and told us to go back to our beds. Madam had trouble enough."

"And then?"

"Oh, we knew it was the master who fell. It was a terrible thing to happen. I always think it cut Madam's life in two. The other girls left at the end of their month. You couldn't blame them. It was a sad house after he went. But I always remembered Mr. Hardwick leaving Madam in my charge, though I was quite a bit younger than her, nearer Miss Cassie's age."

Again he sent her that sharp look. "She was there, too, that night, wasn't she?"

"She had been with us a week, and Mr. Michael. Not that he stopped long, after it happened. Not even for the funeral. Of course, I thought he'd be coming back for *her*. But he never did, not till Tuesday. When I saw him standing there by the grave with that boy, Willie Marston, I couldn't believe my eyes. I mean, not a word for nearly forty years, though Miss Cassie was still his'wife, and then out of the blue."

"Perhaps he wanted to be sure she had one mourner," suggested Richard Gladstone.

"But to wait all that time. Unless he thought—he believed . . ."

"Don't say it, Kate." His voice rang with a new authority. "We don't know the truth, we never shall. If anyone had had an inkling of it he or she should have gone to the police the next day. But no-one did. No-one said a word. And guessing's not evidence."

Kate seemed unimpressed. "Mind you, I never thought Mr. Michael was right for her, not really. He was pleasant enough and everyone said he was a genius—that statue he did of Mr. Hardwick is worth a fortune, a gentleman told me once—but you got the feeling half the time he wasn't really there. That would never suit Miss Cassie. She was used to a lot of admiration. Even Mr. Hardwick, who never seemed to

notice ladies as a rule, noticed her. I never believed she'd settle down the way she did after the poor gentleman died."

Gladstone said slowly, "Would her sister have let her go?"

"It seemed as though she was all she had to cling to—after. It's funny, in a way, because they grew up almost strangers to one another, Miss Cassie being abroad so much and Miss Janet keeping house for her father. But after *that* happened, it seemed as though Madam couldn't let her sister out of her sight. Miss Cassie only had to have a little cold or complain of headaches and round the doctor must come and Miss Cassie must stay in bed, whether she would or no. I'm not going to take any chances with you, Madam would say. I never saw such devotion. After she lost her husband, Miss Cassie seemed to be all she had to live for. There were never any children, you see, just her and him and she idolised the ground he walked on."

The spectacle of that fanatical devotion seemed to shake the old man. He said, fearfully, "The terrible power of a woman's love. How does she seem in herself, Kate?"

"Very queer indeed," replied Kate, dolefully. "I can't do anything with her. She just sits in that room and doesn't so much as look at her meals. If you believe me, she didn't even know it was snowing, because she was sitting with her back to the window and didn't think to look out."

"Does she say anything?"

"Not to me. But she's muttering under her breath all the time."

"To herself?"

"To—to Miss Cassie. Just as if she still saw her there. Where are you? she'll say. I always knew you'd give me the slip, if you could. You've cheated me again ... I think myself all this has turned her mind. She hardly had her clothes off during those five days. There was a nurse—oh, she insisted on that, and the doctor came twice a day, but I could hardly get her out of the sick-room, not even to sleep. I'll lie on the sofa here, she'd say. The nurse didn't like it. It's not right, she told me."

"It certainly wasn't. I'd better go in. Does she know I'm hereV'

"I couldn't say, sir. If you ask me," she added, in a despairing burst of candour, "I can't be sure she knows any of us. It's as if she'd gone a long way away, back into the past. I suppose a doctor would say she was out of her mind."

"Perhaps she is. Only—Kate, have you ever thought that when people are out of their minds they're still somewhere? The question is—where? Some jungle perhaps where they're caught by branches or roots and can't escape, some haunt of wild beasts—where perhaps no-one else can reach them or rescue them."

"I've thought sometimes—you get queer thoughts living in a house like this—there's things worse than death."

He looked at her in surprise that she should imagine any-one could debate the point. "By the way," he half-turned back, "she's had—no other visitors?"

"Mr. Michael's not been near the house, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I meant."

He turned towards the drawing-room door, but she stopped him with a word.

"Not there, sir. She's sitting . . ." she indicated a door across the passage.

Richard Gladstone looked startled. "Does she often sit there when she's alone?"

"Not while Miss Cassie was alive. It was as if she wouldn't let her go in, wouldn't share anything to do with Mr. Hardwick. But since the funeral she's sat nowhere else."

On the old man's face the lines deepened. Slowly he crossed the hall, opened the door. There was something bizarre in the picture of the old woman sitting bolt upright by the economical fire, under the shadow of the impressive statue of her husband that was Michael Sorley's best period. He had done it, reflected Gladstone, closing the door and coming further into the room, after his return with Cassie, the bride of a year, and John had bought it to please his wife, who declared that, sooner than let any stranger possess it, she would break it to pieces. Wherever the eye turned it beheld photographs, sketches, crayon-portraits of John Hardwick

Rectory like a whirlwind. Instantly the house was transformed, Janet banished to a place at the side of the table, for, said her aunt, it is not *convenable* for a spinster to act as her sister's *chatelaine* when there is a married woman on the premises—and the play began. Indeed, thought Janet, who was less deficient in imagination than her father realised, it is an apt simile. It was as if a playhouse had been left untenanted for more than two years, its long curtains drooping in the dust, its seats overalled, its boards untrodden, its airs unechoing. Then, overnight, the lights flashed up, the theatre was filled with bustle and clamour, the curtains were restored to their vivid magnificence, there were voices, footsteps, rustle of silk and soft clank of jewels, the bell rang all day, parcels, sewing-women, upholsterers flowed in like an army until even the Canon appeared no more than a dot floating uncertainly on this boisterous sea.

Janet felt her deposition keenly. "It is hard to blame me for being unmarried," she protested, but her aunt had no sympathy for her self-pity.

"Any woman can marry if she sets her mind to it," she announced briskly. "You have been your own mistress for a considerable time now, and you cannot wish to spend the rest of your days as your father's unsalaried housekeeper."

"You are accustomed to French ways," protested her niece. "For myself, I should not care to marry a man I did not love."

It was difficult to catch Madame Dubois off her guard, but with this simple declaration Janet succeeded. It was a full minute before the horrified lady found her voice.

"What nonsense are you talking, Janet? You are no green girl now. And you are laying up a very lonely old age for yourself, let me warn you. Even if you contrive to stand between your father and all the women who are aching to become the second Mrs. Amberley—well, my poor child, even fathers do not live for ever. One day, unless you exert yourself, you will be plain, elderly Miss Amberley, quarrelling with some other jealous spinster for the privilege of arranging the altar vases. And you must know as well as I that if you are to marry there is no time to be lost."

"You speak as though husbands could be plucked from trees."

"They certainly do not fall into your lap like over-ripe fruit," her aunt assured her. "Marriage is a career. One must lay plans and work hard. Otherwise, you will become one of these miserable women perpetually looking for the crumbs of attention that fall from other wives' tables. And, believe me, such crumbs are most unsatisfying. Now, let us examine the neighbourhood. There is Mr. Waddilove."

"Aunt Florence! Why, he has never so much as thought of me."

"Have you ever attempted to put the idea into his mind?"

"I detest the notion."

"Have you no ambition? I believe, Janet, if you were Cinderella and I set you in a circle of Prince Charmings you would emerge a spinster, after all. Parbleu! I wash my hands of you."

She said as much to Charles. "You need not plume yourself you will ever be rid of your incubus," she told him, spitefully. "That is what I have to complain of in Englishwomen. They refuse to grow up. Even at Janet's age they are like little children reading fairy-tales. I would not marry for common-sense. I will only marry for love. Yes, that is precisely what your daughter told me. No wonder you blush. I blushed myself. At her age—not that it is her age that is important, but—does she never look in the glass? She is like a child taking a penny into a shop and asking for a plum cake. She should be grateful if anyone will give her a plain bun."

Having thus refused to take any further interest in her god-daughter Madame Dubois threw herself heart and soul into the business of getting Cassie well launched on the English market. She could, like most French wives, be frugal enough, but she had the wisdom to know when money was like bread upon the waters. "No man likes the idea of a stingy father-in-law," she told Charles. "And once Cassie is married she becomes another man's financial responsibility for the rest of her life. And then, it is important to have the right people and plenty of them, and that is not cheap either. Men, the right

men, are in very great demand and naturally they go to the highest bidders. Abbot St. Mary is a very obscure neighbourhood, and I am sure you do not want your daughter to marry some country lout. No, leave it to me and be sure I shall get the best possible results at the lowest reasonable cost."

The whole neighbourhood instantly became aware of her arrival. It would have been amusing but for the tragedy implicit in the comparison to the younger woman to note how similar aunt and niece were by nature and how completely different they appeared in public. Each had the same long face, the sallow complexion and, by nature, the same straight, dark hair. Yet no greater contrast than these two presented could be conceived. Aunt Florence wore a daring Paris frock, she had her hair coloured and curled, her face made up. The County ladies noticed this and thought her intolerably fast, the County gentlemen to a man found her a dashed amusin' woman—her face and conversation alike sparkled with animation. She had had the wit to turn her most damaging feature, a very large mouth, into a positive asset, unlike the unhappy Janet who was almost afraid to smile lest she make the offending feature still wider. The general consensus of opinion was that the Canon had a very striking sister, and one with a talent for entertainment at her finger-tips. There was not a house within calling-distance harbouring a young man that the audacious widow could not identify, and no ravaging fox was bolder in snatching his prey than she. The first party given for Cassie was the talk of the place. She organised everything personally down to the last detail; she took care to see that even unattractive young women were provided with partners—she had insisted on sending out invitations to a number of socially hopeless men (so far as Cassie was concerned) to whom she referred casually as *'les autres'*. Competing hostesses knew their ineligibility, but admired Florence's unscrupulous use of them. For daughters accustomed to spend half the evening mending mythical rents came back glowing. True, they might not have secured introductions to the pick of the eligibles, but they had enjoyed themselves, and innocently basked in the puerile compliments that age paid to youth. And then Cassie was so

much more beautiful than any of them that jealousy was out of the question. As well be jealous of a peacock or a rose. Return invitations poured in. Florence sifted these with the greatest care.

"You are here for one purpose and one purpose only, and that is to find yourself a suitable husband. What's that you say about fun? How often must I tell you that fun begins after marriage, not before it? First secure your husband, then devil him how you please. This young ruffian of a Castlebarry who seems to have turned your head—his reputation is not that of a marrying man."

"He has never wanted to marry anyone before," said Cassie, obstinately, "He told me so himself."

"And that remark must have echoed through several hundred caverns before it fell on your ears," was her aunt's unsympathetic reply. "Even in England you cannot afford to play fast and loose, for it is easier to enter Heaven than to coax a wedding-ring out of the County."

Round about it was generally held that Cassie's chances of getting the kind of husband Florence considered suitable were very high.

"That dragon will see she doesn't make a *mesalliance*," remarked Lady Montrey to her good-natured husband, whose three daughters were all lamentably plain, but were, in fact, destined to 'go off' before the lovely Cassie Amberley. "How the Canon did it I don't know, but I haven't seen anything so lovely and at the same time so outrageous for years."

"Ned Castlebarry seems to agree with you," said her husband. "All the same, you know what they say—most happily-married women are plain."

It was a joke he had offered her for twenty years, and since she knew he adored the ground she walked on she accepted its unflattering implications with her usual gay smile.

"Anyway, the pair are altogether too conspicuous for my taste," continued her loyal husband, fondly watching his wife unpin her curls and hang them on the mirror. She was a good-natured woman and had sent her maid to bed early. "And as for marryin', I don't see how the poor devil could. He has only his pay and any thin' that old rip of an uncle of

his leaves. And accordin' to rumour he has dependants and to spare."

"A child in every *creche*," agreed Lady Montrey. "And I believe the estate is mortgaged up to the hilt. Has the Amberley girl any money?"

"Enough to buy her own clothes if she lives quietly in the country. Of course, Amberley has private means, but then there's that elder daughter. He'll not get her off."

3

From Cassie's point of view her English visit opened in a blaze of glory such as she had never anticipated. Invitations showered in thick and fast; wherever she went she was feted, followed and adored. She was the belle of every ball, she danced her slippers through every night. She heard the most extravagant protestations and received more offers in a single season that had hitherto come her way in a lifetime. She would have been more than human if her head had not been a little turned, and Madame Dubois, appreciating this, rode her severely on the curb. Like the beasts in Revelation, that lady had eyes before and behind. She could scent an affair before it started, she had the birth, income and prospects of every dancing-partner at her finger-tips, she was a past-mistress in the art of ignoring the socially useless, at knowing which way a cat would jump before it seemed possible that the animal itself had made up its mind.

And it did not escape her eagle eye that wherever Cassie Amberley was, there Ned Castlebarry found his way. Aunt Florence began to talk of returning to France. Her house should not be left too long, she had never intended remaining more than a few weeks. Cassie pouted and demurred. After all, she pointed out, it was natural that she should wish to prolong her visit. She was English by birth ... And "Must you harp on the fact, cherie?" demanded the exasperated Madame Dubois. "I know the English consider their birthplace their greatest virtue." She flung up her hands in an extravagant gesture. "Their sense of values! I thank my God every night that I married a Frenchman."

"I begin to think I would sooner marry an Englishman," flashed the mutinous Cassie.

"He will treat you like a breeding-sow. I know the English aristocracy."

"Ned is different."

"That Castlebarry! I knew it. It is true what the proverb says. What's bred in the bone . . . You are English, and all my training cannot cure you. You think that marriage is the wedding-night and perhaps the following year. Marriage is not like that. It is five, ten, fifteen years to come, when romance has vanished and only time remains."

"But I love Ned, Aunt Florence."

"You love him? Very well. There is no harm in that. It will teach you a great deal. No woman is fit to marry until she has broken her heart once at least. But to love and to marry—they are poles apart. Consider, chérie. Your Ned is tall, handsome, passionate—he has a reputation, I know—but do height, looks and passion pay the household bills? You know they do not. Your Ned also has a mother who is as tough as an old hen, he has two sisters no more likely to marry than your own, his father is a poor thing who may snuff out any minute . . ."

"Then Ned comes into the estate."

"The estate? Pouf!" Florence snapped her fingers. "A tumbledown house with taxes as thick as weeds, and his father's debts. A fine inheritance. As for himself, he has his pay and when his father dies he will send in his papers—unless, of course, he marries an heiress first. But if he does not, then you will all be living on the bare floor with the mice and the rats. How will you like that? For, remember, his mother is old and the old are unadaptable. His sisters are English ladies, so of course they cannot work. They will be three old women of the sea round his neck. You will see them every morning at breakfast, for even the old lady will follow the barbarous English custom of coming down before the house or the day are warmed and aired to greet her. They will advise you how to bring up your children and Grandmere will remember how much better behaved Ned was when he was an infant. Every time you buy yourself a new gown they

will remind you that their wardrobes are exhausted. While, should your husband present you with a trinket—and even English husbands are human in a small way from time to time—they will nudge one another and say, The cost of that would have paid our dressmaker's bill for three months."

"If they never have any new clothes they can't have any dressmakers' bills," insisted Cassie, logically.

"Women always have dressmakers' bills. My dear child, surely you see that such an existence would be insupportable. One of these daughters is only a few years your senior. What kind of an establishment would you have, with an old woman nagging at you, and doing her best to separate you from your husband? I know that tough stringy type. You would be saddled with them for the next thirty years."

"Were you saddled with Uncle Raoul's family?"

"They were saddled with me. His mother was a very sensible woman. You have had the incredible folly to marry an Englishwoman," she told Raoul. "True, she has some money—my godmother saw to that—but she has no beauty. It is no wonder no Englishman wanted her. But quite soon they changed their tune. In France, you know, it is not necessary for a woman to be beautiful if she is chic. I gave myself entirely into my mother-in-law's hands. I know my disadvantages, I said to her. I have been brought up as that most useless of all creatures, an English upper-class girl; I have been hawked round the marriage market without attracting a suitable bidder. I have no qualities, I said to her, that could make me a success there. Certainly I have a little money, but once married, my husband has the handling of it, and in England men do not consult their wives about expenditure."

My mother-in-law nodded her head. She had no looks herself, but she was unforgettable.

"It is bad form," she said, making one word of the two. "I know. Now, with us, a man takes his wife for his partner, and in France we do not believe in dissolving partnerships. The woman who is dissatisfied with her husband has nothing to gain by making her dissatisfaction public. She loses her husband, her home, her
f women

rights. A woman has certain rights and if she is sensible she sticks to them. Other rights are not hers and she is foolish to claim them. To be a wife is a career. Did I not say marriage in France is a partnership?"

"How did you meet Uncle Raoul in the first place?"

"Through being, like you, infatuated with the wrong man. My parents sent me abroad to a finishing school, I made suitable friends, Basil—that was his name—had not the money to make the journey—besides, he could speak no word of French—and I soon realised how fortunate I was. Frenchmen expect their wives to be the centre of attraction. Your English husband glowers. Englishmen are the least civilised of all men. They regard a wife as they regard any other possession. If you take my advice, you also will marry a Frenchman. But, of course, it will take some effort on your part."

After that, for about a year, there was a slump in the Amberley matrimonial market. The Canon looked about for a successor to the lady who had become Mrs. Hughes when, by waiting a little, she might have become the second Mrs. Amberley. Janet continued in her precarious position as housekeeper, while Cassie remained obdurately lackadaisical to the suitors, frantic or persevering, who continued to seek her hand in marriage. Everything in fact was checkmate until the press announced the engagement and imminent marriage of the Honourable Edward Castlebarry.

"Bacon!" wrote Aunt Florence contemptuously to her brother, referring to the bride. "The woman has been reared on a veritable pyre of pigs. And a globe-trotter, I am informed. Naturally her father—the family emigrated to America a generation ago, before which time they had no history—is delighted to think of his daughter entering English society. Let us hope that Cassie will now return to her senses. She has been eating her heart out for the young ruffian in the most undignified fashion. She appears to think the whole matrimonial world is her oyster. A girl with her looks and opportunities should have made you a grandfather by this time."

The Castlebarry marriage was about a year old and the

gossips said that "a happy event is expected shortly" when Madame Dubois wrote that Cassie had at last abandoned her absurd infatuation and engaged herself to a completely eligible young Englishman, Andrew Barrie.

"He is certainly as good as she can look for," she wrote firmly. "He is one of the Lincolnshire Barries, and as you know they are by far the oldest-established branch. He is rather older than she, but that is no bar to a suitable marriage, and he is in a position to make admirable settlements. There are two sisters, both fortunately married, and he will naturally inherit the family estate. Even before he does so his financial position is eminently satisfactory, and if Cassie plays her cards well she should land this fish with little trouble. He will not, of course, consider himself betrothed until he has your consent, and he will be coming to England for this purpose in the course of a few days. He would, in fact, have preceded my letter but he is the most devoted of sons (Janet, though not the Canon, could imagine the quirk of Aunt Florence's expressive mouth as she penned this phrase) and he is here with his mother for her health. You will not, of course, have any objections to raise to so eligible a *parti*. It will be one of the matches of the season." And in her bold hand, under her flaunting signature, she added, "Praise God for bacon!"

The whole tenor of the letter naturally aroused in the Canon the most illogical bias against his proposed son-in-law, a bias that was by no means dissipated when, the following day, he received what he could only consider an application for his daughter's hand from the prospective groom.

"The fellow might be applying for a situation in my household," said he disgustedly. "As for your aunt, she appears to have overlooked the elementary fact that a father has some rights. If this Barrie has succeeded in winning Cassie's affections he is an uncommonly fortunate fellow."

"A very stiff effort," was Janet's calm comment as she handed the sheet back. "If the man is like his letter I would not be in Cassie's shoes for half a dozen titles."

She visualised a haughty aristocrat, handsome no doubt since even Aunt Florence allowed so much, but one who

would consider that in offering marriage to the daughter of a clergyman, who was no more than well-connected, he was bestowing a great favour. But she had not made allowance for the fury of love to which Cassie's beauty and cool elegance had aroused such a man. When he came striding up the path to the rectory, for he had left his horse at the gate, she saw a tall finely-built figure, a typical cavalry officer, with the high bridged nose and short upper lip of his aristocratic ancestry. She heard his voice, light and pleasant, asking for the Canon, and she thought with a sudden flash of bitterness, "He does not ask for me. Perhaps Cassie didn't even tell him of my existence." She wondered whether he would find the contrast between her and her sister incredible, but he had not been in the house five minutes before she realised that when next they met he would not so much as know her. His inward vision was so coloured by the image of his beloved that he saw all women through the haze of her beauty. The Canon being momentarily engaged it fell to Janet to entertain the stranger and he wasted no time in enlisting her help and sympathy.

"Madame Dubois seems to think that your father will insist on a long engagement," he said. "But I hope I can count on your support both in this connection and also for the invitation my mother is extending to Cassie to spend as much as possible of our engagement up at Kilmartin."

Janet felt pricked with sudden anger. "How insufferable he is," she thought. "He imagines that we shall give way on every point," and she said lightly, "You can't imagine that my father will be very pleased at the notion of losing Cassie as soon as she returns."

"But if he looks at the situation from your sister's point of view," urged Andrew—"I want her to get to know my mother and of course my father also, and her life with her aunt is not a very solid grounding for the sort of existence she will have in Lincolnshire."

"Cassie invariably contrives to adapt people to her own wishes," said Janet in the same unsympathetic voice. "I scarcely think you need feel anxious about her."

Andrew Barrie seemed to see his companion for the first

time. "On the whole," he observed, "it is simpler to adapt oneself to tradition than to attempt to mould it."

This remark threw Janet into a transport of rage, but fortunately the Canon arrived before she could reply, and as though some miracle had taken place her future brother-in-law instantly revealed a charm and eagerness that astounded her. Now it was easy to see why the difficult Cassie should have yielded to his suit when she had so casually disdained other men who also had a good deal to offer.

The Canon expressed himself delighted at the meeting and the younger man came to the point with a directness that won Janet's further admiration.

"I have been just saying to Miss Amberley that I hope you are no friend to long engagements. As you know, I am not far off thirty and circumstances make it probable that I shall inherit in the course of a year or so, and it would be an advantage for Cassie to know what will be expected of her before she actually has to take over the responsibility."

"It is easy to see why as a nation we are unpopular on the continent," reflected the critical spinster whom both men appeared conveniently to have overlooked. "I daresay Captain Barrie is no more conscious of his superior manner than Papa when he talks to the lower orders, but he exudes such superiority at every pore."

The Canon, who had troubled to inform himself of his prospective son-in-law's circumstances, now asked sympathetically after the Baron who, since a hunting accident three years earlier, had been no more than a breathing doll who must be dressed daily by his valet and installed in the library where he vacantly signed letters and documents set before him by his agent and his son. Andrew had sent in his papers two years earlier, when it became obvious that his father would never again be sufficiently *compos mentis* to take charge of his own affairs, and now medical opinion held that the old man could not last more than another year. It seemed to the Canon that such a household, dominated by a masterful woman and whose titular head was an imbecile, albeit an imbecile of the blue blood, was hardly a cheerful background for his lovely daughter, but his Christian philosophy had

always encouraged men to look to a future that should be brighter than the present and this philosophy he now easily embraced. However, he was worldly enough to know the value of a show of reluctance. "One day when you are, I hope, as happy a father as I and with as good reason," he said courteously, "you will understand my unwillingness to part with my daughter immediately she is restored to me again. Circumstances have separated us for so long and now you are proposing to carry her off before I have time to realise she is home again. After all, once she is your wife, she will never return except as a visitor."

Here he seemed suddenly to realise Janet's presence and carried his companion off to the library where the two gentlemen instantly got down to business. The Canon made it delicately clear that his daughter's happiness was practically his sole concern, but at the same time there was no reason why that happiness should not be bolstered up by suitable settlements. She was not entirely unendowed and in a burst of paternal pride he decided to double her income by the gift of a dress allowance that could not, however, be impounded by her husband. The Captain agreed politely to the Canon's suggestions; he was already a rich man and on his father's death would be wealthy enough to ignore so comparatively trivial a sum. Cassie's own income would, of course, pass automatically under his control, for it was some years yet before the first of the Married Women's Property Acts would be placed on the Statute Book. Marriage at that period of civilisation was held in such esteem that a woman who was successful in that competitive market could afford*to dispense with every advantage of her single estate. And since many single women had nothing but an allowance that could be withdrawn at any time the sacrifices they made were small.

On the whole the gentlemen were very well satisfied with one another. The Canon would have been more than human if he had not been elated by the prospect offered to his darling and indirectly to himself. Naturally he wished his daughter to espouse a good man and a kind, but there was no reason why virtue and benevolence should not go hand in hand with a country estate, a considerable competence and those trap-

pings of worldly splendour that, a source of temptation to the weak and arrogant, may yet be used by the wise to the Creator's glory. As for the Captain, he told his mother on his return, "The Canon's a great deal better fellow than I expected, having seen his sister. And I believe he's really attached to Cassie. When she comes to stay I think we should invite him to accompany her, though not of course to remain for any considerable period. Fortunately, as a clergyman, he will not be able to leave his parish for very long."

"Is there not a Mrs. Amberley? I thought Madame Dubois spoke of a second wife."

Her son shook his head. "There is an unmarried daughter but she's quite negligible. She keeps his house, but it is easy to see why she has never been invited to the South of France."

4

Janet, listening patiently to her father's eulogies the same evening—the Canon enthusiastically allowed the young man to be nearly worthy of his beloved child—agreed, though with reservations.

"Yes, I think Cassie has done well for herself, not only from a material point of view,—the advantages there must be obvious—but I think her husband-to-be is so much in love with her that he will make her happy, if she will allow him."

The Canon stared and bridled. "My dear Janet, I cannot pretend to understand what you mean by that. Naturally, she will allow him ..."

"I meant Papa, if she is also in love with him."

"Do you assume that your sister would engage herself to any man with whom she was not in love?"

"In that case I cannot understand why she stayed in the South of France. What if Aunt Florence has a migraine? She has servants and friends galore. However, she is sure to have some good reason. Cassie always has."

Once again the Canon felt perturbed; once again he reminded himself that unmarried women without prospects are likely to suffer from jealousy. He must pray for her to be

delivered from temptation. As though resolved to do so at once, he rose and left her.

And after all, they did not have to wait long for Cassie's return, which took place the following week. She was accompanied by her intrepid aunt who, having weighed the disadvantages of the English climate in November against the pleasure to be derived from watching her brother assume the dignity becoming to the father-in-law of a prospective peer, had decided to risk the weather. In Charles Amberley's eyes, she was more fantastic than ever. He noticed her appearance with dismay. Barrie must indeed be infatuated if he was prepared to swallow that modish figure of fun as a relation. Florence, however, as usual gave her impression of not caring a pin what anyone thought. When she heard that Charles proposed to stipulate for a six months' engagement she tcha'd vigorously.

"Where's the sense in that?" she demanded. "Get the gel married as soon as they both like. There is nothing to wait for."

"I don't wish to give the impression of hurling my daughter into a stranger's arms," said the Canon coldly. "In six months time she will be twenty-one and independent ..."

"All the more reason for marrying her oif while she is still under your jurisdiction."

But Charles repeated that he had no wish for his daughter to rush pell-mell into marriage, nor did he imagine that Lady Kilmartin would wish it, either.

"Precisely," agreed Florence. "My dear Charles, how pig-headed you are. Lady Kilmartin, whom I have seen and you have not, is by no means the rapturous mother-in-law of your imagination. I don't doubt she looked considerably higher for her son, and seeing that he has the run of the peerage and will make an ideal husband for an Englishwoman . . ."

"I am sure I cannot understand you aright," contributed the Canon, employing the devastating courtesy so much more effective than insolence. "A stranger might suppose you were warning me that unless this marriage takes place in the near future it may never take place at all."

"You read me like a book," said Florence in sarcastic tones.

The Canon looked agitated under his pomposity. "If matters rest on so gimcrack a foundation it would be as well for both parties to realise it before it's too late."

Florence drew a deep breath of exasperation. "How English!" she said.

"I am English," Charles pointed out coldly.

"And so, unfortunately, is your daughter. A French girl would appreciate her good fortune and would understand that a mother-in-law is a most important factor in marriage. For the first year she would be suitably docile, and repress any feelings she might have. At the end of that year she might start suggesting changes. If, as is usual, she had presented her husband with an heir by that time, her influence over him would be greatly increased. She could then start making demands with a very fair chance of success. If Cassie attempts to rule the roost the instant she becomes the Honourable Mrs. Barrie she is heading straight for disaster. That young man has a great opinion of his mother ..."

"If she is all he considers her, we have nothing to fear. She will appreciate Cassie as he does himself. You have met her, Florence. What sort of woman is she?"

"Well enough for an Englishwoman," agreed Florence reluctantly. "Stamped with convention, of course, but a good type. Cassie will be a fool to intimidate her."

"There should be no thought of intimidation. Her son has made his choice ..."

"Your daughter has made hers but you're not disposed to fall on the young man's neck. The feelings of parents, whatever their sex, are not very different in these matters. As for you, my dear brother, you may be as unworldly as you please in the pulpit, but when we are alone you will not deny that you would prefer to be father-in-law to the future Lord Kilmartin than to Mr. Jones of Kentish Town."

But the Canon replied icily that his daughter was not likely to engage herself to Mr. Jones of Kentish Town.

In the meanwhile the sisters were meeting for the first time for more than a year, and while Cassie noticed that Janet was thinner and less fashionable than ever, and then dismissed

her from her thoughts, the elder sister found herself puzzled and even alarmed by the changes she discerned. In worldly wisdom and elegance Cassie was perhaps more advanced than before, but what she had gained in poise and experience she had assuredly lost in joy. She was not less beautiful—that she should be more beautiful seemed to Janet impossible. She carried her beauty like a banner wherever she went, and "even Lady Kilmartin cannot wishto prune this tree" thought the unsophisticated Janet, "it is like a rose. You can neither remain unaware of its existence nor forget it when it is out of sight". Yet the change, though indefinable, was obvious. "What has happened to her?" she wondered. "The beauty is there, of course, but it has hardened. There used to be a fluidity about her, an eagerness and spirit no-one could resist. Now something is lost. It is like snow when the wind freezes. It is still lovely, but the softness, the richness is gone." So in her imperfect way she strove to define the indefinable.

"Your star is certainly in the ascendant," Janet congratulated her sister. "I suppose Papa can hardly be blamed for assessing your value even higher than before. It's a good thing it's you who are making this amazing marriage. I should be terrified of her ladyship to start with."

"On the contrary, you'd suit her in many ways better than I do," was Cassie's careless rejoinder. "She looks at me as if she thought her darling Andrew were marrying a leopard. However, there are a good many distractions up there. Barrie Hall is a centre of social life, or will be when Andrew is married. The old Lord is more or less paralysed and his wife is engrossed in good works. But I daresay I shall make a very pleasant life for myself."

"But you'll be happy," urged Janet.

"I should be very unnatural if I were not. Andrew can give me anything a girl could desire."

"And—you do love him? It is so very obvious that he is madly in love with you, and it must be difficult to accept so much love unless one can reciprocate it."

Cassie laughed unkindly.

"Anyone could see you were not married, Janet."

"You are not married yourself yet," Janet reminded her

tartly. "And if you do not love Captain Barrie you should refuse to marry him even now. Love in a cot would be better than a rich marriage where the benefits were all material ones."

"Not for me," said Cassie. "You don't understand, Janet. You might be happy married to a poor man. In fact, anything would be an improvement on the drudging existence you live here. But after my life with Aunt Florence, and you cannot begin to understand how gay and brilliant it has been, so much vivacity, so many admirers, such a round of pleasure and all the wits as well as the dandies at her parties, I could not return to live in a house like this, become enveloped in domesticity. I must have a rich setting, and that's what Andrew will give me. You need not think I shall disappoint him. In my own way I am ambitious, too."

The result of this conversation was to increase Janet's apprehension. Like all unmarried women, she was intensely romantic and a marriage based on materialistic grounds seemed to her abhorrent.

"It is Aunt Florence's fault," she told herself. "She has brought Cassie up to believe in marriages of convenience. But if she wants no more than a roof over her head, she might as well come home."

Cassie, however, seemed after the first day to throw off that air of hardness that had intimidated Janet, and proceeded to captivate the neighbourhood. The Canon was congratulated on all hands. She was deliciously gay, yet aware of her importance as the betrothed of a man of weight and standing. Now, thought Janet, she is like someone in an enclosure. The world may approach, but she remains behind the bars. She tried to imagine the sort of life to which Cassie looked forward, and by contrast her own seemed unspeakably barren and miserable.

"She will certainly create a sensation in Lincolnshire," she told herself. "I wonder if she will invite me to visit her when she is married. Perhaps when she has her first child ..." But then she laughed at herself for her pretensions. In the households of Abbot St. Mary an unmarried sister was often welcome at such a time to relieve domestic strain, but

Cassie would have servants galore. Besides, Andrew would have his family who would regard a drab sister-in-law as no more than an incubus.

After a short stay at the rectory Cassie went north, accompanied by her father, and Aunt Florence returned to France.

"Now that Cassie is off my hands I can attend to my own affairs/" she announced.

"I hope they are satisfactory," said Janet in polite tones.

"One's affairs are seldom so satisfactory they cannot be improved," was her aunt's grim rejoinder. "I know it is useless to remind you of that and assure you that it is often necessary for women to exert some initiative. But one of these days you may wish you had taken my advice."

The Canon returned from his short visit in high fettle. The estate was magnificent and in excellent condition. It stood to reason that the Kilmartins should enjoy the good feeling of the neighbourhood, and it was clear that Cassie's beauty had already advanced her considerably in local society.

"No man could wish for a better future for his daughter," Charles Amberley assured Janet. "Lady Kilmartin is a little stand-offish, perhaps, but then she is a woman with many anxieties. Her husband is quite dependent on her and his son, and, as both realise," he continued buoyantly, "his illness cannot be of any long duration. Cassie will have a great position and I am sure there is no-one who is better fitted for it."

Whenever her father spoke like a hero out of one of Miss Austen's novels Janet knew that he was in exceedingly good spirits. He confided to her over and over again the size of the estate, the splendour of the house and its appointments, Cassie's importance in the neighbourhood as wife to the heir—Think of it, Janet, when she wishes to ride out she will have the choice of three carriages. In short, he made no secret of the fact that he was entranced at the prospect of being father-in-law to a peer.

"And on Sunday he will preach on My Kingdom is not of this world or some similar text," reflected Janet, not in

amazement but with a dry amusement by no means uncommon to her. "And he will see nothing inconsistent in his adjurations to the congregation to keep themselves unspotted from the world."

Cassie had the tact to write to her father precisely the letters he most appreciated, and that he could quote to his acquaintances, but in writing to her sister she sometimes unleashed her private feelings. These letters were not intended for the Canon's eye, and although she knew her father resented her secrecy, Janet kept these to herself.

"It is more than time there was a younger woman than my prospective mother-in-law (already she is the dowager to us) at the Hall. Aunt Florence would find here proof of everything she has ever said against the English. The talk all day is of hunting; nothing is too small to excite their passion. Even rabbits shaken out of sacks will do if nothing richer offers. You cannot imagine the life, Janet. All the men come down ritualistically dressed for whatever sport is to be enjoyed, and if it is fine there is only time to take in an enormous breakfast before they are off with guns and dogs—or sometimes on horseback if it is fox-hunting, and as though a great wave had receded the whole house is subdued until their return. Then they are all too much exhausted to speak much—some of the men can hardly keep awake, but that, I think, is because they cannot believe there is anything worth keeping awake for if it is too wet or too late or too dark or for any other reason impracticable to be out killing things. I begin to understand Aunt Florence's point of view. Foxes, ducks, hares, even rabbits are more important to these sportsmen than women. They take us, as it were, in their stride. You see, the weather doesn't matter so far as we are concerned. But if it should be wet, then they stand with their noses pressed against the glass or march into the hall to tap barometers or stride up and down or linger in the gun-room talking of yesterday's and to-morrow's hopes until the first gleam of sunlight brings them out with a rush, like frogs after rain. As for the conversation, among the men it is all of the sport they have had, the sport they have missed, the bird they just failed to bring down, even the fish that got away.

Aunt Florence would call them barbarous. In France men don't avoid the society of women as they do over here. On the contrary, they seek it. And that's good for the women. It keeps them alert. I begin to understand why so many Englishwomen droop. There is no sense blooming if no-one ever notices you. When we are alone, that is, when the men have got a day fine enough for their sport, the conversation is of engagements, weddings, births, prospects, and of the coming or the existing fashions. No-one flirts, no-one pays compliments. It is all considered exceedingly vulgar. The Dowager is entirely immersed in good works on the estate and in looking after her husband. She, not Andrew, reads family prayers. For myself, I would be ashamed to nag so at the Almighty. He will be a great deal less troubled when I am in charge here."

"Has your sister any news?" the Canon would enquire hungrily, looking at the sheet as though he could pierce through the paper.

"Nothing of any importance, Papa. She has asked me to send her this or that."

But presently the letters struck a new note; now Cassie seemed more in tune with her environment. She spoke with greater enthusiasm of their social occasions.

"Cassie seems to be attending a great many dances," remarked the gratified Canon. "No doubt Andrew has realised that you cannot hide a light under a bushel."

Even if Papa wore a red tie, thought the graceless Janet, anyone would know he was a clergyman.

Then the letters became shorter and less frequent, and Janet had to deal with short temper at the breakfast-table. But Cassie's father refused to make a single adverse comment on his favourite daughter.

"We have all been young," he would observe with singular obtuseness to the daughter whose youth had been put out at usury for her family's benefit. But in his study in place of the sermon he had announced he must compose, he was writing, "Do not forget your father altogether in the midst of your gaieties. Remember we are very quiet people here and we like to have the reflection of high society."

The next letter, however, came not from Cassie but from Andrew and breathed a spirit of urgency. He asked the Canon to agree to an ^f early marriage and to waive his stipulation of a six months' engagement at the least. "Cassie's position will be far easier when she is my wife," he wrote.

"I cannot imagine what he can mean by that," said the Canon aloofly.

"Can you not, Papa? I think the dowager, as Cassie calls her, is beginning to show her claws, and poor Andrew is afraid Cassie may take the bit between her teeth and bolt."

"Bolt where?"

"That is what Andrew is afraid of. Back to France, perhaps. Oh! there is no question, Papa, of Cassie caring for Andrew as he cares for her. I should not be surprised to know that Aunt Florence made the marriage in the first place. I don't expect you to ask my advice, but if you did I would say—remove your embargo, let them marry as soon as they please. For there is no doubt about it, Cassie is restless as a visitor and Andrew is getting anxious."

But before the Canon had made up his mind the catastrophe had occurred. It arrived in the shape of a telegram delivered at the breakfast-table, and the result was to make the Canon change colour and become all in a moment an elderly man who has suddenly lost his way. "Like a boat broken loose from its moorings," Janet reflected. "Oh dear, this is just what I feared. Something has gone wrong, something that even Papa is not able to ignore." The Canon summoned up sufficient presence of mind to dismiss the servant with a brief "No answer" but he could not so easily dispose of Janet.

"It is bad news I can see, Papa," she observed when the door had closed. "I take it it is Cassie."

The Canon recovered a little of his former spirit. "I cannot see why you should suppose anything of the kind."

"No-one else has the power to distress you so deeply," said outspoken Janet.

"There is no need for so much apprehension," replied her

father testily. "It is just that she is returning rather unexpectedly to-day."

"That is certainly unexpected. But what does she say?"

She came round the side of the table and gently took the telegram from her father's hand. The Canon was too much upset by its contents even to rebuke her.

It read: Your daughter returning to-day arriving 3.45. Letter follows. Kilmartin.

Janet expelled a long soft breath; the news itself was surprising, yet she had only the sensation of a climax long anticipated.

"That must be from the dowager," she remarked. "No-one else would send you a telegram with such a signature."

"You are leaping to conclusions, Janet," her father assured her. "Quite unwarrantable conclusions."

"Then whom do you suggest? Not Lord Kilmartin, we know he is too feeble to deal with his own affairs. And Andrew would sign his Christian name. In any case, he is not Kilmartin yet."

Her father grasped at a straw. "That is probably the explanation. Kilmartin has had a stroke or some similar adversity, and naturally Cassie would prefer to leave the family alone with their grief."

"In that case she would send the telegram herself. Besides, what do the two final words mean?"

But only Cassie could tell them that. "You may be sure there is some good explanation," was all the Canon could think of by way of reply.

"I don't wish to be pessimistic," said Janet in steadfast tones, "but it looks to me as though Cassie has been sent away."

"Sent away?" The bare suggestion brought the Canon to his feet. "Have you taken leave of your senses, Janet?"

"And that can mean only one thing," Janet continued as though she had not heard him. "She has broken her engagement."

"Gentlewomen do not break their plighted word, without very strong provocation. I think you wrong your sister."

Nevertheless, the suggestion stuck in his mind. It was unthinkable, of course. Cassie would never make a better marriage, and if Janet's preposterous suggestion was true she had irretrievably damaged her social career. He could not concentrate on work all that day. More than once he left his study and came into the hall as though he thought he heard Cassie's step on the drive. Janet heard and correctly construed his movements. "Poor Papa, it will be a shock he will find it hard to overcome. He had so counted on being the father of the future Lady Kilmartin."

After luncheon Charles Amberley gave orders for the carriage to take him to the station to meet the 3.45. At 4.30 he returned—alone.

"You are right," he said in stricken tones. "There is more to this than I imagined. She has not come. What can have happened to make her afraid to return to her father's house?"

"Perhaps she missed the train," said Janet sensibly, but her own heart missed a beat. Of what folly was Cassie not capable? And she must know that a young woman of her position and appearance could not hope to travel alone unmolested. So, she deduced, she is not alone. Papa is right. It is worse than we had expected.

The Canon debated within himself whether he should despatch a telegram to Andrew Barrie, but he shrank so heartily from the notion that Janet was easily able to dissuade him. "At least wait for the next train," she urged. "Or perhaps Cassie has sent a telegram and it has been delayed."

The Canon therefore sent the carriage to meet the next and last train of the day which arrived at 6.40. When it returned it brought Cassie with it.

"My dear Cassie. You have given us a terrible fright. We feared some accident. How did you come to miss your original train?"

"There was a misunderstanding, Papa. It is all right."

"But surely you did not travel alone, a girl of twenty? What can Lady Kilmartin be thinking of?"

"She is thinking of Andrew," said Cassie. "Thinking of him all day and all night. If any word of hers could have

stretched me dead at her feet she would not have hesitated to speak vit. Hesitated? She would have exulted."

Her father took her hand and drew her towards the study. "Cassie, I think you and I must speak of this in private."

Janet, recognising the note of dismissal in his words, completed her household tasks and went up to her own room. After a long time she heard the study door open and then slow steps ascended the stairs. Now her womanly intuition bade her forget her bitterness so that she thought only of her sister. What grief had been her portion that she should move with this old woman's step, like someone in whom the flame of living has died to a bare ember? Possessing a greater measure of delicacy than her father could understand, she resolved to do nothing to force Cassie's confidence. If her sister chose to confide her trouble then she was ready and eager to listen. But she would ask no questions, add nothing to a burden upon whose nature she could speculate, but whose full weight she did not yet comprehend. The footsteps reached the landing, hesitated outside Cassie's room, then came on. The handle of Janet's door turned.

"Come in," invited Janet, not rising.

Cassie entered and sank down on the edge of the bed. She was breathing fast as though she had been running.

For some time neither sister broke the silence. At last Cassie said, "Janet, you must help me."

Janet made no attempt to mask her astonishment. "I? What can I do?"

"I must get away quickly. Papa doesn't understand."

"Where do you mean to go? You can hardly find a quieter place on earth than Abbot St. Mary."

"Not for me. You forget that Andrew has friends not ten miles distant. The story will be all over the neighbourhood in two or three days."

"You have not so far told me anything," said Janet slowly, "but I take it you have broken your engagement."

"It has been broken off," Cassie agreed.

"But not by you?"

"You heard what I said fo Papa when I came in. The

Dowager would kill me with her own hands before she allowed me to become Andrew's wife."

"Then you have done something exceptionally foolish. Andrew did not give me the impression of being so easily influenced."

"It is not Andrew's fault." There was no spirit in her exhausted voice. "No man in his position would marry me now."

"Cassie, what is it? Does Papa know?" she added as her sister made no reply.

"Not altogether, though the Dowager will see to it that he does very shortly. The fact is—I don't love Andrew."

"That is nothing new," said Janet quietly. "You didn't love him when you became engaged."

"Ah, but then I didn't know ..." She stopped as though she were too weary to complete the sentence. Janet was shocked by her appearance. Her beauty was burned away. For a moment she even reminded her sister of their mother when her fatal illness was drawing to its close. There was the same colourlessness, the same indifference to her surroundings, but here it was the more shocking in view of Cassie's youth and the beauty for which she was notorious.

"I have no wish to make things more difficult for you," Janet began, and suddenly there was no need for further questioning. She knew.

"Cassie, I have it. Why did I not think of it before? You have met Ned Castlebarry again. Of course, that is his part of the country."

"I had forgotten that. Perhaps if I had been prepared ..."

"But I am still at a loss. How could *he* affect your marriage? Why, he is married himself. Rumour says his wife is expecting a child."

"His wife!" cried Cassie with sudden passion. "A woman he married for her money as both of them realise. Not for love. On his side at least there was never any question of love. That kind of marriage makes no difference."

"No difference? Now, Cassie, you are talking like a child. Of course it made a difference."

"Not to me."

"You mean—it is because of him that your engagement has been dissolved?"

"It is useless to blame me, Janet. You do not know—you cannot know . . . And how could I marry Andrew after that?"

"Cassie, you had better give me all the facts if I am to help you. Do you mean, there is a scandal?"

"It will not be Lady Kilmartin's fault if there is not. She married her husband for his position—that is easy to see—so how could she sympathise?"

"I daresay a mother is prejudiced. She would find it difficult to forgive a woman for not being in love with her son. Worse, for being in love with someone else and allowing the fact to become known. For that, I think, is what has happened, has it not?"

"I was unprepared," said Cassie in the same colourless tone. "But the instant I set eyes on him again I knew I could not marry Andrew or anyone. They should never have parted us."

"But—did Castlebarry ever propose marriage?"

"How could he? He had no money and nor had I. He has been sacrificed—we have both been sacrificed—to the wretched estate and his mother and sisters. He is a man strangled by an octopus. How dare you blame him for not being free?"

"I blame him for spoiling your life. A man of any true nobility of spirit would have accepted the position, would have wished the best for you since he could not give it you..."

"It is easy to understand when you talk like that that you have never been in love. You are like Papa, who talks of honour and integrity. I tell you, they are words, worth no more than the scrap of paper on which they could be written. Circumstances separated us—for I believe that if Aunt Florence had been less headstrong we might still have been happy. When we met again—oh, it was quite by chance the first time—we both knew that nothing had changed our feeling for each other."

"You say the first time. There were other meetings then?"

"Of course."

"In company, I suppose."

"Sometimes."

"Oh Cassie, you were not foolish enough to meet him by stealth? Another woman's husband?"

"I met him as and when I could."

"And you were discovered?"

"It was nothing I could have foreseen. A child belonging to a guest was left at home from some party because she had a cold, and she remembered a book I had showed her and went to my room to look for it. That is how she found the letters."

"The letters?"

"Yes. You see we could meet so little, and in public his wife never took her eyes off him. And so we would write. There was a hollow tree on the estate—I put my letters there and took his."

"In every word you speak," cried the horrified Janet, "you proclaim the insanity of lovers. Anyone might have found those letters."

"We were more discreet than you think. We never used our own names, we had special names for one another. Besides, why should anyone find them?"

"But it appears that this child did. And—what happened?"

"As soon as I had read a letter I fastened it with a wafer so that no-one could open it without my knowing. How could I guess," anger flamed up suddenly in cheek and voice, "any one would rummage among my belongings?"

"I still do not understand," confessed Janet. "How could a child know their meaning?"

"She thought she would play a game of postman, and she left one of the letters in each of half a dozen rooms. I suppose I am fortunate that Lady Kilmartin was the first member of the household to find her letter. She opened it, thinking, she said, it would contain a sheet of blank paper or perhaps some printed note."

"And she found a love-letter? But how could she be sure to whom they were addressed?"

"You forget. The child had taken them out of my room."

Oh, it was hopeless to protest. I had been for a walk with Andrew and when we came in we received a message that the Dowager wished to see us. She was in her room, the letter open before her. Even Andrew, I thought, could hardly miss my start of horror when I saw it. It was hopeless to try to deceive her. She asked if it was my property and told me how it had been found. I could find nothing to say except that it was my property, that no-one else had any right to it. She swooped on that like a kite on its prey. 'Your affianced husband has a right,' she said. Andrew looked at me in amazement. He was utterly confused. 'I don't understand, Cassie.' 'If you were to read this letter you would understand perfectly,' said his mother, holding it out to him. I made a grab at it, but Andrew was quicker. He took it—and passed it to me unread. 'I am sure you can explain,' he said. 'That is my letter and it is private,' I repeated. 'Perhaps you will tell my son by whom it was written,' insisted the Dowager. I said again, 'It is private.' Andrew was frowning. 'It is from your father? Then of course . . .' 'It is not from her father,' said the dowager scornfully. 'Do fathers use such expressions as——' and actually, Janet, actually she began to quote from the letter." Cassie had been pale enough before, but now she burned like a furnace. "You had no right to read it," I said. 'You had no right to receive it,' she retorted. 'Will you have the goodness to tell my son in my presence who wrote that letter?' Andrew intervened. 'Cassie's letters are her own property.' 'Even when they are love-letters from another woman's husband?' He was flabbergasted. I could see that. At first he didn't believe her, but it was too difficult for him. He had been believing her all his life. 'Ask her,' said the Dowager. Andrew turned to me. 'Cassie, I don't wish to interfere in your affairs more than my position gives me a right, but—if you will assure me that there is no truth in what my mother has just said, that she is speaking under a misapprehension. . . .' I tried to say, 'This is a letter from an old friend,' but it was no good, Janet. She was too strong for me. She knew as well as I there are some expressions only pardonable to lovers."

"But—he was not your lover, Cassie? You were not so

wicked as that?" Janet was shocked and too much taken aback to conceal the fact.

"I loved him. I've told you before, you can't understand. I knew I could have so little of him, just the little time before I married Andrew."

"You would still have married Andrew?" Janet's voice was faint.

"I must marry someone. Papa could never support the shame of two spinster daughters. And Aunt Florence was right. I was never likely to get a better offer. Beauty is all very well, and I should be a fool if I did not know how beautiful I am, but to reach the top of the tree one needs so much else—money, connections, the right environment. No, Aunt Florence was talking sense as always when she told me to take him while I could."

"And—what happened?"

"Poor Andrew. It was easy to see it was a great shock to him. He didn't fight any more. You can't blame him. You could see his mother meant to publish the story far and wide, and how could he marry me after that? He looked quite dazed, but I could see already from the instant he recognised that what his mother had said was true, before I had confirmed it, his mind had changed. Or rather, his vision of me had changed. I was a different person. He might have a hundred mistresses, but I must not have one lover."

"That is the way of the world," said Janet sensibly. "You must have known it."

"I never meant him to know," said Cassie stubbornly.

"Andrew is not the only one to be shocked," burst forth Janet. "But—tell me, does Castlebarry know what has happened?"

"Do you think I would allow him to remain in ignorance of the fact that that woman is his enemy? Oh yes, she knows who wrote those letters. I had forgotten that if a man writes, a characteristic hand there is no need for him to append his name. I saw Ned this morning."

"She allowed it?" Janet sounded startled.

"She? She has nothing to do with my life for the future. She sent me in with a footman and when we reached the

station a good half-hour before the train started I told him there was no need to wait. I took a cab as soon as he had made himself scarce and drove over to Castlebarry, nearly twenty miles away..."

"You may be quite sure that everyone in the neighbourhood knows that by now," ejaculated her sister.

"I keep telling you, it doesn't matter. I know I am ruined socially. That is why I must get away quickly. It is not as though I were Miss Brown or Miss Smith. Then I could hide anywhere. But for years I have been the beautiful Cassie Amberley and Aunt Florence saw to it that I should not be easily forgotten."

"And—Castlebarry?"

"Oh, you will blame him, I know, but it's not his fault. He has to think of the estate, his mother and sisters, even of her." By 'her' Janet realised that Cassie meant the lady whose fortune depended on bacon. "Luckily it was one of her bad days. I asked for her, of course. I meant to say Papa had been taken ill, I was returning immediately—but she is one of those women who take infinite care of themselves at these times, so it was he who came. He shut the door quickly and said 'Cassie, you must be mad to come here at this hour, alone. If Kitty or my mother had seen you . . .' I told him what had happened. I thought ..."

"You thought he would help you. But, Cassie, what did you suppose he could do?"

"There was nothing but, oh Janet, I had to see him once more, I had to. But he wasn't tender or grieved for me. He said, 'I always warned you I could do nothing. Will your father take you back?' I don't know why I expected he would say anything else. I knew from the start the risk I ran but I thought it was worth it. When you're in love you don't look ahead. You just live from day to day."

"Oh Cassie, what a sorry end to all your hopes. And now?"

"The Dowager's right. Every respectable house will be closed to me. I don't know where to hide where they won't track me down. I have become everybody's quarry. If only we were Roman Catholics I could perhaps seek refuge in a

convent till all this had blown over. Even Aunt Florence will be flummoxed by this."

There were many thoughts in Janet's mind but she voiced none of them. To see the lovely Cassie brought so low, her triumphs trampled in the dust, an honourable position lost to her, abandoned by her lover, the butt of every ungenerous tongue, was to arouse in the older woman a passion of sympathy. For she knew her world. She knew that for Cassie there could be no going back, and what could the future conceivably hold?

5

Lady Kilmartin did not long allow the Canon to remain in ignorance of what had occurred. At first, white with rage, he threatened action for libel, but Cassie persuaded him that this would simply increase her misery. When, incredulous, he was compelled to believe her story he followed his usual precedent of consulting his sister, Florence. But if he was disposed to treat his beloved ewe lamb as an invalid to be given the softest bed, the choicest cut of any joint, Florence was far more bracing. "You would do well to realise," she wrote, "that Cassie has closed the doors of all reputable houses to herself. If you want her to get married send her back to me and I will take her for a trip, say, to Rome, where she will meet people whose paths have never crossed Kilmartin's, among whom she may well find some excellent fellow prepared to make her his wife. If you insist on keeping her at the rectory you will merely find yourself saddled with two spinster daughters instead of one."

However, nothing, not even a scandal of this magnitude, could defeat Madame Dubois. She wasted no time crying over spilt milk. Having discovered with relief that Cassie was not *enceinte* she went forward with plans for the Italian trip with unabated zest. Her villa she let at a most advantageous figure; she told Cassie immediately to put off her martyr's air and count herself fortunate in her generation. "When I was a girl a father would have felt himself justified in beating his daughter black and blue for such an offence, yes, and of turning her out to fend for herself. Now remember, men don't

like Niobe except as a piece of statuary in the rock garden. If your heart is broken, throw it away; it's no use to you. You will be saved a great deal of trouble if you have none. If it is not broken beyond repair, and I doubt whether it is, see to it that it's mended at the first possible moment. There are better men in the world than that nincompoop, Castlebarry, and presently you will be glad you did not throw yourself away on him."

To herself she reflected grimly on the illogicality that kept Janet, the virtuous one, in a dry-as-dust routine at the Rectory, while Cassie, the sinner, was rewarded for her folly by a trip that would have delighted her sister.

It did not then occur to her that Providence may sometimes keep the winning card up his sleeve.

It happened that one morning at breakfast the Canon looked up from his letters to observe that he had heard from his old friend, Archdeacon Ferrers, that his nephew and the Canon's godson, John Hardwick, was in a very bad way. He had lost his fiancée and had himself been seriously injured in a runaway carriage accident, and the Archdeacon was writing to suggest that the young man should be allowed to recuperate in new surroundings. "He is naturally," wrote the Archdeacon, "in a somewhat melancholy frame of mind, and his physician considers that if he could be quite removed from the scene of the tragedy his recovery would be more speedy. Will you, my dear friend, take pity on him and invite him to spend a part of his convalescence with you? I can promise that he will not strain your hospitality; he is engaged on a book concerning desirable changes in the law, which will occupy most of his days. He is perfectly able to get about with the aid of a stick."

"Poor fellow!" said the Canon with cheerful commiseration. "Naturally we must invite him here. You had better see about having a room made ready for him at once, Janet, and I will write to my old friend to-day. I don't pretend that we can offer a very cheerful prospect to him, but he shall have all that our hospitality can provide."

Janet agreed with no great show of enthusiasm. She con-

sidered the prospect as unpromising as any puritan could have devised. While Cassie disported herself in Rome she, whose only sin was that she was not beautiful, not desirable, was to be burdened with a self-engrossed invalid, who would mope about the house alternately blaming himself extravagantly for an accident that, in the circumstances, he could hardly have engineered, and inveighing against a providence that could show such scant appreciation of his worth as to strike him, him of all men, in this ferocious manner.

Her father interrupted the train of her thought to observe, "Since he is writing a book he will need some place to work. That small room on the ground floor that you use for your household accounts would be best and you can remove your possessions to some other apartment. Naturally John will require a room on the ground floor since, poor fellow, he has injured his leg."

"Poor fellow," repeated Janet sarcastically, never dreaming that a day would come when she would willingly turn out of any room that he desired or endure any inconvenience that might prove an advantage to him.

"You need not look so severe," her father added testily. "He will be exceedingly busy and in the circumstances he will not wish for female company. Indeed, except at mealtimes, you will scarcely know he is in the house. He will make virtually no difference to you at all."

"He hardly sounds a lively addition to our manage," she remarked perversely. "Doubtless doctors and archdeacons know best, but I should have thought his wound would heal far more quickly if he addressed himself to his work, and in helping other people to solve their troubles be cured of his own."

The Canon stood up. He was really angry, so angry that he even forewent his second cup of tea.

"Perhaps it is expecting too much of you to look for sympathy in the circumstances, but if you had ever loved and lost, as even our poor Cassie has done, I should expect to find a kinder disposition towards a fellow-sufferer."

He went to the door, then looked back. Janet was drinking her tea, entirely unmoved by his last stab.

She finished her solitary breakfast at leisure, then went upstairs to see to the preparation of the guest room for the coming visitor. It was so long since anyone except Aunt Florence and Cassie had been to stay that the room to be allotted to him seemed doubly strange. But as she raised blinds and inspected empty drawers, paper-lined and smelling of sandal wood, removed the cloth from the dressing-table and the sheet from the scrolled gilt mirror, the past came rushing back and once again she was a meek plain child watching her lovely mother prepare for a new arrival. Years and years ago a girl had stayed there. Janet remembered her name even now—Sybil Morland, a lovely golden-haired creature with a winning manner and an eager anticipation and gentleness that won every heart. If she closed her eyes Janet could still see her, rocking softly in the big chair with a sobbing Cassie in her arms. Why was Cassie crying? Tooth-ache, perhaps. She had tooth-ache often as a little girl. Too many sweets, said old Dr. Martin. You'll have no teeth left if you go on like this. And presently under the magic of that golden girl's smile and lovely voice the pain had dulled.

"Where are we going?" Cassie had whispered, and "All the way to Fairyland," said Sybil Morland, rocking harder than ever. Later when Cassie had fallen asleep she couldn't bear to let her go. Even if one wanted to remain a spinster, Janet had heard her say, and anyhow who could, one wouldn't dare, because how could one live without these? The tenderness of the gay young voice, a note almost of reverence as she spoke of children had gone like an arrow to the heart of the unwanted child standing in the shadows by the door. She had choked on a sob and Sybil had looked up startled. Mrs. Amberley had said in a sharp though not unkind tone, "Take care, Janet, we do not want to wake Cassie; she has had such a bad afternoon."

And immediately the lovely visitor on whose account Janet had crept to the threshold, had exclaimed, "Oh, this is your clever daughter, Aunt Marguerite. How proud you are going to be of her one day."

Afterwards she had let Janet come in and watch her brush

her long hair with free happy sweeps and pin it up on the top of her head, and clip on her bracelets.

"How small your feet are," Janet had exclaimed watching them slip into the little white satin slippers. She had stood, lifting her dress an inch or two above her ankles, and smiling. Then she pirouetted a few steps.

"I wonder where they'll take me to," she said, stopping and stooping to kiss the plain little girl. How soon they'll take me up to the altar and then back to my own home, was what she had meant. But the following year she had died of a low fever, picked up in some workman's dwelling near her home. So that was where her happy young feet had taken her, to the churchyard through the January murk there to stay alone when the party dispersed to gather round warm hearths and whisper and condole and say fiercely, Where's the sense of it? A girl of twenty-one and such a lovely girl, too.

Charles Amberley had said gravely, "It is not for us to question the ways of the Almighty. Our life here is only a probation period. Perhaps Sybil had progressed so far she had nothing more to learn on earth," and Janet had thought, If we are only here to learn love Papa is right.

"I shall take that chair into my room," decided the spinster of twenty-eight. "No self-centred young man shall have that chair." But because she was afraid of what the maid would think if she ordered her to take it along the corridor to the second-best bedroom (Papa naturally retained the best) she guiltily opened the door, peered out, and finding the corridor empty, began breathlessly dragging the chair towards the further end. Of course she was interrupted. Her father appeared from nowhere to say in cold tones, "I pay a number of servants to do that sort of thing for you, Janet. Where are you going to put the chair?"

"In my room," said Janet. "Mr. Hardwick can have the one that stands between the windows now. It is more suitable for a man."

The Canon said nothing; after all, it didn't matter. He went down forgetting his daughter immediately, thanking God that he had a sister to care for 'the bird with the broken pinion' as some pious hymn-writer had called sinners of her

particular category and thinking that this young John would bridge very pleasantly the gap that must yawn between the date of Cassie's departure and that of his own proposal to a new-comer to the neighbourhood, a Mrs. Cora Jardine. New-comers were generally suspected, but this one's history was known. She was a widow, of good birth, with no family encumbrances, with a little money and a great deal of social ability. Mentally the Canon had marked her down and this time no red-faced M.F.H. should rob him of his prize.

He shut the study door and resumed his sermon. His next was: Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you.

The text on which the Canon had fixed had been chosen with particular reference to the miners of Abbot St. John, the mining village in his constituency, whose curate-in-charge was a Mr. Thorp who, said Sir George Owen, coal-owner, lord of the manor and vicar's warden, was a square peg in a round hole. No sense of responsibility, he declared, encouraging dishonesty if you remembered the Pauline injunction to live at peace with all men. He—Sir George—was only too eager for peace, but the blockheads wouldn't see reason. Did they imagine a man ran a mine as a philanthropic venture? Led by their agitator, a fellow called Matthews, they were making intolerable demands, and the directors, in Owen's view, had no option but to post lock-out notices at the mine. The lock-out—strike Owen preferred to call it—had been in progress for some weeks and Charles Amberley hoped to induce a more Christian spirit—in the men, of course.

"I have never understood this policy of preaching to the converted," reflected Janet who, as the Rector's daughter, of necessity attended all the services and entertained herself during the sermon by prognosticating her father's next sentence. "Except for the few agricultural labourers in the free seats, everyone is convinced that the miners are in the wrong. As for the miners they do not come to Church, and if they did they would go to Mr. Thorp's tin chapel. I doubt whether Papa would recognise one of them, even Matthews, by sight if he met him face to face in the High Street."

In the meantime, the condition of the men was deplorable. In the 'sixties there was no provision for unemployed men, particularly those who were out of work through their own fault. There was the parish, but the miners were a notoriously independent body of men and the majority preferred the slow starvation for themselves and their families which was the Only alternative. Sir George was equally adamant. The men were, he insisted, attempting to hold the community to ransom and his action and that of his co-directors was the only possible course a man of spirit could have adopted. The demands, he assured the Canon, were unreasonable and to accede to them would imperil the security of employers of labour in almost every other industry, coal being a universal necessity. The Canon, holding the not uncommon view of his time that in these disputes labour is pretty sure to be in the wrong morally and certainly economically, adopted his friend and warden's standpoint and had promised to preach a sermon on the unchristian nature of materialism. Neither he nor Sir George perceived anything ironic in this suggestion.

The converted sat in their rented pews and agreed fervently with everything their rector said. For the rest, there were a few agricultural labourers in the free seats in the north aisle, but not nearly so many of these as the Canon would have wished to see. In the feudal sixties farm labourers worshipped with their employers, and since in this neighbourhood the nonconformist element among farmers was very strong, the majority of the men filled the pews in the dissenting chapel. Even those who had been baptised and reared in the State faith knew that it didn't do for a labourer to have independent religious views. In the winter when work on the farms diminished an upstart who chose to find his employer's religion not good enough for him would find himself head of the list of redundant workers and be forced on the hated parish.

In the Manorial pew Sir George Owen sat with his wife and two daughters, Madeleine and Grace. He listened impatiently to the Rector's eulogy. Like Janet, he realised that here at all events the seed fell on barren ground. It was a pity Amberley didn't go down and give it to the fellows straight from the

shoulder. That chap, Thorp, was no good. An alarmist if ever there was one. Only this morning he had sent up a frantic message to the Manor. Sir George shrugged. Suppose the fellows down there were clemmed, whose fault was that? Men should stick to their bargains. It was all these damned Unions, out to make trouble. A firm Government would have made them illegal. Thorp, of course, supported the Unions, said they were the men's only hope of getting a square deal. The worst of parsons, even the best of them, was that they couldn't appreciate that ethics frequently clashed with economics and when they did economics were bound to win. Ethics don't feed and clothe people, support the export trade and keep the wheels of industry running. Let men be ethical in their own homes, but business and religion never could mix.

And here was that ridiculous little clergyman actually warning him, Sir George Owen, the man who could buy up most of Abbot St. Mary, to look out for himself because the men were desperate. What could the men do? Break a few windows, he supposed, and be clapped into jail in consequence. The suggestion made by some female nincompoop that milk should be given to the wives and children had filled him with indignation. The State knew what it was about when it treated women merely as adjuncts to the men. If ever a day dawned when women were given votes, that was the end of England's greatness. They were a soft sex, and he had no fault to find with that. Men looked for softness in women though sometimes, naturally, they were disappointed. But they were ruled by their hearts rather than their heads, and would throw away a campaign for sentimental reason in a manner calculated to make a sensible fellow's blood run cold. Thorp was as bad, if not worse, with his rhodomontade about economic justice. There was only one form of justice, the kind that allowed a man to take what he'd fought for and won, without outside interference. Anything else was depredation on the one side and charity on the other.

The Canon paused, said gracefully, "And now to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost," and the congregation rose to its feet and fumbled in bags and trouser pockets. The choir started a hymn: *In the Cross of Christ*

J glory and Sir George thought, "I might get Amberley to come up to the house for lunch. He'd better put it across that curate of his, tell him if he can't keep his congregation in order he'd be well-advised to look for another job. That'll larn him. He's a married man, I understand."

The plate was passed to him and he put in five shillings.

As soon as the service was over the church emptied like water flowing out of a jug. In the churchyard people met, exchanged greetings, formed little groups and walked slowly homeward. Even Sir George walked back on Sundays, local opinion being against the use of the carriage except in emergencies. Janet remained in her pew until the congregation might be judged to be well on its way. She felt she had no part in the intimate life of the neighbourhood, and the story of Cassie was still too recent to be forgotten. She knew how people whispered.

Poor Canon Amberley. One daughter so plain and the other disgraced.

She was still in her pew when her father reappeared and came sweeping down towards her.

"Sir George wishes me to dine with them," he said. (Even the Manor dined at mid-day on Sundays.) "Some trouble has cropped up. I shall be back to tea, of course." And as he turned he added, "Tell Slater to carve the joint. You are no hand with a knife."

Janet collected all the paraphernalia customary to a church-going female—prayer book, hymn book, umbrella, handbag, boa, and went out of the church by the north door, which was only used as a rule by the poor who were not accustomed to enter or leave the building by the same door as their superiors. The church crowd had dissipated, but a stranger was walking slowly between the graves, examining the stones. At the sound of her footsteps he looked up and she saw a face gravely handsome, with a long unyielding upper lip, a legal mouth, dominant nose, fine dark eyes under thick smooth brows. She saw with approval that he wore no beard, but a dark moustache and dark sideburns. His whole appearance was both dignified and distinguished.

Who can he be? she wondered, for strangers at Abbot St.

Mary were rare. Had he been staying with one of the local families he would not be haunting alone in the churchyard, while a traveller would hardly choose this place to find himself at such an hour. Besides, he had not been in church. Janet was certain of that. Throughout the years she had developed a technique for discovering who was absent and who had been expected and who was present—and unknown. The stranger came into neither category. Oblivious to the extraordinary appearance she must present, she remained standing watching him, as surprised as though he had been a visitant from another world. She noticed his clothes, of good material and excellent cut, the fashionable silk hat he now carried, the boots which were covered in dust as though he had walked a considerable distance. Only when he began to move towards her did she realise that the cane he carried was not a mere addition to his dress but was of real value to him. Yet despite an obvious lameness he moved quickly and with grace.

"Why, he must be John Hardwick," she told herself in amazement. "But this is extraordinary. I never dreamed he would look like this."

The stranger was now within speaking distance, and he said with no show of diffidence, "I wonder if you can tell me if the rector will be coming this way."

"I think you must be Mr. Hardwick," said Janet at once. "I am afraid my father has been called up to the Manor. There is some local trouble. I did not understand he was expecting you to-day."

"I had to change my plans very suddenly, but I did send a telegram. I fear it has not arrived?" And then he added in puzzled tones, "I think you must be Miss Amberley. I am afraid I did not know. ..."

Janet felt the familiar bitterness rise in her breast. "That my father had a daughter?" She supposed the Canon had not remembered to mention her existence.

"That he had a daughter at home. I should apologise. My uncle certainly gave me to understand that Miss Amberley was abroad at the moment."

"That is my sister, Cassie. I am Janet Amberley and my father's housekeeper. He may have forgotten to mention

me," she added, unable to suppress her chagrin, "but I assure you that if I had not been here your invitation would not have been issued."

An instant later she was horrified at her shocking rudeness, but before she could begin to explain her companion said, "I think it far more likely that your father spoke of you particularly, but—you have not met my uncle, Miss Amberley. If you had you would know he often even seems to forget his own existence. For him nothing has any reality that is less than two centuries old, and that he would consider deplorably modern."

"I am aware that clergymen's daughters are generally taken for granted," said Janet in a more conciliatory voice. Since this Mr. Hardwick was to be a member of the household for some weeks it would be folly to antagonise him on sight. Her unexpected guest, however, proceeded to say something that took her breath away.

"Then, Miss Amberley, they should see to it that they are not overlooked. Really, it is too much to accept such treatment without protest, and then complain of it. The issue lies with the ladies concerned."

Sheer surprise caused her to stop dead and they remained looking at one another, she fierce, he quite unmoved. "If this is how he always talks", she reflected, "he will make his mark here," and aloud she observed in a dry voice, "It is easy to see, Mr. Hardwick, that you are not a woman."

"I hope so," was her companion's grave response. "But if I could incite those women who consider themselves badly used to rise up and defend their own interests, instead of bemoaning the fact that they have no champions, I should think I had done an excellent work."

Janet continued her slow walk towards the rectory. "What precisely would you have them do?"

"Anything that would bring them into the public eye."

"I don't know about your uncle, but my father would certainly say how very unwomanly."

"But they are declaiming against their womanly status. Therefore in logic they should do something to change it. Half the trouble with the world, and there is trouble on all

sides, is that so many of those who suffer most are prepared to sigh and fold their hands and wait to be rescued. That is neither the gospel of success nor, as I read it, the gospel of Christianity."

"Of Christianity?" exclaimed Janet. "Why, that is the gospel of meekness, of acceptance of humiliation, of..."

"You should read your Bible more attentively," interrupted her astonishing visitor. "Take ye no rest and give Him no rest until He have established the kingdom in Zion. Kingdoms, Miss Amberley, don't establish themselves. They are established by those who are prepared to lose everything except the kingdom itself. How can an army of meek non-resisters hope to win any battle?"

"If you are going to expound that doctrine to Papa you will find you have a hornets' nest about your ears," Janet assured him drily.

"I doubt whether the Canon will invite my opinion or pay any attention to it if he did. But if he looks round him he will see that more and more of the downtrodden, those to whom justice has been denied, are beginning to accept that gospel. But perhaps he deplores the unrest among the masses?"

"If you mean the trouble in Sir George's coalmines, he would say that where men have made a bargain they should stand by it."

"Even if the bargain is in itself evil?"

"Sir George is a very respected member of the community ..."

"Is he respected among his employees?"

Janet experienced a fresh shock to realise that within a few minutes she and the stranger had leaped over the normal prim barriers that divided men and women of their generation, and that he was talking to her not as a hostess, certainly not as a woman, but as a person, a fellow-citizen. They reached the door of the rectory before she could reply and she asked quickly, "Did you come here when you arrived, Mr. Hardwick?"

"I was sure that on a Sunday morning a clergyman would be in his own pulpit. Besides, my luggage is at the station. Being Sunday there was no conveyance ..."

"Then how did you . . .?"

"I walked," said John Hardwick.

"But surely I understood from your uncle that walking is one of the pursuits at present forbidden to you."

John Hardwick smiled, and instantly the severity of his face was lightened to an extent that left her breathless. Now she perceived the charm and tenderness that were so soon to win her heart for the rest of her long life.

"As to that, my uncle is like a hen with one chicken. He has a fatal tendency to exaggerate the smallest disadvantage. I assure you, Miss Amberley, I am no cripple. Had that been the case I should certainly not have inflicted myself upon you."

"Which way did you come?"

"Past the mining village, through the heart of it, in short. It was an experiment well worth the effort. I hardly like to criticise my godfather but I wonder whether he had visited Abbot St. John since the closing of the mine."

"I think perhaps you had better put that question to him yourself when he returns after lunch. He is, in fact, probably at this moment closeted with Sir George discussing the whole affair."

Hardwick smiled again. "So you are not so Sabbatarian as I had at first supposed. When I heard that no vehicles were available on a Sunday..."

"Only until mid-day. There will be no difficulty about having your luggage sent up during the afternoon, but in the south work that is not strictly necessary is not performed on the sabbath."

"Do you mean to imply that your father gets his own breakfast on Sundays?"

"Papa's breakfast comes under the head of strictly essential labour."

At that he threw back his head and laughed. "I think, Miss Amberley, you and I will have a great deal in common. About your father I am less sure. I am, in fact, so unsure that I hesitated to accept his very kind invitation."

They had by this time reached the end of the drive and Janet rang the bell. To the servant who answered the door she explained the situation, and John was taken upstairs and shown his quarters. When he returned to the drawing-room Janet was waiting for him wearing her normal composed air. "I must not allow myself to be swept off my feet," she had said warningly to that new Janet Amberley she had only discovered a moment ago. "He must not think I can be tempted into even apparent disloyalty to Papa."

So when John came down it was Miss Amberley, the dutiful daughter, who enquired politely whether he had found everything to his liking.

"I am afraid you have taken a great deal of trouble," he said. "Tell me, Miss Amberley, you will support me if my godfather raises objections to what he may regard as an unnecessary violation of the sabbath? I assure you it was unintentional, though for myself I have no such scruples. But neither I nor any of my fellow-travellers relished a wait of six hours in what must be the coldest and darkest waiting-room on the whole of the line. Nor did I suppose you would wish me to disturb your household at midnight."

Janet was still a little confused as to what precisely had occurred to alter their guest's plans, but she put this aside with a quiet, "Papa will perfectly understand. He will be back soon after lunch and will be exceedingly sorry to have missed your arrival."

"I would not for the world interfere with his arrangements. I only hope that my coming will not inconvenience your housekeeping."

Once again Janet felt indignation rise in her breast. "Already he supposes I am unused to entertaining. There is one thing, the instant he sets eyes on Papa he will see that he is perfectly at home in any company, whatever he may think of me."

"My father is very much looking forward to your visit," she replied somewhat haughtily. "We understand you are writing a book on law, and a room is being put at your disposal."

I will show it you after lunch. It is small but sunny and I think you will be comfortable there, I have only to turn out my housekeeping books. . . ."

He interrupted in genuine dismay. "But I am not usurping your room? How absurd. There is a table upstairs that will do excellently. Besides, I'm not one of these inspired authors. I can write anywhere, in a railway train, in a restaurant, if necessary sitting on a staircase." He saw her puzzled face and continued with that odd suggestion of intimacy, "You see, it's what I was saying just now. You should have told your father—for I'm sure the suggestion came from him—that it would not be convenient for you to give up your room. You may think me unsympathetic but my heart never burned for the toad beneath the harrow. A toad of any intelligence would have got out of the way."

"In another moment you will be telling me the toad should have demolished the harrow."

He laughed again. "Unlike my uncle, and I am sure unlike the Canon, I don't believe in miracles, not miracles that are against nature. And I don't suggest that it's within the capacity of a toad to destroy a harrow. But an army of toads could render it harmless."

"A Trade Union of toads?" said Janet.

"Precisely."

"Then you are a radical?"

"Of course."

"Oh dear," said Janet. "That will disturb Papa. He says it's bad enough having Mr. Thorp always expressing advanced radical opinions."

"Who is Mr. Thorp? Another land-owner?"

"No. He is a curate in charge of the tin chapel at Abbot St. John. He has seriously annoyed Papa and Sir George by supporting the miners, which Papa says is treason in a man who has been appointed to preach the gospel."

"That the meek shall inherit the earth? I daresay he will—six feet of it—in due course. And if matters go on much longer at your mining village without taking a turn for the better a good many of them will not have to wait long for their share."

Here a servant came in to announce luncheon and John Hardwick said, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, "Would you like me to carve? From what you have already told me of your father I'm sure he doesn't approve of women usurping that masculine privilege."

"He says I carve execrably," agreed Janet. "And I think he's right."

John selected a steel, attended to the blade of the knife and sliced the joint in a manner that must have won even the critical Canon's approval. While he was thus bent over the joint it occurred to Janet for the first time that this was the melancholy invalid whose advent she had dully resented. Until this instant she had forgotten about his recent tragedy and no word or gesture of his had served to remind her. Yet it was impossible to believe that a man of his sensibility could be untouched by such a loss. But then he has a thousand interests in his life, Janet reminded herself, and suddenly it seemed to her as though with a few words this stranger had opened a door into the world. Chance visitors had come and gone before, of course. Aunt Florence had brought the tang and echo of her rich continental life into the quiet house, but when they went away they took their world with them. Even while they remained she only saw it as one sees a reflection in a mirror. How I sympathise with the Lady of Shallott, she told herself passionately, and it seemed to her that Hardwick was possibly not unlike Lancelot, allowing for the difference made by a suit of armour and a shield embossed with a lady. John Hardwick was very soberly dressed, but even wearing armour he could not in her eyes have been a more radiant figure. So completely was she swept off her feet by his qualities that she did not even see herself as that supreme absurdity, the maiden lady no longer in her first youth infatuated by a young man a year her junior, and already cherishing a broken heart.

The carving done Hardwick took his seat and said cheerfully, "Now in order that I shall not bark my shins when your father comes back, will you tell me something about your family? Your sister is abroad? Is she married?"

So there is actually someone who has never heard of Cassie, thought Janet with gratified amazement and she said, "She has had an unfortunate affair of the heart . . ." and even as she spoke she remembered why their guest had come south and felt an unbecoming flush colour her face. In immediate contrition she exclaimed, "Forgive me, I am very clumsy. My father always says so. I had forgotten . . ."

"On the contrary," said John, "you have reminded me that a great many other people are also unfortunate. And besides, if I am to be here for some time, it will create an impossible situation if there is to be pretence on both sides. You won't expect me to talk of Laura, I know, but it would be unkind to her and impossible for me to pretend she never existed."

Janet said simply, "There must be a kind of richness in having known her at all. When I heard Cassie's story—oh, I could not envy her, of course—but that experience seemed to remove her into a world—I scarcely know how to put it—a world of adults. You and she belong to it."

"And you do not?" He shook his head. "Miss Amberley, you could never have said such a thing if it were true. Well, one day perhaps I shall meet your sister when life is happier for both of us. Now let us speak of your father—can you give me any hints as to how to make myself acceptable to him? You know, it's strange, but though he is my godfather I have not set eyes on him for twenty years. I doubt whether we should recognise each other in the street."

"Once you have seen him again you will certainly never forget him," responded Janet warmly. "He will be very distressed to have missed your first meal with us, but Sir George had a message from Mr. Thorp that there is trouble brewing in the mines . . ."

"Brewing?" The strong dark brows smooth as silk lifted incredulously. "From all appearances it is there already and in abundance."

"It is most disturbing," Janet agreed. "They have been out now for almost six weeks, and I hear there is an epidemic among the children."

"What else would you expect?" demanded her impetuous

companion. "Children can't live without adequate food and adequate warmth."

"If their fathers were to think of that they would never have quarrelled with their employment."

"It is precisely because they do think of that that the trouble has started."

Janet looked at him in dismay. "Now you are talking in riddles."

"If you had children wouldn't you want them to have a better time than you had had?"

"Of course," agreed Janet quickly, taken off her guard. "That is, of course, assuming that life had been unjust to me."

"Life has been very unjust to them. Their experience of it is long hours, bad conditions, poor pay, constant unemployment and the workhouse or a pauper burial as like as not at the end of the road. Miss Amberley, I can see you have imagination. If that were the best prospect in front of you would you not be prepared to take any risk to secure a better condition of life for your children?"

"But it is not better," cried Janet. "It is worse. I heard Dr. Miller saying in the village the other day that there are almost more children in the churchyard than in the homes. Do you still support the men?"

He said slowly, "Your father would tell you it is expedient that one man shall die for the people."

She insisted, "But these are children," and with sudden passion he cried, "If you had seen as many of them as I have—oh yes, my uncle's parish also embraces a large coal area—you would not say that. They are pygmies, tiny men and women, the girls mothering the last baby while some woman from the village attends the lying-in at home. The boys go out to work at an age when your brother, if you had one, would still be a child. Miss Amberley, you are a Christian. Then do you never wonder what your life is for?"

Then, seeing the look of startled resentment on his companion's face, he hastened to apologise.

"The last thing my uncle said to me when I left his house was a reminder that I was coming here as a visitor, not a reformer. He said that clergymen don't like their guests

to do the reforming, they consider that is their particular vocation."

"It is not so much reform as keeping the law, or that is what he says," observed Janet.

"The law!" said John Hardwick bitterly. "What is that but a set of rules made by rich men for their own convenience? One day, when another set of men are in control, they may utter a perfectly new set of laws—that it is illegal for men to be hungry, illegal for a man to dismiss a labourer without just cause, illegal for a child to have no shoes and sleep on the floor, wrapped in a blanket."

"Are you proposing to enter Parliament?" enquired Janet, confused as well she might be by this torrent of eloquence suddenly poured on her unsuspecting head.

"Parliament? What does that do? It appoints commissions, it makes enquiries, it proposes amendments that are negatived by the opposition, but before anything substantial is done its life is over, a general election is called for, and fresh issues are at stake. No, Miss Amberley, I told you earlier that people must work out their own salvation, peacefully if they can but, if necessary, resisting unto blood. This country," he added drily, "has never been famous for keeping out of a war."

When the Canon returned later, having pshawed his host's fears and promised to give the excitable Mr. Thorp a piece of his mind, he was by no means pleased to learn that his visitor had arrived during his absence, and had apparently already established a warm relationship with his elder daughter. To his surprise this relationship strengthened as the days progressed and since he could not believe that John sought Janet's company of his own choice, he made an opportunity to say to her, "We must remember that my godson is here for a twofold purpose, to recuperate after his accident and heavy loss, and to get on with this book of his. As good hosts, we must respect his need for privacy."

"If he wants privacy, Papa, he can easily have it," was Janet's astounding retort. "No-one ever interrupts him when he is at work, but if he chooses to talk it wouldn't be politeness on my part to attempt to discourage him."

"I cannot imagine what you find to talk about to such a man."

Janet knew her father well enough to understand the words that remained unspoken. If it had been Cassie, that would be a very different matter.

To her it was astounding how the advent of one person could so completely transform the house. Gone were the mornings when she would lie in bed facing another uneventful day, seeking out a round of small duties to fill in the empty hours, waiting attentively on her father at every meal. John had done something for her at present too great for her to assess. He had introduced her to herself. "I thought my life was set in a straight road, and I should be fortunate to remain on it for the rest of my days," she told her surprised reflection in the mirror. "John has made me see that any break in the hedge may be preferable if it leads me into real life."

One of the young man's first actions had been to visit Abbot St. John, and make the acquaintance of Mr. Thorp. The latter was a perfectly insignificant curate, with no material ambitions. He lived in a house not much better than the hovels occupied by the miners, and he had identified himself heart and soul with their cause.

"Sir George has offered to reinstate all the men except Matthews if they go back at once, and even to consider some of their claims," he told John. "But Matthews he refuses to have back at any price. And the men are stubborn and will not agree. He calls them ungrateful and fools who know not which side their bread is buttered, and when I asked if he had never heard of Judas Iscariot, he was in two minds to insist on the Canon giving me notice."

"He would be hard put to it to find anyone to take your place," replied John, drily. "Does he really intend to hold out?"

"I am afraid he does."

"Then he is either blind or a braver man than I take him to be. But either way he proves himself a fool. He must realise that ultimately he will lose. Oh, he may win this battle and the next and the one after that, but the time will come when he is faced by men more strongly-armed than himself, and

then he will be utterly routed, and fellows like Matthews and his followers will show no quarter."

It was not to be expected that the Canon would look with favour upon his visitor's activities.

"You are allowing yourself to be carried away on a tide of indignation that, though your motive may be irreproachable, will sweep any who follow you to ruin," he told his godson.

John merely suggested that if his godfather were himself to visit the mining quarter he might change his opinions.

The Canon fished up a text from the New Testament. "May I not do as I will with mine own?" he enquired. But John, nothing daunted, said that it was immoral to suggest that men could belong to a board of directors who had it in their power to reduce a whole colony to semi-starvation at a word.

Janet openly backed the new-comer, to the Canon's chagrin. He could not help noticing the effect John had had on this unsatisfactory daughter of his. Why, even a father must see that she was a changed woman. There was a brightness, an air of anticipation about her that were completely new. "Lawyers," said he, taking up the cudgels with a will, "should foster law and order rather than class themselves with the rebels."

He said the same to his godson.

John Hardwick never at any stage of his career did things by halves. "Did you never reflect, sir, how right the Pharisees were when they classed Jesus with the rebels?"

The Canon was unspeakably shocked. He observed later to Janet, in whom he now confided more than ever before in his life, that he should hardly have expected such blasphemy from a man who had been brought up by his old friend, Archdeacon Ferrers.

"I am beginning to be sorry I ever allowed my sympathies to be touched," said he, indignantly. "I had supposed that John would wish privacy and quiet in which to work. But he seems to have forgotten his book as easily as he has forgot poor Miss Campion."

But to that Janet said nothing. The matter went too deep. She could to some extent at least appreciate the nature of the blow John had received. It was not often that he spoke of Laura and never, with the pious resignation so beloved by Victorian moralists.

"It would be quite useless for your father to try to convince me that there was any purpose in that senseless affair," he told Janet once after the Canon had attempted Christian consolation. "Laura and I were immensely attached to one another, she gave me the prospect of a happiness I am unlikely ever to find with anyone else, she had charm, beauty, wit."

"And you, John?" said Janet, gently. "Do you blame yourself?"

He looked at her in some surprise. "I? Oh, but did I never tell you? I was not driving at the time of the accident. Laura had the reins. If she had a fault—and who has not?—it was that she was a little wilful, she enjoyed risks and I enjoyed them for her sake. She used to inveigh against a safe way of living—so unprogressive—and, of course, she was right. I don't say she agreed with my political views, but the spirit that prompts me to take a stand against the stiff-necked Toryism beloved of your father was her spirit also. Life with her might have been dangerous, but it would have been life."

It was a shock to Janet to learn that their guest, despite his upbringing in the household of a man whose life was rooted in faith, eschewed the Christian doctrine.

"It is so inconsistent in you," she cried. "You of all men who spend your days and will mortgage all your future to bring about a better order of society, to deny the existence of a God. Why? Why? If you have lost your faith, why do you not give yourself up to a life of pleasure?"

It was one of those rare warm days that are a precursor to the English spring, and John and Janet were in the Rectory garden, she in a long chair darning the Rector's socks, he on his knees uprooting weeds. While Janet was speaking, he hauled up a giant dandelion plant, thus disturbing a covey of small red ants who scurried hither and thither in apparent dismay at the disruption of their small busy community.

"Do you see those ants?" returned John. "Do you suppose

they're saying, There is some good purpose in this sudden destruction of our shelter. We cannot say what it is, but we can believe it has some eternal meaning? As for the ants, who are destroyed by this work I am doing, can you believe that their companions seek for some rational explanation?"

"But, John," she protested, "that is an absurd comparison. Ants have no souls."

"So we assume."

"Would you compare us with mere insects?"

John sat back on his heels. "If there is such a God as you suppose, Janet, can you believe that we are of greater stature, compared with him than those ants compared with ourselves? Why, we fail even to attain the standards we set for mankind. Look at our prisons and our asylums, see the use we make of our freedom, the rampant injustice and wastage of our social order. Solomon, indeed, tells us to look to the ants for an example. No, Janet, for me to believe in a God of Love you would have to provide me with a far more orderly creation than the one we know. And, if he is not love, then I should refuse to worship him in any case."

"But—Our Saviour?" protested Janet, bewildered by the fury of his argument.

"A great man with a great dream, an example perhaps of what man may ultimately attain."

"He was the Son of God," insisted Janet.

"In the same sense in which we may all claim to be his sons. Man is, perhaps, dowered with the capacity for greatness, but in how many cases has he been denied his heritage before his birth? What of the idiots, the deformed, the men of twisted mental stature? And the others to whom opportunities are denied from the instant they draw breath? No, Janet, I can believe in the ultimate greatness of man, but never in your God."

Matthews, the miners' leader, was a little dark man [lyith](#) one shoulder hunched higher than the other. Through the good agency of Thorp, John soon met him and heard his story.

"My dad was killed in a fall of coal with my elder brother when I was ten," he said. "There wasn't any compensation paid, because the owners said he'd not taken proper care. My next brother and me went to work the next week, my mum took my three sisters into the House. She couldn't work because she couldn't leave them—the youngest was less than a year. When my eldest sister was ten she went out as a mother's help, getting a shilling a week and her meals. That's how the poor live, Mr. Hardwick. Think of it. Fifty years in the mines, and at the end of them I'm hardly earning enough to keep me and my Maggie in decency. As for when time's short or there's sickness, what chance does a working-man have to put by for a rainy day? No, he watches the rain come through the roof, that's all he can do."

Thorp told John that Matthews had been the victim of his own fierce tongue. He was well-known as an agitator, and whenever work went short he was the first to be stood down. He had been one of the pioneers of the Trade Union movement, holding that only by a ruthless unity could the men hope for fair play.

"It's one of the most bitter pills he has ever had to swallow that a man's foes are they of his own household," Thorp told John. "The rich mines won't combine for equal pay. The fellows who work there ask why their pay packets should be reduced for the benefit of the workers in the poorer and more expensive mines. No sense blaming them," he added, as if to forestall any possible criticism on his companion's part. "They're simply following the example of their so-called betters."

Matthews, however, remained grimly bitter.

"It's our one hope," he pointed out. "If only the shiftless and the unlucky are going to form unions we might as well save ourselves the trouble."

He went about addressing meetings all over the country when, for one reason and another, he was unemployed **and** could find or raise the expenses of the journey. He said **once** that he was as much a tramp as a miner.

"It's not just yourselves you have to think of," he pleaded, "Maybe you're doomed already. All we older men are doomed. You can't go on all your life in the mines, not under the hellish conditions we know. We're done for now or in a few years. In any case, when they want to stand men off or keep down production to raise the price of coal, it'll be the older ones who'll go. But there are your children and their children. Are ye satisfied for generation after generation to go on paying the same debt? Ye know what they say about a house divided against itself, and ye know our history. Time after time the owners starve us out. Aye, and it's easy starving three or four hundred men. But d'ye think they could starve out fifty thousand or a hundred thousand? Then they'd have to meet us, because there's not an industry in the country can live without coal. They can put in all the machinery they please, but it'll not take the place of the men who hew and cart the coal—and they know it, if you don't."

But for Matthews, said Sir George, the mines would have reopened already. He was prepared to treat with the men on the understanding they disowned their leader. But this fanatical little preacher had claimed his followers' loyalty, and they refused to come back unless Matthews also was promised reinstatement. And this condition Sir George refused to accept.

"Has the man no sense of self-preservation?" John enquired of Thorp. "Or does he really think his bank balance will save him?"

"He's found all his life that money will outbid anything else," was Thorp's dry retort, "and until he learns better, things are at a deadlock."

If Matthews was one fanatic, Thorp was another. An utterly obscure little man with none of the Canon's handsome bearing and few of his gifts of rhetoric, he was the only outsider admitted to the miners' hovels. He and John swiftly established a close relationship, though each viewed the social

problem from a different angle. Even in the heart of desolation, misery, dirt, hatred and injustice, Thorp could retain his Christian beliefs undented. The greater the squalor, the deeper the darkness, the more essential the Christian faith. Confronted by John's quick, scornful, "You can still call on a God of Love in the face of all this degradation—after sitting up all night with Mary Matthews, who can't last till the week-end in any case—watching children housed worse than animals—seeing privilege scoff at the rights of man?" Thorp could reply, "None of the evils you've spoken of could shake a man's faith in God, only renew his strength in the search for God. And if not a God of Love, what God could be of any avail? It's when life's at its worst that faith comes into its own. Anyone, practically speaking, could believe in the existence of God in a perfect universe."

"I suppose," said John, reflectively, "one might say that your existence is a proof of something beyond the limits of humanity. No, no, Thorp, I am not jesting. I can't subscribe to your beliefs, but there are times when you make me feel that I'm missing something on that account. The Canon now—well, he's the usual comfortable hypocrite, who has never experienced conversion. He doesn't believe in what he preaches; if he did he couldn't go on living in the midst of comfort without so much as visiting this part of his parish, and I suppose his best claim on his death-bed will be, I have done very little harm. And even that will not be true. He will not only have extinguished his own light, he will have quenched other men's lights also."

Meanwhile, the situation at the mines deteriorated daily until Sir George, enraged beyond measure at the men's out-lawry, as he called it, resolved on a measure so drastic and, to John's way of thinking, so inhuman, that the long-anticipated crisis was suddenly upon them. It was part of the miner's agreement with the owners that they should be entitled to a certain proportion of coal as part of their wages and have the right to buy coal at the pithead at a nominal price. Now Sir George and his fellow-directors issued an instruction that no coal was to be supplied to miners on any terms until work at the pits re-started. The savagery of this attempt to

bludgeon men back to the mines appalled not only John but all right-thinking men and women.

"Surely the community will never permit such brutality," he exclaimed to Thorp. But Thorp said, "It's the weapon of the blockade, my dear Hardwick. You would be asking of Sir George a Christian forbearance of which he is incapable if you expected him to leave a single weapon in his armoury."

"The people are always half-starved," John said, slowly. "Now even in sickness and in old age they are to be frozen."

He went back to the Rectory, where Charles Amberley was composing another sermon on the text of "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" The Rector listened very courteously to what his godson had to say, and then replied, "These are technical matters, my dear John, in which it ill becomes a layman to intervene. You say that Sir George is withholding coal. His reply will be that the men are withholding their labour. If he is holding them to ransom, as you picturesquely put it, then they are doing precisely the same thing."

"With rather different results," suggested John, tight-lipped. "It may be that the shareholders' dividends will be a mite reduced. Sir George may find his profits slightly smaller than last year. That will be the sum total of the effect of this stoppage on the owners and directors. And these are part of the fortunes of war."

The Canon was swift to pounce. "You admit, then, that it is war between the miners and the owners?"

"How can it be anything else when one side is resolved to obtain as much profit as possible and to pay as small a wage and provide as intolerable a condition of life as the men can be compelled to accept? Oh, it is war all right, and your friend is in the position of a modern commander descending on a band of unarmed warriors and decimating them with weapons to which they have no access, weapons he has been careful to deny them."

"My dear John," began the Canon in some distaste, but John's blood was up and he swept on impetuously, "It is murder, sir, no other word will suffice. Have you been out to-day? Then you will know that the wind cuts like a knife,

it will come through the walls of those miserable hovels the miners call their homes as if they were made of paper. As for the rags the children are wearing, they might almost as well go naked. Has Sir George no imagination? Can he not see in his mind's eye those pitiful skeleton children sitting round empty grates, huddled into ragged beds, clinging to one another in an effort to keep warm enough to stay alive. To stay alive, that is the actual truth."

"You are too prone to exaggeration, my dear fellow," said the Canon looking angry. "And you are allowing yourself to be influenced unduly by that renegade, Thorp."

"I am allowing myself to be influenced, as you call it, by my own need of food and warmth and clothing, and by what my eyes have seen and my ears have heard during these past weeks," was John's bitter retort. "Sir George will have the deaths of scores of men, women and children on his conscience, if he persists in this wicked refusal to give the men fuel. Surely you could speak to him, point out his Christian duty if necessary."

"Christianity has nothing to do with it," snapped the Canon, unwisely. "I have already told you, it is not for laymen to attempt to teach industrialists how to run their businesses."

"I have always doubted the efficacy of the Christian doctrine," said John in despair to Janet later in the day. "And now your father has admitted that this gospel of the value of the common man, which is surely the essence of Christ's teaching, has failed completely. Sir George may occupy the most highly-rented pew every Sunday, but since that makes no jot of difference to his behaviour on Monday morning he might save himself the expense. At all events, Sir George would be wise to send his wife and daughters away, even if he chooses to remain on the spot himself."

"Why, John," exclaimed Janet in alarm, "what do you think the miners could do? Throw a brick through a window, perhaps, if they could get near enough to the Manor to do any damage, but what more?"

"Sir George almost came to grief when he was out riding recently," John reminded her.

"An accident," said Janet at once.

"I fancy if he persists in this lunatic course there will be more such accidents, any one of which might prove fatal."

Janet sighed. "Oh John, can you never rest, even for a moment? You are completely exhausted, and you have done everything mortal man can do, and it is, after all, no direct responsibility of yours."

John struck his hands together in a passionate gesture. "That is what galls me more than all else. That I am so helpless. I am, after all, as much a steward of the law as your father is a steward of the Christian doctrine and Sir George of the lives of these poor fellows, and I am helpless. The law gives such men no protection whatsoever, yet if they transgress they are immediately called to account. Christianity tells them to look to a better world, which they have little prospect of attaining under the hellish conditions of their lives here. Capital assures them they have no rights in this one, and the law backs Capital to the hilt."

Exhausted by his anxiety and his sense of despair, he took the cup Janet handed to him and leaned back in his chair. The long pleasant room overlooked the garden, dark now under its wintry sky. The fire burned hospitably in the grate. The china bowls and cups that decorated cupboard and tallboy caught the light on their smooth, shining sides.

"How useless a member of society I must seem to you," murmured Janet, mortified. "There is nothing I can do."

"Do you call this nothing? Sometimes I wonder why women are not satisfied to be the background of a man's life* Oh, I know it may not compel so much attention, so much admiration even, as the central figure, but can you conceive of a picture without a background? Do you know, Janet, until I came here I had no notion what a home might be? My uncle has been kindness itself, taking me in as a child when my parents were killed in an accident, but though he has given me food and shelter, he has never given me a home. His own heart is set on another world more real to him than the one we know ..." He was smiling as he spoke, and a wave of joy flooded Janet's being. "That is the first time anyone has said anything so delightful to me. The pity is that Papa does not require me to make him a home."

"He would be very badly off without you," suggested John.

She shook her head. "One of these days he will marry again. He is, as it were, marking time now."

"Why, Janet, you have never suggested such a thing hitherto. I never thought..."

"If you did not, John, you may be sure that a great many other people have. An unmarried Rector, or rather, a Rector without a wife, is at a disadvantage. A Rectory needs a lady at its head, and it is a very masterful daughter who can take her mother's place. Oh, believe me, it is only a matter of time. But for circumstances, he would have brought a step-mother to the Rectory before this."

A day or so later the Canon told John that Sir George was reconsidering his decision. He proposed to discuss the situation with the mines manager. "He wishes to be fair," intoned the Canon.

John swept that aside impatiently. "When does he propose to make a further announcement?" he said.

"My dear John, it is not for us to dictate. He is prepared to meet the men half-way, a most generous gesture, in my opinion. But he has other concerns besides the mines. But at the earliest possible moment he will go into ways and means again . . ."

But John would take no comfort from this half-promise, but flung away saying, "It will be too late. He wouldn't be advised in time, and when he does reconsider what he has done, he will be too late."

8

Events proved John's gloomy prophecy to be true. On the very night of his conversation with the Rector, the tragedy he had feared took place. Maddened by privation and cold, unable any longer to endure the sight of their children's grey cheeks, the withered faces and forms of wives who, in happier circumstances, would still be blooming young women, despairing of any amelioration of their desperate lot, more than a hundred men set forth under a black sky, armed with picks and shovels to help themselves to the coal denied them by

authority. It was a bitter night, the cruel wind almost ripping the skin from their faces, piercing every ragged garment they wore. In the village many a wretched soul turning in his bed heard the tramp of feet going towards the pit. Many surmised what was afoot, but no-one lifted a finger to stop that grim procession. Men like Thorp knew that no effort would be successful to halt an army of hungry desperate men who would, he knew, stop at nothing. Later, when it was discovered that not only was coal plundered but one of the inadequate force of guards brutally murdered by the slice of a shovel that clove his skull from crown to chin, he admitted that he had heard a shot fired.

"And you didn't think to leave your bed?" asked authority sharply.

"What for?" demanded Thorp. "I'd no mind to have the second shot in my own skull. I knew the lads weren't armed, and if, as you say, a guard's been killed, then it 'ud be self-defence."

"Siding with the rebels, eh? So much the worse for him," cried Sir George, shaking with rage and alarm. "He'll think better of his conduct, maybe, when he and his wife find themselves in the same plight as these scoundrels who have murdered Burton."

"He must have guessed what was happening," John assured Janet, "but he had no mind to be called in by authority to give evidence against his friends."

The police had considerable difficulty in eliciting the facts. In hovel after hovel they were met with black looks and black* lies. Each wife swore that her husband had been in bed with her all through the night; as for the presence of coal in cellars empty twenty-four hours before, the miners defied the authorities to prove their contention. There's always coal in a miner's cellar, they said. The very children were interrogated, but these were either too languid to realise the trend of the questions or too much intimidated by their parents to give truthful replies. The fact remained, however, that during the night a large body of men—the number varied from forty to three times as many, according to the teller—had attacked the dumps of coal, despite the efforts of the guards,.

and had plundered it for several hours before their leader, Matthews, warned them that a moon was breaking through the clouds and it was time to desist. The police, indeed, might have had a hard time proving their case had theft been the only charge. But in the course of the night one of the guards, a man called Burton, who had fired a warning shot and wounded one of the miners, had been murderously attacked with a shovel and his head split open. His body, cold and lifeless, the wide open eyes staring at the hopeless sky, was left where it had fallen. The other guards had been overcome and roughly handled before being gagged, though none had suffered mortal or even serious injury.

"Who do they think is responsible?" whispered Janet after the Canon had taken himself off.

"Matthews will be their first suspect, and indeed he may well have struck the blow. He is the most dangerous of all creatures, a man with nothing to lose, since Mary Matthews died last week. But the real murderer is Sir George himself, though he will never be brought to justice for the crime."

"Great play is being made with the fact that even after they knew a man had been killed they continued to dig the coal," said Janet in low tones.

"A watcher from a more compassionate world might groan to realise that to such men fuel was of more importance than life itself. Oh, make no mistake about this, Janet, Sir George is out for blood. He—and your father—can talk of the blood of Abel crying to Heaven for vengeance, but it's Sir George who will be avenged."

"How will they learn the truth? From the men?"

"Do you suppose men who've stuck to a leader as these fellows have stood by Matthews for weeks will betray him now?" was John's spirited retort. But Thorp, when he heard, shook his head.

"A chain is only as strong as its weakest link," he said. "You can't have an enterprise engaging more than a hundred men and have them all tough. And the police are patient. They **will** keep at it till they find some poor fellow more vulnerable than the rest and they'll pummel him—oh, only verbally, of course—till he breaks down and gives way."

"I wonder if they know," reflected John.

"Them as knows nawt can tell nawt," quoted Thorp. "But—yes, they know. The police are looking for the blood-stained shovel."

"Will they be able to identify it when they get it?"

"Every man knows his own shovel. Of course, there will be plenty missing. It is a sign of absolute despair when you see a man's tools in the pawnshop, and there have been plenty of shovels on offer these last weeks. Yes, I suppose sooner or later they will run the fellow to earth, and, if, as I suspect, it is Matthews, he'll face the music for the sake of the rest. They are all liable to arrest under our law ..."

"Only if it can be established they were involved."

But Thorp only said in the same sad passionate voice, "There are some truths you cannot hide, and this will be one of them."

When the police came to the rectory to question John, the Canon's rage rose to towering heights.

"Do you appreciate what you have done to repay my hospitality?" he demanded.

"You don't suppose those fellows would confide in me, do you?" John's mood matched his godfather's. "They wouldn't trust me enough. They trust no-one outside themselves, except Thorp, and they would not have told him, because they would not hang such a burden round his neck."

Sir George's mathematical education might be at fault, as John had suggested, but he was a dangerous opponent when it came to cards, and when a week had passed without any arrest being made, he laid down a trump. If the guilty man was apprehended, he announced, he would yield to a good proportion of the men's demands and reopen the mines \$t once. It was significant that at this stage he made no exception in Matthews' case.

"He is convinced, as indeed we all are, that Matthews is the guilty man," was John's comment to Janet. "Now he will wait like the crafty trapper he is, until some poor devil, weaker than the rest, spring his traps."

Precisely who betrayed Matthews was never known, but it was generally understood that some woman was at the

bottom of his downfall. For the women, as John had prophesied, played the owners' game. After months of near starvation, of watching by children's deathbeds and following the pitiful little coffins to the cemetery, of seeing rosy cheeks turn grey and the light die out of childish eyes, the opportunity now offered them of a return to some sort of standard of living was too much for them. One of them laid information and three weeks after the outrage, as the Canon termed it, Matthews was arrested on a murder charge, and the following day Sir George was as good as his word. A few of the hardier spirits refused to benefit by this act of treachery, but they lived to regret their defiance. Sir George was without pity for any who opposed his will.

Forty-eight hours after the arrest the whole neighbourhood knew that John had been to the prison where Matthews was held, to offer his services for the defence.

"It is outrageous," stammered the Canon. "A man like that should be drummed out of his profession. He is elected to serve the law, not to flout it, and if he is going to cast in his lot with murderers ..." Ire deprived him of the necessary breath to complete his speech.

"I always believed he was a better Christian than he would allow," was Janet's outrageous reply. "Was not our Saviour charged with eating with publicans and sinners, and what is John doing but that very thing?"

"So he has even suborned you," panted the Canon. "I cannot, it appears, look for loyalty even in my own household. If this man, Matthews, does not hang, it will be a triumph for lawlessness that will shake the nation to its foundations."

Both John and Matthews, however, knew there was no possibility of an acquittal. Matthews admitted his guilt and no amount of argument on his adviser's part could persuade him to plead Not Guilty.

"Where's the sense, Mr. Hardwick?" he enquired drily. "If you could show I hadn't done for the chap there'd be no peace with the peelers going round looking for some other chap to hang. Besides, what's ahead for a man wi' my record? D'you think I'd ever get a job again? and I'd as lief hang as go on t'parish."

"You could claim self-defence," urged John. "Burton fired his first shot before you struck him."

"He was a brave chap defending maister's propetty," said Matthews. "Why, he's nigh a hero already in t'papers. And they're getting up a subscription for his widow. Not that I meant to do for him," he added thoughtfully. "He shud ha* bin on t'same side wi' us. Where's the sense of two chaps each wi' a living to get being in opposite camps?"

Despite Matthews' attitude, John continued his arguments, and in due course persuaded a well-known but slightly eccentric Q.C. called Theodore Glass to undertake the defence.

"I suppose you appreciate what you're doing," said Glass. "I must say, my dear fellow, it is very quixotic of you, seeing you will have the whole civilised community at your throat. Oh, it's not the same for me. I have a reputation for oddity and I shall only be considered to be living up to it. But you are a young man at the outset of your career, or at all events not far advanced in it. It is important, you know, to strike the right note from the start."

"I cannot have made myself clear," said John simply. "I was there when it happened. Oh, not at the pithead that night, but in the neighbourhood. I saw the slow murder that was going on day after day. Any other stand on my part now would be treachery to everything for which I believe the law stands."

Glass clapped John on the shoulder. "There is no sense my saying anything further," he said. "I can see you are of the stuff of which martyrs are made. By the way," he added, as the younger man rose to leave him, "you know that an application has been put forward for the case to be heard in London, owing to powerful local prejudice?"

"It is what I anticipated," agreed John. "I must see about securing some kind of lodging. In any circumstances, I could scarcely remain longer under the Canon's roof. You know the saying about entertaining angels unawares?"

"And he considers he has been entertaining Beelzebub?"

"I fear I have been a poor liaison officer between my uncle and my godfather," John confessed.

"I can tell you the name of a decent hotel where you'll not be overcharged and the food will be eatable," Glass offered. "When do you propose to make your move?"

"It will be too late to come up to-night, but I shall leave the Rectory immediately after breakfast to-morrow."

Glass accompanied him as far as the door. "See those new leaves pushing through," he invited his companion's attention—"How many of them will have to fall to sustain the rest? It's like that with our efforts. We are pouring water into a leaky jug, touching this case. At least our client understands that."

"We must hope," said the unconquerable John, "that we shall touch the public conscience."

Glass heaved a sigh. "You make me feel an old man. It is twenty years since I nourished such a hope as that."

While John was travelling south Janet was having what later generations would term a show-down with the Canon. Charles Amberley's indignation when he heard of his godson's resolve was intense. He repeated all his previous arguments, embellished with scathing comments that Janet no longer troubled to refute. "He cannot, of course, remain any longer under this roof," he added, holding her attention for the first time. "I understand, when he is in London to-day, he will make the necessary arrangements, and I trust that to-morrow we shall see the last of him."

He waited for her comment, but Janet was speechless. For the first time in her life she knew the meaning of the phrase "her heart stood still".

"To-morrow?" was all she could whisper.

"Certainly. And Janet, there is one further thing I wish to say to you. Once he has left us, there is to be no question of correspondence between you. The acquaintance has been harmful enough, Heaven knows, and I am thankful that the opportunity now occurs to put an end to it."

To so absurd a declaration Janet paid not the slightest heed. What, she abandon John, whom she now regarded as her sole link with actual living, because his views had offended her father and that part of the community which he represent

ted? Now she acknowledged freely what hitherto she had not permitted herself to say even in secret, that she had fallen in love with him on sight. No, she corrected herself, not fallen in love. Rather did she love him with the ferocious passion of a woman no longer young, who expects no love in return, but longs hungrily for the smallest crumb of recognition. Love, she had always understood, was for beautiful women like Marguerite and Cassie, for fashionable, audacious women like Florence Dubois; and always hitherto she had visualised it as a gift offered by man and accepted by woman. That woman should love unasked would have seemed shameful. But now she saw love for what it is, an offering made by the lover with no thought of bargaining, no room for calculation or self-interest.

The Canon was speaking again. "I trust, Janet, you understand my wishes."

She flung up her head.

"If you mean that, when John is departed, I am to return to the spiritless existence that was all I knew of life before his arrival, then I must tell you that nothing is further from my thoughts. You say that John has done nothing but harm since he came here; you are wrong. I do not argue with you about his political opinions, but he has done something for me no-one has ever thought of doing before. He has made me aware of myself as a person. And just to be your temporary house-keeper,—for I am not the fool you suppose; I realise well enough that as soon as it suits your convenience you will replace me and then I can fend for myself, either here or beyond your gate—that, Papa, is no longer enough. I find that I have the same feelings and wishes as other women and in the future..."

Here sheer physical pain stopped her speech. The Canon had grasped her by the arm and was now holding her in so firm a grip that by morning her arm would be black with bruises. ,

"Janet, consider what you are saying. I think you have taken leave of your senses. To anyone but myself it would appear that you have conceived a shameless infatuation for this young man. Really, at your age it is disgraceful."

Janet, however, instead of being quelled by this accusation, continued to face him, head up, eyes brilliant with rage. Seen thus, she reminded him of the child, Janet, in one of her tantrums, stamping her foot, screaming with passion, defying him with every breath she drew. In those days it had been simple enough to deal with such insolence. A peremptory summons to dressing room or study and subsequent dismissal, bruised and humiliated, had put an end to the matter; but a grown woman, even though she is plain and no man has ever asked for parental consent to woo her, is a more difficult proposition.

"If John chooses to continue our friendship, then I shall be very proud. I don't think, Papa, you realise that this is the first time in my life I have ever made a friend."

"The friendless are usually to blame for their condition," the Canon remarked. Thereafter, having observed that words failed him, he proceeded to spray her with them until she felt battered and beaten down by the storm. Finally, leaving her breathless and temporarily silenced, he marched out, wearing the whole armour of righteousness, and went to call on his friend at the Manor. As the workingman flies to the public-house to seek solace in beer, as the morphia addict seeks the comfort of his drug, so the Canon and his warden, like a seasoned married couple, perpetually sought comfort and help the one of the other.

Meanwhile, Janet went slowly up to her room, trying to appreciate what her father had just told her. John was going away. He had entered her life for a few weeks, a stranger who, she had supposed, would make little difference to the monotonous tenor of her days; and in those short weeks he had become the entire meaning of her life. From the first Sunday the die had been cast. It did not occur to her that he might reciprocate her love. No-one but Madame Dubois had ever suggested she might ultimately marry, and to Aunt Florence marriage was simply a duty, out of which a sensible woman reaped as much pleasure as possible. That she should love and be loved in return—the Canon would greet such a suggestion with less derision than disgust. Such a notion would shock him even more than Cassie's deplorable licence.

"All the same, since I may not have love, at least I will have freedom," she told herself fiercely. "As I told Papa, John has made me realise I exist as an individual with a personal life that I was allowing to leak away in this dreary house. I need have no thought for Papa. I should need to be a great deal more dull than I am by nature not to know that he intends to propose to Mrs. Jardine as soon as this trouble has blown over. And certainly he will find it more amusing to see her face at the other end of the table than mine. He has made that abundantly clear."

9

It was late when John returned, and he was relieved to find the library in darkness. He had had his interview with the Canon before his departure that morning, and each perfectly understood the other's mind, or rather, the Canon understood the path John intended to follow. As to understanding his mind that was beyond him. It was hardly to be expected that a clergyman of the Church of England with good blood in his veins should understand the mind of a crazy radical. Going quietly up to his room John began to pack. He could not pretend to any grief at saying good-bye to the Canon. Thorp he would miss, but there was little likelihood that Thorp would miss him. For him mankind existed less in the individual than in the crowd. This man or that might die, but Man was eternal. Of Janet he thought little. She had been a good friend to him as far as circumstances permitted, and had infused an unexpected pleasure into his stay, but she had, he believed, no part in his future. So he spared her no more than a passing pang of pity, immured in this inhospitable house where she knew neither affection nor respect. But it passed as quickly as it came. She had shelter and food and security in a world where tens of thousands as worthy as she had none. He finished his packing, looked round to make certain he had left nothing behind. Then he recalled a book he had lent the Canon in the early days of their acquaintance and that he wished to take to London with him. Doubtless it would be in the library and, encouraged by the memory of that dark threshold, he made his soft-footed way through the house.

When he opened the door, however, he was startled to find a lamp burning and the embers of the fire drawn together.

"I beg your pardon," he began, anticipating that the Canon had returned, but it was Janet's face, Janet's voice tremulous with emotion, that greeted him.

"Oh John, this is like an answer to prayer. I was hoping against hope that you would come down. If not, I intended to rise very early, for you could not go without a word of good wishes from me."

She thought her secret must be written so clearly in her eyes and the mouth she strove valiantly to control that he could not but read it. John, however, answered with his usual friendly warmth.

"I had no intention of leaving the house without bidding you farewell and thanking you for all you have done to make my stay pleasant," he assured her, "I shall always have grateful memories of you." (At these words hope died utterly in her heart; it was like a faint candle blown out by a quick, sharp wind.) "I am only sorry," John continued, "that I have made your position more difficult, as I fear I must have done, since you have championed me so nobly in my unpopularity, but when I am gone the Canon may unbend."

"I am not concerned with Papa," returned Janet in so careless a voice that he was startled. "Nothing I do will alter his opinion of me, and in any case I no longer care what he thinks. I wanted to tell you, John, that I shall never be able to thank you for setting me free from his domination, for that is what you have done. I did not think anyone living could do so much. And I am convinced that, though I am no longer a young woman, it is not too late if you will help me once more now."

John, thoroughly intrigued and forgetting the book, sat down in the chair on the other side of the hearth.

"If there is anything I can do to help you, you know you can count upon me."

"Be careful," Janet warned him. "You don't know yet what I am going to ask. You may think I am presuming. And yet it is very simple. John, I have resolved to come to London also."

If he had been startled before, he was now flabbergasted, as he sought wildly to accept the implications of her resolve. He liked her, she was loyal, she was courageous, but that he should be saddled with her company—oh no, that could scarcely be thought of. Theodore Glass had warned him that he was jeopardising his reputation by championing Matthews, but this extraordinary woman was proposing, as he saw it, to jeopardise it to a far greater degree.

Janet was watching his face intently, and read his thought. "Oh no," she told him, and he could not guess how much courage was required for the laugh accompanying her words, "I am not proposing to compromise you publicly, and since Papa has no opinion of you in any case—you will not mind my saying that," she added quickly, "but he prides himself on his outspokenness, and I am sure he cannot have left you in any doubt of his views."

"In the circumstances it is hard to blame him," said John mildly. "But, Janet, are you not going to explain your meaning to me?"

"It is perfectly simply. Until now my opportunities of escape have been nil. Life seldom offers many opportunities to women in my position. That is why I dare not allow this one to pass. I may never have another, and all I ask of you is a little co-operation."

"Let us begin at the beginning," suggested the more practical John. "For a start—have you anywhere to go?"

"I have a plan. I read a paragraph in Papa's *Times* about a body of enterprising women who are associating to improve the housing conditions of the poor in London. They have secured premises as a headquarters and they are ready to accept volunteers. It is true that I am inexperienced, but I am very willing to learn, and in the meantime I am an excellent housekeeper, so I should not be a burden on them. I have a small income from my mother that would suffice for my keep. No, do not try to discourage me. It may be that I have no qualifications for the work, but if that is so, then there must be some other activity open to me. But I must come to London."

"Are you proposing to tell your father of your plans?"

"That would be fatal. He would oppose them immediately. Indeed he would be capable of writing to these women, assuring them of pay incapacity for this or any kind of work. That would mean one door slammed in my face."

John rose and propped his broad shoulders against the chimney-breast.

"Are you sure you are wise? As you remind me, you are of age > y ° u a r e financially independent—naturally he would miss you ..."

"On the contrary, nothing would please him better than to be rid of me. You cannot be very perspicacious if you have not realised that. But it must be on his terms. If you cannot help me, why, then I must contrive for myself. But I will not let this chance pass, because I dare not. I warn you, John, I am desperate, and you have always said it is desperation that makes the pioneer."

"Bravo, Janet. And now you must tell me my part, and be sure I shall fill it if I can." It was extraordinary, he thought, what a change had come over her. She would never be beautiful like Laura or Cassie of whom he had heard so much, and whose likeness had been exhibited to him by her proud father, but to-night, her face blazing with determination and hope, she was almost distinguished.

She leaned forward eagerly. "It is quite simple. You are going in the morning, Papa tells me."

"At crack of dawn."

"Then you may be sure Papa will take pains to be out of the way. It is his habit to avoid unpleasantness whenever possible. Therefore, only the servants will be about, and they will not notice if you take with you one more piece of luggage than you brought. Even if they do, they will only suppose Papa has lent it to you."

He drew a deep breath, part admiration, part, admittedly, relief. "So that is how I am to help you."

"Yes. I will pack a trunk to-night. Indeed, it is almost packed already. It belonged to Mamma—she was a Miss Howard so even the initials will fit—and I will leave it outside my door. It is quite a small trunk, which you can collect in the morning. Take it to London and put it in the luggage

office for me, and post me the ticket. It won't seem strange your writing to me directly you have gone. Even Papa cannot object to your sending me a Collins. Then, in a few days, when I hear there is a place for me, I can come up to London without anyone suspecting. If these pioneers will have none of me, then I will find alternative accommodation. I cannot be the only woman of my age and station who is resolved not to moulder into the grave. From London I will send Papa a telegram . . ." The colour ran into her pale cheeks; her eyes were bright. When we are both in London, she was thinking . . . and—Since he cares so much for the conditions of the poor he may even visit our hostel. "Oh," cried she, carried away by her own enthusiasm and recklessly rekindling that little candle he had so thoughtlessly doused, "I have it all planned to the last detail."

"So I perceive."

In their mutual absorption neither had heard the door open and now the Canon's voice, encrusted in icy fury, caused both to start guiltily.

"Papa!"

"I woke and heard sounds downstairs and came to learn what was on foot," said the Canon in his best pulpit manner. "I must confess I had no inkling of what I should find. But perhaps it was providential."

Janet put her hands suddenly over her mouth. She had a vision of an amorphous providence insistently shaking the Canon by the shoulder. "I am not aware that I have said anything amusing, Janet."

"No, Papa." She was instantly sober, apprehensive. Even after so long she could never rid herself of the feeling that she was still a little girl, subject to his anger and its consequences. She felt her body tremble and controlled it with angry pride.

"You were both of you so deep in your—intrigue—that you failed to hear me, which is perhaps as well, as I gather you had no intention of taking me into your confidence. Well, Janet?"

John started to speak but the Canon silenced him at once. The young man was conscious of the poor figure he must cut

even more conscious of Janet's plight. At all events he could stand by her, refuse to allow her to be defeated by the Canon's bombast.

"We knew it would be no use, Papa—you would never agree. You drove us to this deception. Naturally I would rather have come to you openly, told you I was going away, won your consent—but I didn't dare. You would have stopped me somehow, made me feel my own futility, and I could not take the risk. This was the only hope I had."

"If your reason for leaving my roof was an honourable one you had no cause to fear my opposition."

The world might be one man's oyster, thought the exasperated John, but it was this man's perennial pulpit.

"As for you, sir, I understand you were a partner to my daughter's deceit."

"Would you have agreed if your permission had been asked?" John demanded. Now anger held him, too, anger against all the tyrants who wreck human lives. The Canon was only a dot on that tremendous canvas but he was symptomatic, and John had no mind to be careful of his speech.

"Janet is of age. If she chose to make such an imprudent marriage I could not have stopped her."

Janet uttered a little cry. "Papa, no, you . . ."

But John intervened, "In the circumstances, then, surely Janet is right. What choice had we?"

The temptation was too great to be resisted. "I would sooner see my daughter dead at my feet than know her linked with such a man as you have proved yourself to be. As for you, Janet, I warn you of your folly in allowing yourself to be—bamboozled—by this fellow. The example he has already given us of his integrity should be a warning to you what to expect. You realise, of course, that if you put this insane plan into force you leave my roof for ever?"

"I didn't suppose you would ever have me back. All the same, you are wrong . . ."

"That will do," said the Canon. He turned to John. "I hope you are satisfied now. Not content with making my house a byword, being, at all events indirectly, concerned in

the death of one man and the almost certain death of another, you are resolved to break up my home life."

"Papa," said Janet, white with strain and anger, "you shall listen. I am going to London to work in a settlement."

Her father looked contemptuous. "Do you really suppose I credit that? You could have no conceivable reason for concealing *that* from me. However, you have made your bed. Now you must lie on it. I would only beg of you to put an end to your conversation now. It is after eleven o'clock, and this house has been the subject of too much gossip as it is."

Even in his dressing-gown, a fawn garment austere decorated with black foliage harbouring unidentifiable birds, he could be impressive. Now he turned towards the door.

"I shall not close my door until I hear you come up, Janet," he said. "This is one of the saddest moments of my life. Faith misplaced, affection flouted, the work of years undone."

He went out.

When the door had closed behind him Janet began to laugh. She laughed and laughed until John took her by the shoulders and shook her into sobriety.

"Stop this, Janet," he bade her. "It is most unseemly. If you can't remain serious when you are receiving a proposal of marriage, how am I to believe you have any reverence at all?"

10

In the years that followed John never allowed himself to think that he had been trapped by circumstances into marriage with a woman he never pretended to love. If sometimes he found himself amazed at his situation he would recall Janet's desperate honesty, her insistence that he was in no way bound by the Canon's abominable suspicions.

"It is true," she confessed, "that I love you. I understand now why Cassie could behave in so reckless a fashion, why Major Griffith took his own life when his wife died last year, though at the time it seemed to me extravagant, incomprehensible. But I love you so much that I want your happiness

as well as my own, and I know that when you came into this room to-night you had no thought of making me an offer. Until Papa put the notion into your head ..."

But this was intolerable. It was true that John had not dreamed of marrying so soon after his great loss; indeed, he had wondered if he would ever replace Laura by any other woman, and that that woman should be Janet Amberley, for whom he cherished no warmer feelings than that of friend and well-wisher seemed fantastic. Yet, in the situation in which he now found himself, it seemed to him that he might do considerably worse. She was no green girl but a woman older than himself. She understood and sympathised with his aspirations, she appreciated that for him henceforward the cause was more important than any individual, she would not, he believed, make greater demands upon him than his natural kindness and courtesy could satisfy. She had courage and independence, two virtues he admired in women, and unless he did marry her he could see no future for her at all. Her very eagerness to absolve him from responsibility quickened his feelings, and when they parted at length it was agreed that she should accompany him to London in the morning, and there be married to him with the utmost expedition of the law.

As for what Abbot St. Mary would think, neither cared a jot. The Canon, when he had overcome his chagrin, would be thankful to be rid of an encumbrance, most of Janet's acquaintances would consider her enterprising in the extreme to have achieved, at her age and with her small dowry of looks and possessions, so personable a husband. Aunt Florence would congratulate her warmly on at last taking her strictures to heart. And in any case, Janet told her singing heart, what do any of them matter to us?

From the outset she accepted the fact that his feeling did not and probably never would equal hers. Had he not already loved and lost the beautiful Laura she might have entered on her new life with greater perturbation. Certainly she would have looked askance at every woman he met. But since the force of his affections had already been expended on the dead girl, she felt she need not fear the assaults of jealousy. Later

she was to modify her views, to realise that causes are more dangerous than people. But at first she threw herself wholeheartedly into his work, resolved to further it by every means in her power.

She accepted instantly his plea that this was no moment, with the Matthews trial so close at hand, for a honeymoon. Later, he said, when that had been settled, they might go away for a while. At once she acquiesced. But ten years afterwards she was to recall that first one matter and then another had come between them and their plans. The first was, of course, the Matthews trial, whose issue was a foregone conclusion. Not all Glass's eloquence and John's fervour could bring about any verdict but one of wilful murder. Nor indeed had Matthews anticipated any other result. John went down to the prison to see him on the night before the execution and found him perfectly resigned to his fate.

"I keep thinking of Burton," he said, "and the way things work out. I never had aught against the man. We was both of us sufferers in a manner of speaking. He didn't want to fire, but he had his orders. We never wanted to thief coal, come to that, but we had our families. It's a rotten society set us different sides."

The *Daily Post*, reporting the case, declared: It is symptomatic of the muddled thinking of the radicals that two opinions should be possible in this case. The undisputed facts are that a body of men engaged on a felonious enterprise shot and murdered a guard. Mainly through the wrong-headed enthusiasm of defendant's legal advisers, it has been suggested that the condemned man is deserving of sympathy and even of acquittal on the capital charge. If every ruffian who fancies his neighbour's goods is to be allowed to consider he has a right to them because of his own need, even to the extent of committing murder in order to gain such possession, society will be flung into a state of chaos where security will be as extinct as the dodo.

John's characteristic comment was, "To men like Matthews, security has always been as fabulous as the unicorn."

On the day of the execution Janet saw him for the first

time despondent and even doubtful of the ultimate victory of moral justice over the letter of the law.

"All that effort and fortitude thrown away," he told Janet. "It's a complete triumph for Owen and his crowd. I hear he's yielded a few of the more trivial points, in the same way as you bait a trap with cheese to lure the mouse in. But once the men are back, he'll withdraw what he's acceded, and the memory of the lock-out will be too recent for them to revolt a second time. Nothing has been achieved, nothing established except the fact that money and power are still the prime factors in deciding an industrial dispute. Righteousness and justice are as weak as children in the grip of a Goliath."

But by next morning he had recovered some, at least, of his faith. "There shall never be one lost good," he reminded Janet. "I can't believe in your personal God, the Ruler of the Universe, but men like Matthews make it possible, in spite of all the Owens of this world, to believe in man as one day unconquerable."

Cassie's reaction to the marriage was one of frank incredulity.

"I never thought Janet had it in her," she confessed to Aunt Florence. "I suppose it is propinquity—I daresay he is quite a middle-aged man, and possibly a widower to boot."

"On the contrary," said Madame Dubois, "he is your father's godson. Surely you had appreciated that. And from what I recall, he has good expectations from his uncle. The Archdeacon is a bachelor and likely to remain one. No, I think at last we may congratulate Janet whole-heartedly."

"What must Papa be thinking?" murmured Cassie.

"I should imagine he is as startled as yourself. However, he should be grateful to this young man, whatever his deficiencies. He has removed a serious burden from your father's shoulders."

Cassie sat down to write to her sister such a letter as roused Janet to a transport of fury, less because the younger sister assumed as a matter of course that her new brother-in-law was in some way "under proof" than because she was openly

congratulatory on her acquisition of any kind of husband. When John saw her face and the trembling of her hands he began to laugh.

"What can your sister conceivably have said to move you to such indignation?" he enquired.

"The family will be very fortunate if Cassie's husband, when she has one, is one-quarter so distinguished as you, my dear. As for this letter," with shaking hands she tore it in shreds, "oh, it is intolerable!" John laughed again, but privately he thought such a display of feeling an absurdity. And when Janet tried to insist on his visiting a photographer at once in order to convince her sister of her husband's extreme eligibility he shouldered the notion aside. He was too busy at present, he said, for such frivolity.

Early the following year the Canon led the second Mrs. Amberley to the altar, and settled down very comfortably with his handsome, mondaine bride. The erstwhile Mrs. Cora Jardine was a charming and accomplished woman of the world, as much at home in her elder stepdaughter's rather austere surroundings as she would later be in the more brilliant if slightly less reputable establishments Cassie would set up in the years ahead. Moreover, she had no mind to be overshadowed by her husband, and stood up to him with a will when he spoke sneeringly of his son-in-law, as was frequently the case. For during the following decade John's name frequently appeared in the news, always, said the outraged Canon, in support of the wrong side in any argument.

"There is a considerable difference between fame and notoriety," he enunciated, "and I am afraid that John courts notoriety rather than good repute."

"You must not be provincial in your outlook, my dear Charles," retorted Cora equably. "John Hardwick is a very distinguished person in his own way, even if it is not yours."

"Certainly," stammered the Canon, puffing like a pouter pigeon, "it is not mine."

He had been assured that Hardwick had excellent qualifications to fit him for a position that might be a source of pride to his relatives by marriage, instead of which he used

his gifts to champion various dubious reforms that had for their objective the wreckage of society. Easier divorce for women (an insufferable thought to any Christian) was aimed, obviously, against domestic morality. The abolition of the death penalty was an encouragement to the commission of violent crime, while the overhaul of the entire penal and lunatic systems, for which John perpetually pressed, was a dangerous step along a sentimental road. But the Canon's astonishment and rage reached their height when he learned that his son-in-law was one of a small band of pioneers whose aim was to make married women financially independent of their husbands by allowing them to retain control of their own incomes after marriage.

"He is set for the destruction of married life," announced the Canon both in the pulpit and out of it. "It is natural for a man to be the head of his household. We have biblical testimony to that effect. Women have not the education to understand finance ..."

"Then give it them," exploded John when these views were presented to him. "Your father's notion of marriage, Janet, which appears to be that of the majority of Christians, seems to me merely a form of legalised slavery, except that in marriage the woman allows herself to be bought with her own money."

Charles Amberley refused his son-in-law's invitations to stay at Northweston, the pleasant suburb on the edge of the industrial town of Merton, but Cora arrived with a lively curiosity to discover the nature of her stepdaughter's manage. Thence she travelled to Paris where Cassie was now staying with a Madame Halle, and spent a few very pleasant days there.

"I have thoroughly enjoyed myself," she told Cassie. "It is true that I scarcely knew your sister before my marriage, but I am sure she would surprise her father very much if he could see her now. She has a great dignity, not because she is a married woman but because she is John Hardwick's wife."

"And he? Is he the paragon she pictures him?"

"He is a man it is not easy to forget. Between ourselves,

my dear, I wonder how she contrived to marry such a man, for he is unquestionably a force to be reckoned with. Your father says that he was supposed to be engaged to some young woman who was killed in an accident, and presumably Janet's obvious admiration and sympathy won his heart."

"In short, she secured him on the rebound." Cassie nodded in a satisfied manner as though at last a problem that had for some time perplexed her was solved.

"You would be very unwise to write her off on that account, even if that is the true explanation," Cora warned her. "Janet may have been a nonentity before her marriage but she has taken colour from her husband, and her cool 'John does not think so,' and 'In John's opinion such-and-such a course would be desirable', made me thankful that your father elected to remain at home."

Janet's hopes of motherhood seemed likely to be fulfilled a few months after her marriage, but in the seventh month she had a miscarriage and was extremely ill. After this she was warned that she should abandon her hopes. Cassie was, in fact, in England at this time and had intended to pay a visit to Northweton, but when the bulletins about Janet became increasingly serious she decided to postpone her journey, and by the time Janet was fit to come downstairs Cassie was back in Paris.

"I am quite useless in illness," said she unblushingly to her stepmother. "When Janet is able to travel she and my brother-in-law must come to see us in Paris. A change will do her good, and it will be more entertaining for all of us. I shall be interested to see how Janet reacts to the Parisian atmosphere."

Cassie's removal to Paris was consequent on Madame Dubois' apparently sudden decision to marry again, this time a young man at least ten years her junior. Charles had been shocked to the core when he heard the news, but the more polished Cora said soothingly, "Now, Charles, you are being absurd. Everyone Florence knows is delighted, and is convinced that she and Armand will make a splendid pair. There isn't this prejudice against the husband being younger than the wife in France, and ever since she became a widow

your sister could take her pick of new husbands. I hope that later on you will feel inclined to accompany me to the South of France and see the pair for yourself."

It was when Madame Dubois made her announcement that Cassie recognised the necessity for making fresh arrangements for herself. Greatly to her father's disappointment she had not married during these years, despite her beauty and undoubted popularity.

"The truth is," Aunt Florence confided to Cora (the two women became excellent friends on sight), "although one cannot tell Charles so, Cassie has all the qualities that make the successful courtesan and practically none that promise for success in marriage."

"At all events, she is fortunate that she didn't marry that wretched Castlebarry," said Cora, who could be as outspoken as her companion. "I hear he is completely under his wife's thumb and thought very little of in the neighbourhood."

"You will never make Charles understand that there can be any satisfaction for women outside marriage," agreed Florence. "As a matter of fact, if marriage were her goal, Cassie might have worn a wedding-ring some years ago. But she is more attracted by men of the world who prefer a less binding relationship."

"I hope at all events you won't repeat that to Charles," exclaimed Cora energetically. "He would regard her as a lost soul."

"Dear me!" said Florence. "He and Janet appear to have more in common than I had supposed. Is it true that my god-daughter and her husband are planning to visit the household in Paris?"

"Janet is dying to show off her husband. She is too happy to be malicious, in spite of her recent disappointment, but she would be more than human if she were not inwardly triumphant at having achieved brevet rank before her beautiful sister."

"How does Janet occupy her days?" asked Florence, curiously. "She appears to have married a reforming machine. Does she have any pleasure apart from him?"

"She would regard such a suggestion as a contradiction in terms. Janet's whole life is John, and indeed, Florence,* she might be a deal worse off. Oh, I don't say he is in love with her. But he loves her. As a friend, a companion, a very dear companion—Janet has done a great deal better for herself than anyone anticipated. As for recreation ..." she shrugged. "They go out very little, it is true, but Janet asks nothing better than to be allowed to help her husband with his work."

Florence made an expressive face. "Are you trying to tell me that Janet has become a blue-stocking?"

"Oh dear, no. Nothing so alarming. But she can: conceive of no greater joy than to be allowed to copy out quotations for him, collate his notes, pen in that beautiful precise hand of hers sheets of statistics. And for a particular treat, John reads aloud. He has a remarkably fine voice. Had his circumstances been different, he might have done well in the pulpit or on the stage."

"The two professions are remarkably similar," agreed Florence. "Well, if Janet does go to Paris, I hope Cassie will remember to be discreet."

11

Janet's first and only visit to her sister in Paris took place during the following year. Owing to the postponement of a case in which John was involved, she travelled without him, in the company of a couple called Rudyard, who were travelling through to Switzerland. Janet would have been satisfied to remain at Northwinton until such time as John could take her himself, but since the visit had already been twice postponed John would heap of no further delay.

"It is a thousand pities that we cannot cross together, he acknowledged, "but Penton has decided to ask for a remand, and it is essential that I should, be, on hand until next week. However, I promise to follow you at the earliest possible moment, and it will give you an opportunity to become better acquainted with your sister. It is, after all, three years since

you met, and a good deal has happened during that time."

"So far as I am concerned, I might have been re-born," said Janet, simply. "John, I propose to ask Cassie to come back with us. It is high time she was married. She is simply frittering away her beauty. Oh, I am aware that Aunt Florence maintains a most cynical attitude towards matrimony. It is a thousand pities that Cassie was left with her* so long, but the companionship of the most affectionate woman—and this Madame Halle* must be devoted to Cassie to have her on an indefinite visit—is no substitute for marriage."

"You must remember you're prejudiced," John reminded her gravely, but Janet said, more gravely still, "I can't forget her face when she fancied herself in love with Ned Castlebarry. She was always beautiful but then—oh, it was like watching a daybreak."

For the first time John wondered if it might have been wiser to accede to her plea and wait until he could accompany her. t"or all her assumption of experience, Janet still knew comparatively little about life. Although she had been slighted in her youth and unhappy in her early girlhood, she had been effectually shielded from much of the ugliness of life. John reminded himself that he knew little of Cassie's menage, but although he could admire Florence's smartness and aplomb he could not like her, and he feared that Cassie might have proved an apt pupil. From hints that Cora had dropped—hiilts that had fallen on completely barren soil so far as Janet was concerned—he had deduced that Cassie's standards were those of her environment which was leagues removed from the stiff propriety of Northweston.

"You will have so much to talk about," he said, vaguely. "Naturally you have seen life from different angles—don't let Paris make you dissatisfied with our quieter routine."

After she had gone he felt ill-at-ease. Janet was still too vulnerable, and he feared lest, in that rich casual atmosphere, she should be homesick for the simplicity of their home life and the sense of security in which she basked at Northweston. Within an hour, however, he was once again immersed in his Work, all his forebodings forgotten.

As for Janet, the holiday started excellently. It was a smooth crossing and she landed in France in fine spirits. There was time before they must catch their connection for the Ruyards to see her across Paris—Paris opening like a silver flower to the light.

"We had coffee and croissants at a little table on the pavement," she wrote eagerly to John, "and then they took me in a *fiacre* to see the Paris markets. I never beheld such colour. They insisted on filling my arms with flowers for Cassie, indeed I could not prevent them. Then they actually delivered me to her door, knowing that my French is so intolerable that, when we were children, Mademoiselle always pretended I did not exist, was simply part of the furniture that could not be expected to understand. I must confess I was a little shaken by the size and magnificence of this house. Madame Hall6 must be very fond of Cassie, or else Aunt Florence did not represent the situation to us quite accurately and Cassie is really a kind of privileged companion. Naturally, I appreciate that Papa would not like to know that but Cassie's means cannot possibly meet one quarter of the expenses of such an establishment. The rooms are very large and handsome and most ornately furnished. Everything is most comfortable and yet so strange that comfort is an odd word to use. It was like you, my dearest, to think of sending a letter here to await me. It was the next best thing to finding you yourself in my room.... The view from my window is delightful. I am at the back of the house. Cassie, to my surprise, prefers the front, saying that no noise can keep her awake and that she will lie quiet long enough in the grave. I had thought that, since this is my first visit, she would not have invited a great many friends at all events for a day or two, but the house is almost like an hotel. Each time you enter a room there are more strange faces. I could not place them with the correct names if I were here for a month. The conversation at dinner last night was fantastic. I kept thinking of peacocks, so much colour, such shrillness, although Madame Hall6's voice is certainly not shrill. But there was never a moment of quiet. I did not speak very much myself, having little to say that I thought they would appreciate. The talk was mainly of

pictures, music, the theatre, and you will easily understand that I felt a little at a loss. However, when they spoke of Racine I was able to tell them how you had read me his works i'n an excellent translation that caught, I am sure, the very spirit of the piece. . . . There is a certain Comte Philippe here who is most attentive to Cassie, and I begin to wonder if we may not soon hear of her betrothal. I suppose it is natural that after so many years abroad she should marry a foreigner. Certainly she would be a fish out of water—a brilliant leaping fish, I admit—in our quieter circles. M. le Comte is handsome and accomplished, though not quite so young as I should have liked. Cassie is only three-and-twenty and at the very height of her beauty. She appears immensely popular. Sometimes you would think this was her house rather than Madame Hallo's. Her clothes—indeed the clothes of all the women here—would take your breath away. They seem to me a little daring, but all the same I am resolved to bring one Paris gown back with me, not, you may be sure, to shock North-weston, but to prove to you that you have not married a dowd. I asked Cassie which was a good shop that she could recommend, and she has promised to take me to her own dressmaker. She is very anxious that I should wear black. I wore my new brown last night, and I saw her casting several glances at it. I am afraid she thinks it provincial, which makes me smile, when I recall that it is the *dernier cri* in North-weston. I told her you did not like women to wear black, and she said something quite extraordinary. I doubt if he has ever seen a black dress. That is characteristic of the exaggerated manner of the talk here. However, I was quite resolved they should not set me down as a nobody from the northern suburbs, and when they were speaking of the opera, of which unfortunately I know nothing, I told them how you had taken me to hear Mr. Dickens' last reading and what an impression he had made, that poor sick man putting such a brave face on his infirmities, wearing that scarlet geranium in his button-hole and standing on the platform, an indomitable figure, transformed as he read the Bardell trial, as though he had forgotten his ailments. And when I described how he had spoken his thanks to the audience and closed the book and

suddenly seemed to shrivel up, as though his life were flowing away under our eyes, oh I could scarcely retain my composure. I think even that gay crowd was moved. No-one spoke for a moment when I had finished . . ."

When she had written these last words Janet laid aside her pen and allowed herself to relive that poignant hour. Pouring out her heart to the husband she loved with every fibre of her being, she found herself wondering how she had let him persuade her to separate them, if only for four days and nights. "These are four days and nights that will never come again," she said aloud. "They would be worth anything that can happen to me in Paris, for it is like being decapitated to be away from John."

The next morning she reluctantly agreed to remain in bed until after *petit déjeuner*, but as soon as her tray was set aside she rose and dressed and went out. John had given her a list of the sights she must not miss and when she had paid her tourist's visit to Notre Dame she turned inevitably towards the Louvre. "You must see the Venus de Milo," her husband had told her. "I could envy you there, to be seeing her for the first time, I mean. I remember my first sight of her. I was very new to Paris and I came upon her unawares. There was a young Frenchman standing near me, and when he saw the expression on my face he instinctively put out a hand and laid it on my arm, and for a moment we stood linked by a common impulse of worship. And, of course, you must not miss Mona Lisa . . ."

Armed, therefore, with John's instructions, Janet set out. Her sister waited with cynical amusement for her return. "She will be stammering with excitement because she has seen, not the Venus de Milo, who, I daresay, may rouse no particular enthusiasm in her mind, but something that once moved John Hard wick to emotion." But when Janet returned she puzzled them all by her composed air. In response to Cassie's questions she said that for those who preferred the female form undraped the Venus was doubtless very well, but she personally would have thought better of her if she had worn more clothes. As for the Mona Lisa, she said casually, "There's a woman I would never trust, and if I were

a man I should certainly have my breakfast on a tray sooner than meet that expression over the table each morning." Her chief enthusiasm she reserved for Titian's "Man With a Glove."

"I suppose she traces some likeness to the intolerable John," said Cassie who was frankly exhausted by her sister's earnestness. "He is clearly her touchstone at every turn."

"I am sure you must be all agog to meet him," countered Renée Halle. "All the same she is by no means negligible. She has very fine eyes."

"Which no-one has ever taught her how to use. Renée, do you know she has a plan to take me back with her and introduce me to some suitable neighbours? I begin to think that John Hardwick is as tiresome as I originally supposed."

The visit, which had not begun very auspiciously, ended in sheer calamity. It had not escaped Janet's attention that Comte Philippe was exceedingly attentive, and she began to suspect that his intentions might be serious. When, however, she asked Cassie when she might hope to congratulate her, her sister observed coolly, "You should keep that for Mme. la Comtesse."

Janet was shocked and too ingenuous to conceal the fact. "You mean, he is married?"

"Is it not your experience that all the most charming men are married?"

"And his wife? Does she live in Paris?"

"Alas, she enjoys bad health and cannot be tempted out of the country."

"But, Cassie, has she no objections to her husband squiring you in this fashion? For, even by Paris standards, you are surely very conspicuous."

"Oh, my dear Janet." Cassie was still smiling but there was an edge to the smile that would have warned a wiser woman that this conversation had gone far enough. "What do you know about Paris standards?"

"Not very much, I daresay, but I do know that a girl of your age and in your position—I mean, Madame Hallé seems very kind but she is no relation, this is not your real home—cannot be too careful. Some gossip there has already been ..."

"In France," said Cassie cruelly, "the only disgraceful thing is not to be an object of gossip."

"But, Cassie," Janet was temperamentally incapable of the discretion Cora and Florence could instinctively display, "you are still young, you have your life before you. People are cruel. You don't surely wish to be an old maid, but your reputation ..."

"If you knew anything of my reputation you would realise that whatever else I may be it will not be an old maid."

"And then, is it quite fair to the Count? He is clearly infatuated ..."

"And what could be more charming?" Cassie was wilfully obtuse.

"But he cannot offer you marriage. He is jeopardising your future."

Cassie shrugged. "In Paris we don't live for the future but for the present. Jules is charming, devoted, attentive, everything that a husband promises to be and so seldom becomes. No, Janet, I cannot carry this discussion any further. We have chosen our lives, you and I, you along one path, I along another. The fact is, marriage is not made for me nor I for marriage. Even if I'd married Ned I daresay I'd have tired of him. In any case, he has his wife and the plainest nursery in Lincolnshire by all accounts. I am prepared to admit, if it pleases you, that John Hardwick is a paragon and in Northwinton apparently they appreciate paragons. In France we prefer something human ..." The words broke from her in a flood, and she would have continued but that Janet, with an odd air of dignity, put up her hand and said, "I understand, and I understand, too, that it is useless for me to say any more. As you say, you have chosen your own life. It's no wonder you laughed when I suggested your coming to Northwinton. I quite see you would be bored to tears there. All this meretricious glitter, this living for the day, it would all seem unreal there where we plan and work for the future. It is like a soap-bubble, your existence. At one moment it reflects every colour of the rainbow, and then—it's gone, utterly. One day unless you are careful that is how it will be with you."

Even now, however, she did not fully comprehend the position. She thought Cassie dangerously compromised by the Count's perpetual companionship in a city where everyone must know him to be a married man. The truth, that Cora had understood immediately, that he was but one in a chain of Cassie's lovers, men of culture, charm and substance who filled the place in her life that John filled in Janet's, was not apparent to her until by chance she saw the pair entering a house in a shady Paris square.

"Does M. le Comte live with his mother?" she asked Ren6e on her return from her solitary excursion. Rente's instant laughter told her what incongruously she had never hitherto discerned.

"Come, come, madame," Ren6e chided, her mouth still curved with laughter. "What affair is it of anyone's but Cassie herself? Oh, you may look dumbfounded, but, believe me, there are few women in Paris who do not envy your sister the position she has made for herself. Hers is a brilliant and enviable existence. At my house she meets everyone—yes, everyone—and if they are mere names to you, still they are names that are acclaimed throughout the whole continent of Europe." Even in your barbarous country, added her piercing glance, they are not without honour. Then, seeing Janet's helpless, horrified expression, she added, more kindly, "It is you who do not understand, madame. Cassie ..."

But Janet broke in, "Thank you. I understand perfectly. No doubt our national standards are so different we cannot hope to agree, but in the circumstances I would prefer not to remain."

At first Madame Halte did not take her seriously. She could not see the situation through Janet's eyes. To Janet from this time forward Cassie was a light woman passing from lover to lover, and though she could forgive the young girl who had been deceived and betrayed by the cowardly Ned Castlebarry, she felt she had no point of contact with this experienced materialist who was apparently even without shame. That Cassie could live as she did without forfeiting the respect of her circle was incomprehensible to her, and in her staunch British fashion she felt that to remain under

Madame's roof was to condone that sin that, in her own country, outweighed all the others. The courage and independence that John had once admired in her manifested themselves now. She could speak little French, was ill-at-ease among foreigners; she had no capacity for arranging her own journeys. If she had to travel the shortest distance alone she would seek reassurance a dozen times that she was in the right carriage, proceeding in the right direction. Yet, where her conscience was concerned, she was adamant.

"She behaved," said Cassie afterwards, referring to the incident to her stepmother, "as though she had suddenly found herself in a brothel. She was not like a civilised person. Next morning, at an hour when all reasonable people are still abed, she had gone out, arranged for the transport of her luggage and had even sent a telegram to John telling him to meet her at Dover. How she contrived it with her wretched knowledge of the language and almost complete ignorance of the monetary system, I shall never know, but she was gone before the rest of the household was abroad. We cooked up some story for the others, that John had been taken ill, and really her absence was scarcely noticed. My chief regret is that now I shall probably never meet my brother-in-law, and I shudder to think what story Janet carried back to him."

It was not John, however, but Richard Gladstone who met the exhausted Janet on her arrival at Dover. Gladstone was a small precise man whom the Hardwicks had met during their first year at Northweton. He was, like John, a lawyer by profession, and although he openly disapproved of much of John's vehement partisanship of the unfortunate, it was over the case of a servant-girl's wrongful dismissal that the pair had met. Gladstone was a bachelor, living very quietly and comfortably in a small house not far distant, cared for by an elderly couple who supplied all the comforts of married life, he said, and none of its disadvantages. It was odd that out of all the acquaintances of that first year, this was the only friend Janet had made. It was a strange relationship. Gladstone was by no means a sentimentalist; try though she might, as years went on, Janet could never coax from him a

story of an unrequited attachment or a love that had ended in the tomb. He had none of John's good looks or impressive manner, yet he contrived to be distinguished. Even as an old man he compelled attention. Unlike John, he was a natural lawyer, seeing all things in the light of the law, refusing to be swayed by personal or emotional considerations.

"Your husband has asked me to act as his ambassador," he told Janet when she appeared, white, shaken, untidy, longing only for the sight of John, the sound of his voice, his reassuring hand on her arm. "He has to be in court to-day. But the case is down for hearing this afternoon, so that to-morrow he should be at your disposal."

He asked no questions on the journey north and for the most part she forgot his existence. She saw only those splendid rooms where Renée and Cassie held court, rooms typical of a world that had dethroned morality and made light of marriage. Once again she heard the sparkling talk that was incomprehensible to her, saw the swift Gallic gestures, heard the warmth of the eager voices, felt the river of life go rushing past—and reaching out gratefully for the backwater that was her home. Obscurely, she felt it unjust that Cassie should enjoy such luxury, Cassie the kept woman, the shameless mistress of a French lord, the woman half Paris envied—sought after, courted, made much of.

"Providence must certainly enjoy quaint situations," she told herself with wry humour, "to have made us sisters. But for the future that will be in name only." For she could never return to Paris and she was convinced now that nothing would bring Cassie to Northwester.

12

John was gravely sympathetic about her dilemma but at the same time resolute in his belief that Cassie's life was her own affair and she must shape it as best she could. Sensitive to every shade of feeling, he felt that no human being had the right to insist on foisting his opinions on any other man. Indeed, one of his grievances against the Church was her insistence on a universal dogma. The spirit of man is free, he

would declaim. It cannot be blindfolded by convention, or compelled to believe. The utmost you can do, who think you carry the lamp of truth, is to hold your light where it falls on the path of the unbeliever, but if it is not the light they want, then you must be content to let them grope their own way out of the tunnel. It's that capacity to seek and to find that is the glory of mankind.

He could appreciate Janet's sense of shock, in a sense share it, and at the same time see that Cassie need not necessarily be a worthless creature. But when he tried to explain this to Janet she only looked at him uncomprehendingly, saying, "But, John, does morality mean nothing to you?"

That Cassie could have her own standard of morals that did not embrace physical chastity was beyond her belief.

It was almost eight years before the sisters met again.

During the first five years Janet was completely happy. Certainly her husband was absorbed in his work, but since she identified herself with his activities she had no sense of being excluded. They had by this time established a solid relationship, love on her side, kindness, friendship, companionship, tenderness on his. Janet had ceased to fear the advent of every new woman in his life. Passionate love he had known once, and when Laura died that was the end of passion. Much remained and that he offered her unstintingly. During those years it never occurred to her to seek a second string to her bow. John fulfilled her every need. Of friends she had none, except this dry-as-dust lawyer of her own age, Richard Gladstone, and sometimes she thought he had slipped into her life because he made no demands. Presently she could not remember a time when they had not been friends.

Yes, they were good and satisfying, these five years, the best five years of her long life. All her activities centred round John. With his unfailing affection and thoughtfulness, which were, perhaps, a not inadequate substitute for passion, with Richard Gladstone's friendship to supply an astringent quality to preserve her from complacency, with the cares and duties of a home-loving woman to whom no detail is unimportant, she could think placidly, even with pity, of Cassie

living her brilliant unsure life, of Cora queening it at Abbot St. Mary and making the Rectory such a centre of conviviality as it had never been since Marguerite's heyday. In Northweston few people knew Janet Hardwick, even by name. To John's friends she never became Janet, an intimate, a woman with a separate existence. She was Mrs. Hardwick or John Hardwick's wife. Invitations were either for the pair of them or for John alone. A more ambitious woman would have fretted her heart out in that arid atmosphere, and all her visitors—Cora, Richard, even John himself—urged her to spread her wings a little. But her reply was always the same.

"I have all I want, more than I ever dreamed. As for private friends, there is no time for them. No energy. I want nothing but John."

"If anyone told Janet that she is like the albatross round the neck of the Ancient Mariner she would think him crazy," said Cora to her husband. "Yet that is precisely what she is doing, hanging her entire life round John's neck, making him responsible for every iota of happiness she ever expects to know."

"In all our years together there has never been a single scene, a word of recrimination," Janet boasted to her step-mother, and Cora, recounting the incident to Cassie during one of her trips to Paris, said, sighing, "How could I tell her that a more violent relationship might have proved a more intimate one?"

Not, of course, that Cora and Charles ever had scenes, but she recalled how she and the young Paul Jardine had wrestled furiously in their early days and when he died she knew that for her there would be no more love on that scale.

After the first five years, however, Janet became gradually aware of a change in her circumstances; not necessarily a change in John's feelings, but a slow dropping away of his interest, hitherto so well sustained, in those inessentials that seemed so important to her. He was by this time well-established, and if his practice did not lie among the great, Well, said Charles Amberley, he has chosen his own path and we must hope that he is satisfied with it.

With the slow, the far too slow, awakening of public opinion to a sense of corporate responsibility, he received more and more calls on his time, and since he had long ceased to indulge in a personal dream, taking sweetly and gratefully all that Janet had to offer, he scarcely noticed how his days were encroached upon, until there seemed no time left for Janet and the private side of existence. Janet was disposed—not to blame him, that she would never do—but to feel a sense of grievance and she unburdened herself to her only confidant, the unsympathetic Gladstone.

"Nobody appreciates what John is and what he does more than I do," she insisted, "but surely, Richard, there are reasonable limits. Sometimes I feel he hardly notices me any more than Papa did, and then only for the same reason. Because I am the housekeeper."

She derived no sympathy, however, from Gladstone, who had a dry, crisp manner and never allowed himself to be carried away by personalities as John was.

"That, my dear Janet, as I have told you, conies of marrying a fanatic."

"Don't think I'm not proud of him," she exclaimed. "He does four men's work and I know it."

"Very arrogant of him," was Richard's only comment. "Why should he assume that the other three are so incapable? But then, he's a romantic."

"A romantic?" She seemed doubtful of his meaning.

"Yes. He sees people as individuals, though not as private and particular friends or acquaintances, as creatures looking to him for help. His personal feelings do not sway his decisions and he would equally defend someone he himself disliked as his dearest friend. His test would be the need of his client. Now, a man like that is not entirely human, he has none of the chinks in his armour that ordinary fellows have. That is to be a fanatic," he wound up pedantically. "Now, I am a lawyer in my bones, and a lawyer and a humanitarian are by no means identical. I know that when people consult an attorney it's because they want something for themselves, legally or illegally, they want as much of it as they can get, and they want it as cheaply as it can be procured. I, you see,

am a realist. John on the other hand sees himself tilting at wolves, all the vices and greeds of the world. He's a champion — it is useless to look like that, Janet. That is how he sees himself. It's one of the secrets of his strength. He's no better lawyer than a dozen men I could name, but he will be remembered when their names are dust."

Even after eight years Janet could not bear to think that a day must come when John Hardwick would be only a memory instead of the solid man who, impervious though he seemed so much of the time to her presence, lived and breathed and moved beneath the same roof, came in and out of the same rooms, was her husband and her friend.

"You don't think he's looking ill?" she panted.

"You know perfectly well he is as fit as a fiddle. He's the kind of person who thrives on over-work."

"Over-work," she repeated. "Yes, he has that all right."

She sighed, remembering the happy past when he had allowed her to participate in his work, check references, copy out his notes. Now he had no time even for explanations. Now he belonged to the world of unfortunate and disinherited creatures, while as for her . . .

"Don't forget you have a wife, John," she said to him more than once, and he stooped to kiss her and say affectionately, "That would be difficult, seeing how well you look after me."

"Then spare me a little of your time."

"Perhaps next week," promised John but already his manner was absent. His thought had run ahead and left her far behind.

"Perhaps this is what the wives of all professional men have to endure," she said a little fretfully to Richard. "You should get married and then your wife and I could compare notes."

But he said, smiling wryly, that he had been born with Bachelor marked against his score. "And don't offer to find me a wife, Janet," he added, sharply. "That is one of the things men prefer to do for themselves."

She winced, recalling the circumstances attending John's marriage but an instant later the smile came back to her face,

eager, **full of** hope. She thought she heard the study door open. Perhaps John was ready for the nightly cup of tea they always took together. She half-started to her feet.

"Don't be a vampire, Janet." Richard put out his hand and caught her wrist. "He's not thinking of tea or you or me or anything but the job in hand. You know, I sometimes wonder how men have the courage to marry at all. It would be far less dangerous to go to war."

He had captured her attention with those words. She was part indignant, part curious.

"I can't imagine what you mean."

"You hate them to belong to themselves even for five minutes. Men can't be husbands all the time. They are not like women."

She considered that. Her thought processes were slow, but thorough. "You mean, married women are always wives. But naturally, since that is why they marry in the first place."

"I don't blame you," Richard assured her. "It is nature's way. But too many women think of their husbands as a different sort of woman, superior, of course, because they have more brains and those brains better-educated, but the same kind of creature, a difference not of essence but of degree. Whereas, in fact, the difference is an essential one."

Janet dismissed that with one of those assertions he found maddening. He wondered if John ever found her maddening, too.

"You are a bachelor," she said. "You wouldn't understand."

"That is what I'm trying to tell you. There is a perennial bachelor in all men. That is why they can spend so much of their time away from women, not even remembering women. You may be away from John, be doing all manner of things that take all your energy for the time being, but you never stop thinking about him."

"How could I?" enquired Janet, simply. "He is my husband."

"That matters very little so long as you don't make him perpetually aware of it."

Janet gave vent to one of her rare outbursts of bitterness. "He is so absorbed with these people who turn to him for salvation, he scarcely remembers half the time that I exist."

"You must have friends of your own?" Richard reproached her. But she shook her head. It was true. There was no-one, only the wives of his friends, who never became more than acquaintances. She hated the notion that they might take her time when he wanted it. She hadn't any feeling, any kindness even, to spare for the rest of the world. John absorbed every generous impulse of her nature. She began to hate his clients, because they used him so relentlessly, and gave him little, if anything, in return. "It is so inhuman," she would rage.

"Justice isn't human but divine," Richard assured her.

He was in and out of the house a good deal. John liked him, liked his astringent outlook—You'll stop me from floating into the clouds, he used to say, when Richard laughed at some theory he had propounded.

"He has no right to make fun of you," cried Janet passionately. "You are worth two of him and he knows it."

"I'm afraid you're prejudiced," replied John. "He has a first-class mind, a great deal better than mine, believe me."

But she didn't. Richard repeated what Madame Dubois had told her in that almost forgotten time before Janet Hardwick existed, and there was only meek, down-trodden Janet Amberley living on sufferance at the Rectory.*

"You should grow up. You cannot live on fairy-tales all your life. John isn't perfect or a genius because he's your husband."

"No. Because he is John."

"Poor chap!" said Richard. "You do keep him at full stretch, don't you?"

"Because I want only the best for him."

"Your best," Richard reminded her. "Janet, don't be so intense. Make a little life for yourself, fence off just a strip of it and put a padlock on the gate, and don't let him come in. All human beings should have their privacies, even from the people they love most."

But she didn't believe it. Nothing had any value she could not share with John.

13

Then came the period when time raced past like a mill-stream, so quickly that the very seasons became confused, tumbling over each other's heels before Janet was truly aware of their coming. John would bring her the first snowdrops of the year—always her favourite flower because they had been Marguerite's—and she would think, "Spring has begun at last," and would dream of lengthening days, of the light coming earlier in the morning, and remaining long enough for her to go out after tea, perhaps with John, to see the sticky sheaths of the chestnut turned back to reveal the rosy leaves beneath. When the candles begin to burn on the trees we will go out for a day, we will have a picnic—so she would plan. But by the time John could spare a day the candles would have fallen, the lilacs be brown, the laburnum gold spill on the sidewalks.

"The dog-roses are out in the hedges like pink foam," she would say. "On Sunday we will go down Sandy Lane and you shall see them for yourself." But the blossom would be long fallen and the scarlet hips be forming before John could tear himself from his desk. She would set out to buy roses for one of those dinner-parties they gave occasionally, always to John's friends, who were men occupied, like himself, in attempts to solve the problems that filled all his waking hours, and find to her amazement that the season of roses was past, and there was nothing in the shops but dahlias and chrysanthemums and perhaps bunches of gold and scarlet leaves.

"Have we missed the violets? the chestnut candles? the dog-roses?" John would say in surprise. "Ah, well, next year."

And Janet would return with her russet blooms and arrange them staidly in the vases, put the leaves in his study where they shed themselves inconveniently behind desks and tables, and dream of next spring.

Then followed the long season when the gold leaves fell from the trees, when light came late and departed early, when

fogs came up from the river and lamps must be lighted soon after luncheon, and fires burned before breakfast. (When Cassie came home Janet realised that, after all, chrysanthemums are not the only flowers of autumn. Cassie filled her sister's house with great pink lilies and azaleas that defied the bleak, bare trees and the leaf-choked gutters, just as Cassie herself seemed to defy the nipping winds that turned Janet's nose red and gave her chilblains.) And so Christmas came with John saying, "I have no time for shopping. You must be my proxy, Janet," and Janet, who dreamed of wrapping parcels in coloured papers, decking a tree with silver balls and hanging the house with scarlet-berried holly all in company with her husband would find herself giving instructions to a housemaid and waiting in vain for John to notice the transformation she had effected.

Yet her love for him remained unchanged; if possible, it blazed to greater heights as time went on. And in the small ways that women love he never failed her. No anniversary passed but brought his gift, on birthdays he put aside his work to celebrate with her; but behind all that surface attention she felt him moving steadily away from her, becoming John Hardwick, the philanthropist and reformer, to the exclusion of everything else.

It was a new grievance when he undertook work that took him periodically to London, sometimes for days at a time*. She hated the house when he was away from it, there seemed no life, no colour anywhere. She moped from room to room till his return.

"Surely you could take me with you," she would plead.

"My dearest, it's impossible. It would be so dull. I am engaged all day and often in the evening as well. What would you do then?"

"What do you suppose I do here?" she demanded.

He put his arm for an instant round her shoulders. "Ask Richard to dine with you. Let him take you to the theatre. Indeed, it would be a kindness on your part. His is a solitary life."

Was it imagination or did she really detect a faint note of envy in his voice? Before she could decide John had gone.

Then, in spite of her resolve to be utterly independent, she would find herself seated at her writing-desk, penning John's suggested invitation.

"I suppose," said Cassie in days to come, "Janet is so conscious of her own rectitude it never occurs to her that there may be gossip about her being seen so much in John's absence with this Mr. Gladstone."

"It is clear that you know neither Janet nor Mr. Gladstone. Otherwise you would realise that gossip about the pair of them would be too fantastic to be credited," was Cora's amused reply.

"And is she so sure of her husband that she never wonders who he may be dining with when he is away from her?"

But Janet would have laughed such a suggestion to scorn. What, John, who hardly had time to remember he had a wife, to have a moment to spare for another woman? That torment at least she was spared. But other griefs she knew. Sometimes, desperate at her husband's absence and feeling that all the burden of loss was on her side, she would turn on Richard savagely.

"How fortunate John and I are in your acquaintance," she would say later. "You are an excellent safety-valve, are you not? You don't even object to being made use of." That was as near an apology as she could achieve. No-one except Richard ever saw these moods, certainly not John, never John. For him she preserved all that was best, kindest, most patient in her nature. Of these flashes of bitterness, of disappointed hope, of a sense of ill-usage he knew nothing. Had he married her for love she might have been less discreet, but always at the back of her mind was the unspoken thought that she owed him a debt.

"I know a great deal more about John's wife than he does himself," Richard would reflect. "But perhaps that is no uncommon thing with married people." And in reply to her taunt he would say equably, "I don't object. Why should I? John is my friend, and you ..."

She put on her queenly manner. "I am John's wife."

Then he looked at her with sudden resentment. "John should beat you," he told her. "You're a termagant."

"You should tell John that. He wouldn't believe you. He has never had time to notice."

"All your kindness is for him," he accused her. "You have none to spare for the rest of the world. Even when you dine with me I can almost hear you count the hours until his return."

She looked troubled, even a little abashed. "I suppose I seem incredibly foolish. I daresay other people laugh at me in their sleeves. I should be grateful that John rescued me from my spiritless existence at the Rectory. Ah, but he did more than that. He made me a person. I was never that until he came. John made me a woman before he made me his wife."

"Then be grateful." His voice was stern. "Don't try to claim more than he is prepared to give. You have married a very exceptional man, and yet you dare be sorry for yourself."

"Do you think I would change places with anyone in the world?" she flamed.

He thought, with angry admiration, "No-one who saw her now would dare call her a plain woman. She has no features, she dresses like a provincial ninny, and no-one has ever taught her how to make the best of herself, but all the same at moments like these, she is magnificent."

It was strange how she had spoilt all other women for him. Yet he would have shrunk from that possessive streak in her that, with any man but John, might have wrecked her marriage, as it would wreck his if he weren't so much engaged he does not notice, he reminded himself.

Then, when John returned, Janet would metaphorically spread a red carpet for him. She would have all his favourite dishes for dinner, which he would eat without comment because his thoughts were elsewhere, would fill the house with flowers he would never notice, wear a frock he had once said he liked and wait, hopefully, for some word of approval. Even when it did not come she would not blame him. It was natural. He had so much on his mind, so many people unloaded their troubles on to his shoulders, he had no time for

trifles. She wanted him to think of his home as a refuge where he could pull up the drawbridge and be safe from interruption. Yet even here the world came seeping in.

In the early days of her marriage Janet had dreamed of entertaining—for John. He would obviously rise in his profession, mix with the big names, be called upon, admired, elevated. Fate had destined him to be one of the lights of his generation. And so, of course, he was, as Richard was swift to remind her, but his light gleamed in the darkness, not in the big country houses where, in imagination, she had seen him welcomed and revered. The light shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not. Janet heard the words read again and again in Church on Sundays. Even to Church, she reflected fiercely, she must go alone. Nothing would move John to render lip service to a faith he did not share. The light shineth . . . She had wanted so much for him, the whole world, leadership, the plaudits of the masses, the admiration of the great.

"It is said that was what Judas Iscariot wanted for Jesus," Richard reminded her.

Sometimes she swore she would never ask Richard to the house again, would give orders that she was not to be disturbed in the evening when he came round with his little brown dog. Storms of anger swept over her. This time, she resolved, she would not weaken. But when evening came and John was at work in his study, she found herself listening for the click of the gate, the little dog's eager bark, the sound of Prescott crossing the hall to answer the door.

"Mr. Gladstone? Of course I am at home."

Richard was her safety-valve. To him she could speak interminably of John. To talk of John was her chief, almost her only delight.

There were people coming to dinner. The Dyers, Samuel and Thora. Samuel Dyer was a factory-owner. He had built a model factory, housed his workers, paid them a good wage, built a sort of model town, and even so there was trouble. They rebelled, broke out of the safe boundaries he provided

for them, displayed none of the gratitude you might have anticipated.

"Why not?" said Richard. "They were men before they were employees of Dyer's Model Factory. You can't buy men with good conditions and good pay. The feudal system in this country is doomed to failure. It has had a long run, but eventually it will perish. Men want to shape their own destinies not have them shaped for them by even the most benevolent despots."

Janet was a good housewife. She set the table herself when guests came to dinner, filled the tall silver vase with seasonable flowers, matched by four small vases to stand at the corners, brought out the best table-centre of white satin stitched with gold thread, the silver bonbon dishes, the finger-bowls on smaller white satin mats with a gold fringe, the hand-painted dessert dishes, some unusual fruit, a pineapple or apricots, so that visitors should remember, This is John Hardwick's house. She had never fallen into the fatal error of wearing out her old clothes for her husband. One day he will remember I am still here, she declared, he will look up, and he shall never see a dowdy woman in a shabby gown at the head of his table.

It was she, not John, who saw to it that the wine was suitable and of the right temperature. Some years after John's marriage the Archdeacon had died from a stroke, leaving John all he possessed, which, to everyone's surprise, included a small, carefully-stocked cellar. John drank little wine, but when visitors came the best was put out for them.

"Not that they appreciate it," Janet told herself doggedly, thinking of the guests she would like to entertain on her husband's behalf, men with a respect for their palates, for whom all this trouble would be worth while, not high-minded industrialists like the Dyers, as indifferent as John himself to good food and fine living. As for Thora Dyer, she wore the same black frock every time she came.

"I am not worth dressing for," thought the angry Janet, and she paid more attention than before to her appearance. Seated at her dressing-table, she brushed out her long, fine hair. There was a little grey in it now, and she dressed it

carefully to conceal the fact. No-one should say John Hardwick had married a woman old enough to be his mother. There was grey in John's hair, too, but he did not care who saw it. To start growing grey at thirty-eight! Savagely she blamed the men who lived on his life, giving, she believed, nothing in return.

Somewhere in the house a bell rang. Alarmed, Janet glanced at her watch. Not the Dyers already, the greedy Dyers sucking away John's life, John's energy, as the tide sucks away the sand. But it was too early for them. She could hear whispers on the floor below. Someone for John, perhaps. Softly she opened the door. It was a telegram and for a wild minute she let her imagination wander. A telegram announcing that, after all, the Dyers couldn't dine to-night? Why? What was important enough to prevent the Dyers stealing yet another of John's wife's evenings? Nothing but death, she thought, taking up her hairbrush again. Only death. And death seemed in no hurry for that drab idealist. Still, if only a wish came true because whoever wished it wished so furiously, then Samuel Dyer would drop dead to-night. She could hear Prescott's steps on the stairs. Suppose, when she tapped at the door, it was to say, "Oh, M'm, oh M'm, such a terrible thing."

"Yes?" Down would go the ivory hairbrush with J.H. entwined in silver on the back. "Cook's burnt the fish?" Her voice would be sharp, ready to heap blame on a careless servant who had spoiled John's dinner and John's wife's prestige.

"No, M'm. It's—it's Mr. Dyer."

"Not here already, Prescott?"

"Oh no. No. He's dead. Just like that, M'm. Dropped down dead while he was dressing for dinner."

"Quite dead? Dear me, Prescott, how sad. For Mrs. Dyer, of course."

"Yes, M'm. And, of course, that means he can't come to dinner to-night."

"I suppose not. And naturally Mrs. Dyer won't care to come without him."

Would Prescott guess the huge pleasure, the sense of

triumph it gave her, to know that Dyer was dead, would never come again? Whoever would have expected him to have the tact to die to-night and so late, so close to the dinner-hour, that John would have no time to make some other engagement? Dear, considerate Mr. Dyer, dying just so that she, Janet Hardwick, the woman he'd never really noticed, should have one blissful, uninterrupted evening with her husband.

Prescott would be looking puzzled, of course. "Yes, Prescott?"—taking up the brush again, her voice as blithe as a singing-bird.

"What—what shall I say to the messenger, M'm?"

"Oh, the messenger?" Careful now, remember you are John Hardwick's wife and Samuel Dyer had been John's friend. Frame a suitable message, don't say, Nothing so became his life as the losing of i t . . . or It is a far, far better thing that he has done . . .

"Say, Prescott, we are extremely grieved. Of course, Mr. Hardwick will write. No doubt he will attend the funeral." Oh yes, no doubt at all. John would go to Samuel Dyer's funeral. (Would he remember to come to mine?) "Oh, and say, Prescott, we shall send a wreath."

There, that was done. Lucky, lucky Samuel Dyer, to get Mrs. Hardwick's handsome wreath at his funeral, the first thing she had ever given him with pleasure.

Prescott would withdraw after that. What would she say in the kitchen? "The missis looked ever so—queer." That was their word for everything. Queer. Quite bowled over, she might say, not herself at all. And in her room Janet would put on an extra bauble, something John had given her, might pin a flower in her hair, even try a little colour on her cheeks. For this was an occasion, this was better than a diamond bracelet, a whole evening alone with John. And he? But here elation died. For—she must confess it—John would mind. He would be aghast. He would say, "That is an irreparable loss". Probably he would spend the evening telling her about Samuel, what he'd achieved, what he'd planned. John would not want to put a rose in his button-hole and drink champagne because Samuel Dyer was dead... .

There was a knock on the door. Reluctantly Janet came back from her glittering dream. But still her eyes blazed, her heart thudded. But how absurd. Because—why, because it was only a dream that would never come true.

"Come in. Yes, Prescott."

Prescott looked puzzled, even a little scared. "I — I was wondering if you were all right, M'm, if there was anything I could do."

"Do?"

"I mean, wondering if your watch had stopped, M m. It's nearly half-past, and you did say ..."

"Oh? No, it's all right, Prescott. I shall be down. I hadn't noticed. . . ."

Cover your blinding disappointment. Life doesn't work miracles for plain women.

Ah well, she thought when Prescott had gone, pinning up her hair, taking off her dressing-jacket, slipping into her dress, it would not have helped much, after all. There were too many Dyers. And in the event, John would only have talked of the immense loss his death was to the community. Not holding the Christian doctrine of eternal life he would not say, as the Canon had said years ago about Sybil Morland, She has achieved all she had to do on earth, she has been promoted to higher service. For him, Dyer's death would be a catastrophe, the abrupt termination of a valuable life. Dyer, the stammering bore, did not exist for him. He perceived only the man of vision.

She snatched up the little black lace scarf she carried in case it was cold, and went downstairs. She was just in the drawing-room when the Dyers arrived. John was there already. John could remember to be in time when it was the Dyers. In they came, he large, solid, square, she small and wizened like a scrawny chicken, wearing the same black dress. You might think she had been born with it instead of a skin..

She shook hands with Samuel. Think of something suitable to say.

"Oh, Mr. Dyer, I had the most wonderful dream just now. I thought you were dead."

And then to Thora, "Do tell me, Mrs. Dyer, if your husband has any special fancies about flowers for wreaths."

Had she said that? No-one seemed to be looking at her oddly. She hadn't, of course. She had opened the conversation with the normal stock phrase.

"It has turned colder, I think. Perhaps it's going to rain." She half-closed her eyes in anticipation of Dyer's reply.

"The farmers want rain. We mustn't grudge it to them."

Of course not. Let the farmers have rain, and Samuel Dyer the best burgundy. Thora Dyer was wearing a new ring, a ridiculous half-hoop of pearls. If I had hands like that I wouldn't want to call attention to them, reflected the contemptuous Janet. Still, no doubt Samuel had given it to her. Their silver wedding, perhaps. Would John give her anything on their silver wedding day? But perhaps by that time he would really have forgotten she existed. Oh yes, let everyone have what they wanted, all except Janet Hardwick, who only wanted her own husband and couldn't have him. Janet Hardwick, for whose convenience Samuel Dyer, the philanthropist, the man of goodwill, the tiresome, self-righteous man of morals, wouldn't even drop down dead.

14

Yes, even the people who came to dinner were John's friends, not personal friends or relatives, such as most men had, but people who cared for the same things. During dinner conversation would be general, but always veering towards the subject the gentlemen would discuss when their wives had left the table. And once the women—never more than three—gathered round the fire upstairs the men got together and forgot the existence of any other room in the house. Often Janet tried to arrange for a quiet evening at home, but even on those occasions John would say, quite soon after dinner, that he had some work to finish. She learned to play the piano in the hopes of keeping him from that insufferable desk, but he would only say, Leave the door open and I can hear, and a minute later she would hear the study door close. Not a subterfuge, simply that his mind had switched off her, like

turning off one light (only of course they didn't have electric lighting then) in order to switch on another. And the poor piano-player went on toiling at the ungrateful keys until perhaps the bell rang and Richard would walk in.

"All alone, Janet? I was just passing . . ."

"John's busy." The words came quick and challenging.

"That's why I came."

He used to wonder if he'd have proposed marriage had she been free. There was something about her that held him. A maddening woman in some ways, narrow even for a sex whose interests were shamelessly personal, not handsome, not a brilliant conversationalist, and yet—and yet—somehow mysterious. She seemed so flat and hard on the surface, so obvious, a devoted woman, the kind that suddenly figures in the newspapers, found murdered, strangled perhaps or hit repeatedly over the head with a poker. And the police almost instinctively arrest the husband. Because too much affection is like chloroform. It chokes you. You fight, thrash out your arms, clutch at near by objects. Not that John would ever do that. But she had, he believed, a seed of greatness no-one but himself had recognised.

"John should not have married," he told her once. "He is a mormon at heart. Married to his work and all his clients. You should have married someone who understood you."

"He does understand me." Indignant as always, swallowing the bait, hook, line and sinker. "I'm the happiest woman in the world."

He thought of all the mystery of love to which she was a stranger, the ecstasy, the mutual reverence. . . . Given different opportunities she might, for all her plainness and awkwardness, have been a notable woman. Too late now, of course; she was a sponge soaking up adulation, John's adulation, treasuring his most casual word, to bring out as if it were some present he had given her. "But John, you said . . ."

He was alarmed sometimes by her capacity for passion under that deceptive surface manner. Had Marguerite been like that? Or the fascinating Cassie he had never met? He doubted it. Certainly not Cora. Nor most women. Like a little dangerous spark smouldering away practically out of sight,

smouldering into death one of these days. Unless—unless—that was part of the fascination of life. You couldn't foresee the future . . . If something happened—if some, danger threatened John . . . It was odd how other people didn't seem to notice, all the Dyers and Chapmans and Rowbothams who came to the house. To them, he supposed, she was just a plain woman with her crochet or her embroidery, one thin cheek stained by the firelight. Or sitting absorbed on those rare occasions when John let business affairs wait and read aloud in the drawing-room . . . Even then they only said, He has a beautiful voice. No one seemed to notice her.

"Does John know what he's married?" reflected Richard. "Probably not. Husbands seldom do. Most married couples seem to stay strangers to one another all their lives."

Yes, marriage was dangerous all right. Like roaming in a dark wood, not knowing what might not spring out across your path. A great strolling tiger, all gold and black stripes, looking for an instant part of the sunlight and shadow of your surroundings, a furtive jackal, a great crashing mastodon from whom there was no escape. Safer by far to live in your little house with a married couple, visit your club, keep your office hours, be that cherished creature, a bachelor available for particular invitations, with a reputation for dry wit, for a kind of bland outspokenness. Belong to yourself, keep a careful hand on the reins of your life.

And yet—and yet—

Night after night he would say to Bletsoe, "I'll take Rags out for a run. It's a fine night," and the little brown terrier would come nosing to his hand, stare hopefully at the front door, come bounding back to his master, and then, when the front door was opened, streak down the road, round the corner, and after a minute that ridiculous brown head would reappear, inquisitively cocked.

"This way?"

It was always the same way. Under the gleaming moon, the grey sky with its promise of rain, the cool darkness with trees making a finely-traced pattern against the quiet clouds, always round the same corner up to the Hardwicks' house.

"Is Mrs. Hardwick in? A party? Alone?"

He handed in his hat and stick, called Rags to heel, and into the drawing-room they would go.

"Why, Richard?" Sometimes he saw the sudden light blaze up in her face when the door-handle turned and he announced himself. She'd been sitting there dreaming of John, thought for a magical instant he had left his work and come to be with her. Then she smiled, the good hostess, the kind friend.

"Come in, Richard. John's busy."

"Then you've time to spare for me."

She didn't care for animals, but she dutifully put out a hand to the exploring Rags. Rags sniffed it politely, then came and lay on the carpet, his nose across his master's foot. Now and again when the conversation seemed extra long he put up his head, looked hopefully at that thin cynical face, slowly drew himself on to his haunches.

"Much longer?" inquired his wistful brown eyes.

Sometimes John did come in, and then the conversation became technical.

"John shouldn't have married," Richard would tease her. "Then you could have tamed me."

She looked a little shocked, still spinsterish for all her years of married life.

"I couldn't have married anyone but John." ("Not quite good taste. This is John's house. I am John's wife. How could you think...?")

"Mustn't outstay my welcome." He whistled softly to Rags who bounded up with unflattering haste. "Daresay you've seen enough of me for a while."

Then for a few days there would be the quiet evenings, bridge at the club, a book at home, with Rags bounding to go out, until after about a week he would ring for Bletsoe.

"Going to take Rags for a run."

Same programme, same wild dash to the corner, same enquiring face coming round it, same eager scamper when the direction was confirmed, same momentary hesitation at the gate—Rags never hesitated. He put one paw on the bars and whined excitedly. Bell ringing, feet in the hall, steady permanent face—Kate Winter came into the Hardwicks' service that year.

"Mrs. Hardwick in? A party? Alone? Then perhaps . . ."

Forming the habits of a lifetime, twenty, thirty, forty years on, habits to endure when John Hardwick was dust, when all the storm and pother and anguish were buried—not under mould and grass in a churchyard, but in Janet Hardwick's stormy, rebellious, unforgetting heart, alive for evermore.

Cora, but not her husband, was visiting at Northweston. The Rector seldom left his own home these days. He said he was more comfortable there than anywhere else, and now he was beginning to suffer from gout he was a less complacent man than of yore. Janet might have envied her stepmother if she had known the reluctance with which Charles said good-bye to her.

"Don't stay long," he said. "You've a perfectly good home of your own. It's not as if there will be any company up there. I can't imagine why, if you want to see Janet, she shouldn't come here instead of your making that tedious journey and leaving me alone."

"Because John wouldn't leave his work," said Cora. "Besides,* I shan't be gone long and I've left instructions for all your meals."

"Do you ever hear from Cassie nowadays?" inquired Janet, who still wore a hat for visitors even in her own home. She had pushed up the veil in order to drink her tea. "She never writes to us."

"We heard about a fortnight ago. She is in Italy with friends."

"How much longer does she propose to gather moss?" Janet was growing more tart as she grew older. Cora noticed it at once. "She is thirty-two." Janet would be forty on her next birthday and was painfully conscious of the fact.

"Age won't matter to Cassie any more than it does to your Aunt Florence. She hasn't Florence's intelligence, but even so she will always have so much more to offer than most women—you ought to meet her again, my dear. I know, according to your standards, she falls short of virtue, but I'd hoped that you were beginning to acquire tolerance. It's never safe to lay

down laws for other people, and you must remember, it's not given to every woman to marry the man she loves. We've been lucky, you and I . . . "

She could almost see Janet bridle at the suggestion that the rector could be bracketed with John Hardwick. Of Paul Jardine she did not think at all; he was less than a name to her. As for Cora, could she regard Charles Amberley as anything but a convenient refuge for middle-age, that man about the house so necessary to a woman's *amour propre*? A marriage of convenience, no more. Yet there was no denying Cora was a success, not only with her husband but with the young of both sexes. They flocked to her for advice.

"Mamma doesn't understand," said the young girls.

"Can't you tell Rita's mother . . . or Elsa's—or Fay's?" urged their brothers.

"How can you advise them?" Janet wanted to know. Seeing you have no children of your own, she meant, and Cora so understood her.

"It is quite simple." Cora wore a fantastic restgown at this hour of the afternoon. She lay back on the sofa, waving an equally fantastic fan of green and pink feathers to and fro. "Is it always so hot up here? But you are shut in by the houses, aren't you? About the girls. I always tell them to follow their own hearts. It is what they want to hear, so, of course, they take my advice."

"And you are not afraid of the consequences? It sounds to me exceedingly rash . . . "

Cora looked amused and exasperated. "My dear, haven't you yet realised that in the event people do what they wish to do? No, don't tell me about women becoming martyrs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven or their widowed mothers. If they do, it is because they prefer martyrdom to the commoner delights that, shall we say, you and I enjoy? If you would rather please your conscience than your heart, then it follows that you get more satisfaction from your conscience."

"No-one can accuse Cassie of being a slave to her conscience," observed Janet tartly. "But, Cora, the day will come when she will look round her and find that youth has gone by and she has nothing."

"And what do you wish for her? A life the counterpart of your own? A husband like your excellent John? Your daily round and common task? Cassie would scream with boredom the first week and probably end by plunging the bread-knife into John at the end of the first month. No, no, she has a very pleasant existence and she can hardly be blamed if she has no wish to exchange it for provincial security. She is excellent company, dresses exceedingly well, is hugely in demand at parties and entertainments of every kind, is a skilful and a lucky gambler. I daresay in Northweton you play cards for love?"

"Neither John nor myself plays cards at all," returned Janet in the same tone.

"That would not suit Cassie. She has the gambler's temperament."

"Even lucky gamblers don't always win."

Cora frowned. "You are thinking of Ned Castlebarry?"

"Of Andrew," Janet corrected her.

"Cassie was well out of that marriage," Cora assured her emphatically, "and really, she was fortunate that the fates did not allow her affair with Castlebarry to come to much either. According to my information he has become the dullest man in Lincolnshire."

Janet might be a match for Richard Gladstone, but Cora always contrived to make her feel inadequate. She could look like a bandbox figure even in a negligee, and had a vitality a woman half her years might have envied. Beside her, Janet had the rigidity of a wooden doll.

"She is like Noah's wife," observed Cora once, in a moment of feminine malice, to her husband. "One feels convinced her clothes are painted on her. Everything is so tightly buttoned, so formal, so drab. No, no, in spite of her respectability I feel Cassie has done better for herself."

A few months later Cassie fulfilled her stepmother's prophecy that she was in control of her own life and could marry or remain single as she chose by announcing her engagement to an Englishman called Michael Sorley.

"It is typical of Cassie, after all her chances, to marry a nobody," remarked Janet, giving her husband the news.

John stared. "A nobody? Michael Sorley? My dear Janet, she at least has conferred honour on the family."

Now it was Janet's turn to stare. "Do you mean to say you have heard of him?"

"Heard of him? Why, Janet." John was laughing, but there was a note of amused exasperation in his voice. "All the world knows Michael Sorley."

"I had never heard of him." Janet looked obstinate. "Cassie says he is a sculptor."

"And if she had not everyone, except my ultra-conservative wife, would have known that. Why, I have even heard him described as the greatest craftsman since Michaelangelo. If only twenty per cent of what is said of him is true Cassie has exceeded all hopes of her."

He had touched Janet on her heel of Achilles. "You are so absurd," she scolded, "and you will go round everywhere repeating what you have just said to me. No-one to hear you would suppose that you were a celebrity yourself, even if you deliberately keep out of the limelight. But I shall certainly remind Cassie ..."

"I beg that you will do nothing of the kind. Every unsuccessful or obscure man who has ever lived knows he would have worn the laurels if his ideals had not been too high or his intelligence too profound to be appreciated by the mob."

"If you imagine I am going to sing small to Cassie you are quite wrong." Janet could be as obstinate as he. "If you had put your mind to it, you could have been a judge by this time."

"I can think of nothing more improbable." He, a judge indeed! There were times when he wondered if he had the right to be a lawyer, he with his confused notions of right and wrong, and no moral standard to help him, except his own. He thought perhaps a good many people clung to religion as much for the social security it gave them as the moral. To know that a large powerful organisation had decided thus-and-thus was to be free of the burden of responsibility.

"A penny for your thoughts," said Janet curiously, and he said at once, "There was a very striking exhibit by wSorlev in

an exhibition by contemporary sculptors a year or so back. A bronze that he called Youth Aspiring. Full of power and originality. I remember thinking that if I were a rich man I should acquire it. An inspiration, an incentive, a reminder that even if personal ambition is defeated and hopes are lost, the spirit of man is unconquerable."

Janet was looking at him in amazement that turned to kindness. Dear John. Such an idealist, so enthusiastic, perpetually rekindling the spirit of youth, warming his hands at every stray fire. He would never grow old so long as that irrational faith in human nature sustained him. Whatever this Michael Sorley was like, he wouldn't be able to hold a candle to John. The smile she offered him was meant to tell him all this. But for once John did not respond. He knew what she was thinking, a pleasant facile doctrine, and oh, he thought, how far from the truth. It was years since he had felt young, not really since Laura died. Of course the marriage he had made had had a sobering effect on him. Even at the start it had been a quiet affair of kindness, consideration, never of passion. And for years now the fire had simply been a steady domestic glow. Come back any hour and the hearth would be warm. A man could hold out his hands to it and feel the warmth, temperate, comforting. But what of the flame that had once leaped there, transfiguring the room in which it burned, the flame Laura had kindled that had been extinguished by her death and that nothing, he supposed, could ever light again? Certainly not Janet. And he wanted no complications, had a faint contempt for men of forty who lost their heads, threw professional reputation and achievement to the winds, rushed out leaving the door wide open so that the cold draught could extinguish the tidy little fire. This chap, Sorley for instance! He had never met him, though he supposed, now he was one of the family, Cassie would bring him back on a round of visits perhaps, though, if he was anything like his work, he wouldn't sit by any tame fire. But then, according to Janet, Cassie wouldn't care for that sort of tame safe existence either. He found himself wondering about her, almost for the first time. He knew so little. A lovely girl growing into a beautiful

woman, breaking her heart for a rascal, finding consolation—he wished now he had taken Janet to Paris, met her sister. The only vision he had of her was through Janet's eyes, like seeing a drawing by a faulty draughtsman, though he didn't blame Janet for that. She would be more than human if she were entirely without resentment. Parents have a great responsibility, he thought. He and Janet never spoke of the child who had never managed to get born. It was only as a man got older that he realised the true meaning of sterility. To have no-one of your own flesh and blood to whom to hand on the torch. Not that anyone was to blame. It was always happening, and the Janets of the world talked about the Will of God. Another example of shifting responsibility? Or the human way of seeking the consolation without which the spirit of man must endure defeat?

The man who had made that astounding Youth Aspiring would never admit defeat. He had the very spirit of life in his heart, in his fingers. He caught Janet's eye again.

"Why, John?" Her very voice was a question. He rose abruptly—they were at the breakfast-table. In an instant she would be asking him if he felt well, if anything were wrong. In the happiest marriage, he thought, there should be reserves your partner never tried to invade. Every human spirit required privacy. Even with Laura. . . . He shut the thought away. Where was the sense remembering Laura, dead these dozen years, dead, lost, gone for ever?

Standing at the window he reminded himself that he was almost forty years old, a middle-aged man, set in his ways, vowed to a career, the husband of a devoted wife. He should have progressed beyond the need for novelty. Absurd that this news of the impending marriage of a man and woman he had never met should set the old tides stirring in his blood. New beginnings. Did men really ever outgrow their secret hopes? He had meant so much, achieved, he thought, so little. An obscure struggler, a man disappointed in his secret life, no lover, no son. For during the past years Janet had gradually withdrawn herself and it was at increasingly rare intervals that they came together as lovers. He discerned in her the faint distaste for the physical manifestations of love typical of

her generation and upbringing. And perhaps, once she knew she could never bear a child, her feeling had become stronger, blending into an inward assurance of self-indulgence. Did she ever guess how he had rebelled against the sterility, the unsatisfactory nature of his physical life? But she seemed to think of him as a creature all mind and spirit, to credit him with the same aloof attitude towards physical pleasure as her own. In any case, he had settled in the mould by now. Those dreams, that ardour, belonged to youth, to the man he had been. It was seldom he permitted himself to think of all he had missed.

Janet came to stand beside him. "I think the garden is going to do well this year," she said.

The garden was like Janet, orderly, trim, not an unexpected note anywhere, no weeds, no daisies on the lawn, but neatly laid out in a formal manner, colours carefully chosen, a well-kept garden, just as Janet's house was a well-kept house. If Laura had had a garden would it have been like this, or would it have broken away from conventionality into surprising arbours, sudden flaming bushes that conformed to no particular pattern? What had come over him to-day that he should feel like this? Was it a new eagerness in the wind, a particular flourish of leaves against a blue sky? Or was it his recollection of that magnificent conception of Sorley's seen some years ago and never forgotten? And would life mould him, too, that reckless adventurer, into someone not so very different from sober, respected John Hardwick?

He said quickly, "When your sister is married you must invite her to stay. She will feel strange in England after so long."

But Janet said, "Oh, Cassie would find it dull here. She is accustomed to a great deal of gaiety. She would think of us as old fogies. Besides, we shouldn't be grand enough, and she would think your work ridiculous."

And then, too, she reminded herself, artists were never like other men. She would not know how to cope with an artist, particularly an artist married to Cassie. And behind and beyond all that was the fear that visitors would steal from her the little attention she could still look for from her husband. This house was his refuge. She wanted to pull up the

drawbridge and shut out the whole world. She only wanted Richard when she could not have John. At other times even he was an intruder.

She consoled herself with the thought that even if she invited Cassie, Cassie would not come. .

15

At first, it seemed, she was right. Cassie showed no eagerness to return to her native land which was by this time more strange to her than most European States. Michael took her to Spain for the honeymoon (John never gave me a honeymoon, Janet reminded herself, when she heard) and they lingered on for three months, enchanted by the heat of the sun, the sharpness of the colouring and the complete absence of any sense of time on the part of the inhabitants.

"So far as Spain is concerned the clock need never have been invented," remarked Cassie. "It gives one a sense of eternity."

Michael was at home anywhere. His work was the meaning of his life, and there was no need to return to England to work. Neither he nor Cassie hankered after a family. Children meant putting a peg in the ground, attaching yourself to a rope. Artists, said Cassie qhcerfully, should admit no responsibility save to their art. She was the very antithesis of Janet. To her, men were passion and delight, challenge and satisfaction. The root of constancy, said Madame Dubois, is not in her. Nowadays she could speak easily of Ned Castlebarry. He had had so many successors. Cassie was like a city hung out with flags. She didn't, as Janet did, dream of old age cosily ensconced by a fire with her husband, miraculously unchanged, a little older, a little stiffer, of course but intrinsically the same, on the opposite side of the hearth. Cassie never visualised old age. It was the one enemy she dreaded. To be old meant the dying out of fires that had kept her warm all her life, the end of adventure and hope, a slow progress towards eternal darkness, eternal cold. Janet's unquenchable belief in the hereafter had no consolations for her. According to the faithful, none of those qualities that made life so enchanting,

such a brilliant kaleidoscope, would endure in eternity. So she saw Michael as one more adventure (where Janet saw John as the eternal city), a house where she would rest and be gay, ready to move on to her next destination if the house collapsed over her head, as houses sometimes did, never, never as a refuge in which to grow old gently, and finally close her eyes in the solemn conviction that she would find its heavenly counterpart when she woke up in eternity.

At the end of three months Michael carelessly suggested pulling up their shallow roots and going on to Vienna.

"It's time we heard some music," he said. There was music in Spain, of course, wandering tunes that a man could trace through a still night, down one street after another until the players were discovered playing their random music under the stars. But in Vienna was the real music both knew and loved.

"We ought to go to England for a few weeks," said Cassie reluctantly. She minded not at all leaving Spain and the casual friendships she had made there. She was of those who could find music in the desert.

"Why should we go to England?" asked Michael, casually. "We have neither of us been back for years. In England they erect statues to their great men, and the value of the statue varies with its weight. That is English art."

"We ought to see Janet and her husband."

"She has managed to live very well without you for years. In any case, if she wants to meet us, why should the mountain not come to Mahomet? Reunion in Vienna would be far more fitting than reunion in Northweston. You must write."

"John," said Janet in some excitement, laying down her sister's letter, "Michael and Cassie have gone to Vienna and they suggest that we shall join them there. How typical of Cassie to assume that we shall make the journey rather than they should come here."

But John's face had lighted up at her words. "Vienna! Should you like to go, Janet?"

She looked at him suspiciously "Not alone," she said.

"I never intended you should go alone. But it's years since I was there. And I have kept you short enough of holidays

this great while." Unconsciously he repeated Michael's remark. "It would be a grand thing to hear real music again." ***

She said uncomfortably, "I know, of course, there are not very many opportunities here . . ." But she was thinking that a trip to the Continent involved a great deal of thought. It would mean shutting up the house, changing the servants' holidays. Cassie would have gone round the world with less thought than Janet required to leave her house for a week-end.

"If you are sure you can leave your work," she began uncertainly. "But, John, there is no reason why you should be inconvenienced."

John laughed. "Vienna is worth a little inconvenience. Besides, Richard will hold the bridge quite as well as I. It is a good thing to go away sometimes to realise that no-one is indispensable."

She felt a cold wind pass through the room. He was indispensable to her happiness, yes, even to her life. She never allowed herself to think that he might be the first to go, leaving her utterly desolate.

Patience had never been among John's virtues, and so, within a week, they arrived in Vienna. But when they called at the hotel where Cassie said she and Michael would be found, it was to learn that no reservations had been made in their name.

Instantly Janet was agitated. "There must be some mistake. Mrs. Sorley wrote to us . . ." Opening her large, useful bag she identified Cassie's letter. John stood patiently by until she had found the sentence she sought. "Yes, I am right. She says clearly she expects to be here yesterday."

Her husband smiled- at the twisted sentence. The clerk repeated politely and without interest that no rooms had been bespoken. **

"What can have happened?" There was a tragic note in Janet's voice; her face seemed to lengthen. A modern beauty specialist would have warned her never to betray the fact that she was troubled. It put ten years on to her age.

"Obviously your sister has changed her mind." John was

as cool as the clerk. "I daresay she and Michael decided to stay in Spain a little longer.-"

"Then she should have let us know. Cassie was never considerate. We made this journey particularly to meet them . . ."

John detached Janet from the desk and walked her away, saying, "It is no matter. The important thing is that we should be in Vienna ourselves. The others were only an excuse."

They returned to their hotel and went up to their room. Janet looked round her with satisfaction. "It is really very comfortable," she said.

John characteristically went over to the window to look down at the beautiful city. "When you have rested," he suggested, "we might walk down the Ring Strasse. And perhaps we could get tickets for the opera to-night."

Something unfamiliar in his voice made Janet desist from her unpacking. (She was of those travellers who unpack immediately they arrive at a destination, before they even look out of the window.) It had a quality, caressing, reminiscent, as if he were looking over a scene intimate and beloved. So sound the voices of those who, after long sojourn, return home. She laughed unconvincingly.

"Of course. You have been here before. I had forgotten. Is it much changed?"

"Changed? How could it change? There are places and memories that are indestructible."

The shocking thought struck her that he had forgotten her presence, that here she had no substantial existence for him. And suddenly she knew what had never occurred to her before, that Vienna had a special meaning for him, that it stood apart from every other city in the world 1

Being the woman she was, she could not bottle up her suspicion, allow wisdom the last word. Just as she could not bear to wait, endure any suspense, even in a small matter like the pulling of a tooth, the writing of a letter, so she must put her question the instant the doubt presented itself.

"John, was it in Vienna that you met Laura?"

If he was taken unawares he concealed it well. But she was sure he was not so surprised. He had been so deep in the past, the past that belonged to the dead girl, that even her name on Janet's lips appeared natural.

"Did I never tell you? Yes, I met her here. She was with her brother. We met at the Opera House."

"Were you travelling with your uncle?"

"My uncle never left home. He lived so entirely in the past that to him one place was the same as another. No, I had a friend called Armitage, a man in orders. He was giving himself a holiday after five years of work in the slums. Even Vienna could not altogether persuade him to forget his problems. But I think what really defeated him was the British character. It's difficult to imagine the inhabitants of any large English town transported here. They wouldn't be at home, at ease. Armitage was not."

"But you were."

"My mother, I am told, sang like an angel. My uncle once said that she might have sung in grand opera, but naturally there were a number of objections, the chief of them being my father, whom she met and married after their third meeting."

"Tell me about Laura. How did you get to know her?"

"As I told you, I saw her first at the Opera House. Even at first sight there was something about her and Norman I have hardly discovered in a human creature since, a kind of genius for living. It was as insistent as a fire. Long before I knew who they were or had spoken to them . . ." He broke off on a laugh. "I say long, but almost immediately we were friends. There is something about this city, it seems to dismiss time. The past and the present, they're all one. We found we were staying at the same hotel—oh, not here, nothing nearly so grand. We had rooms in the annexe and came into the hotel to eat, across a cobbled yard. Neither Armitage nor myself was much of a linguist and one day we were in difficulties deciphering the menu. Laura and Norman had the table next to our own—that, perhaps, is why I noticed her in the first place—and they came to our rescue. After that, by common consent, we linked up our parties."

"Was she the only woman among you?"

"You said that just like Armitage. He was inclined to be on his guard—he belonged to that party in the church that wished to see a return to the celibacy of the clergy and he was perpetually on the defensive against his own nature. But even he soon dismissed his fears. Instead of limiting our enjoyment, she seemed to treble it for us all."

"And her brother? Was he older than she?"

"He was the same age as my friend. They were a revelation to us, a sort of spirit of Vienna as I think of it now. I couldn't hope to make you understand. It would be difficult to explain to another English person, though over here they took it for granted. They did not cling to life like misers—they both died young—but took it lightly, recklessly even, but they never despised it, not even the dark and difficult parts. They were orphans and so had been thrown together more than brothers and sisters often are, I suppose. An only child myself, without parents, I found them- fascinating. I had never dreamed before how much an only child misses. Even Armitage was finally won over."

"And for you," said Janet, speaking with difficulty, "she is as alive as ever she was. And yet you never speak of her."

"In England I remember them both as I remember all the friends I have lost, but here, in the city that seemed peculiarly theirs, the city they interpreted for me, everything is changed. I begin to feel that, though human creatures die, the record they made still lives somewhere, if only in the airs and the history of this city that will always be enchanted for me for their sakes. I have wondered sometimes if time dies with the individual." Now, she saw, and, seeing, despaired, he was away on the charger of fantasy and she watched him soaring into the clouds, while tradition and temperament kept her own feet firmly on the ground. "If that is so, if time past is not time dissolved, but still exists somewhere beyond our knowledge and understanding, then their story lives in that invisible archive. Somewhere beyond our sight, that week—for it was no more—burns as brightly as ever. Sometimes even now, on a very golden morning, before I cotine down to the

letters and the visits and all the duties of the day, I get a flash of that vanished delight, like a glimpse through a curtain. I suppose that is an experience common to all humanity, not some particular favour vouchsafed to myself."

"Not to me," said Janet in a still voice. His enthusiasm had kindled even her sober imagination, presented her with a vision of those four youthful figures, since even Armitage seemed touched by their magic, not scarred, as life inevitably scars all her sons and daughters, in their passage through time, but beautiful in their unspoiled youth and the fearlessness they had never lost.

"Are you not going to unpack?" she continued, anxious to wean him from this dangerous return to the past.

"Presently. There is no hurry. It's as I told you. Time is defeated here. They all defeated it." He turned back from the window, smiling at her, so bathed in a recaptured delight that he could afford to draw the curtain a little further back. "I remember one day we spoke of getting old, none of us quite believing it could ever happen to us. Age seemed so remote. And we talked of what we hoped to accomplish by that remote period. Armitage's schemes were all for those among whom he laboured. But they—Norman and Laura—would not look so far ahead. I cannot visualise the future, Laura said. That is the way to lose the present. And how right she was for both of them. They're both imperishable in youth, all three, in fact. . ."

Janet, listening in helpless dismay, was suddenly overwhelmed by a furious burning jealousy. She was like someone standing outside a window watching the pulsing, happy, intimate life of the room within, knowing that he may knock in vain for admittance. For he had shown her at last a John Hardwick with whom she could hope to establish no connection. That John belonged to Laura and to his youth. Why, despite the grey in his hair, the settling of his figure as he approached middle-age, he actually seemed younger now than on the first day they met. That morning in the churchyard at Abbot St. Mary he had seemed to her to possess every virtue but that of youth. The peculiar buoyancy of spirit that belongs to man's first period had been lacking. She

hadn't hankered for it, minded, really; in a way it simplified matters, since she herself was long past youth at twenty-eight. The past was over and done with, she had thought. Let it rest in its grave. But now she saw that his, far from lying withered, unrecognisable, in some anonymous tomb, remained fresh and incorruptible in his heart. How often did he visit that secret chamber where she had never contrived to force her way? Ah, but he went, solitary, by stealth. All these years he had kept this part of his life away from her, and she had not guessed.

"He has forgotten I exist," she assured her bruised and angry spirit. "Laura is more living to him at this moment, though she has been in her grave these ten years past, than I, who can touch him by putting out my hand."

"How real it all is to you!" she burst forth uncontrollably. "They say some people c[^]n relive their past ..."

She saw the amazement in his eyes and wondered: Is that to find me in the room with him? or because to him Laura is ever-present and cannot be relegated to the past? He smiled at her kindly.

"Why, Janet, you must forgive me. I was quite carried away. They say that is the first sign of old age, to become immersed in the past." Deliberately he used her expression. "And I quite forgot you must be tired." He made her sit down and unfastened her boots and looked round for her slippers. What had he been saying, what madness had overwhelmed him? The dream (for what else was it now?) had been so vivid that, by contrast, the present was like a shadow. Yet *this* was the reality—Northweston and this woman at his side, his friendships, Richard Gladstone, Samuel Dyer and the rest, his championship of the oppressed. A good life, he had often thought, satisfactory in so many ways. If he had remained at home, he would never have understood the extent of his loss. Why, a whole world of experience was closed to him, the world of passion and reciprocal love. What would Laura have said to this sober woman with the greying hair, this devoted—housekeeper and friend?

But Janet read into his quick change of mood an intensification of his resolve to preserve for himself a little corner of

his life, and instead of taking advantage of the opportunity to turn the course of the conversation, she said, her feeling of resentment against her own unhappy youth, with its slights and humiliations, the neglect that had been her portion defeating wisdom, "John, you have never told me what she was like. Have you no photograph you could show me?" (Though, surely, a man ten years a husband would long ago have destroyed all tangible memories of an earlier love!)

She stabbed him then with her demand. For an instant he was defenceless before her pitiless sword.

"I . . . You know what I think of photographs, Janet. They may catch a likeness, but how can they catch the spirit of the subject? That's something that defies all man's enterprise. Only an artist can catch that, not a mere box of tricks."

Voice and eyes pleaded with her to be generous, not to drive him too far. But Janet, having taken the bit between her teeth, was in no mood to relinquish it.

"But you have one?" she insisted.

"The three of us—Armitage had to return a day early—had a picture taken one morning at one of the shops here. It wasn't a set piece, more like an impression. She was laughing, I remember, and Norman and I stood on either side. Between two fires, she said, and she was still laughing when the operator clicked the spring. 'One day when I am old and a grandmother, for I mean to have a great many grandchildren,' she said, 'I shall show this to them and say, "You will never guess who that is," and 'of course,' she said, 'they will not.' To the young the old are static, were born stiff and brittle. They can never believe that that is what lies ahead for them, too."

"You have never shown it to me," continued the pitiless Janet. She could be as single-minded as Armitage when she chose, thought John. Armitage had warned him against Laura at first, though even he had capitulated grudgingly to her charm before he returned to England. ("You are like John Bull, who never knows when to stop," Richard Gladstone used to tell her. "You are so arrogant, you believe that because you are Mrs. John Hardwick, misfortune will never dare touch you. You walk on the edge of the abyss and you

cannot believe that one day your stubborn feet may carry you over the edge.")

John stood up, turned purposefully towards his own baggage. "All that belongs to the past," he said, beginning to unfasten a strap. "What concerns us is the present and the future. Surely we have always agreed on that."

"Everything that concerns you concerns me," she insisted. "That is what marriage is."

"You and Armitage would have made a famous couple," he told her, drily. "Both so dogmatic and both so certain that your dogma must be the right one."

16

He was resolved not to show her the photograph or even acknowledge its existence and for the moment fortune was with him, for now someone knocked on the door and a telegram was brought in. This was from Cassie explaining, with lavish disregard for expense, a change of plan, but giving the date of their arrival three days ahead. ^r-

"So now our troubles are over, so far as they are concerned," said John cheerfully. "And we have a little time to ourselves."

To his relief the telegram appeared to have taken Janet's mind off the photograph, and during the period between its delivery and the Sorleys' arrival in Vienna he devoted himself utterly to her. For two days no woman could have asked for a more charming and attentive companion. He took her everywhere, was careful that she should not do too much and reassured her about the past. It was natural, she told herself, that being in Vienna should recall memories of the girl he had once met there, but the past could not harm the security of Mrs. John Hardwick, the ten-years wife. But on the third day, by one of those chances that appear to shape human destiny, a trivial incident occurred that destroyed all her newly-won confidence. Janet had remained indoors to write letters while John went to the barber. Janet wrote to merest acquaintances for the pleasure of setting a foreign stamp on the envelope. But, her letters done, she found herself without

stamps and, sooner than expose her ignorance of the language to a (doubtless) contemptuous clerk, she opened the wallet John had for once left on the table, and looked for stamps there. When she found the faded scrap of pasteboard tucked into one of the pockets she was dumbfounded. She never questioned the identity of the photograph, though both the young men's likenesses had been cut away. This lovely laughing face, surely a lifelong stranger to fear, could belong to only one woman, and she thought, shaken with rage and alarm, "Perhaps if she had lived he would have ceased to carry her picture everywhere." (Had he ever cherished one of his wife? She believed not.) "If he had married her he would have found her less perfect, I daresay. Ah, but the living have no weapons against the dead."

So, all these years, he had kept her enshrined, his secret life. All men live double lives, Cora had remarked on one occasion, and she had sprung instantly to John's defence.

"Not my husband."

Cora had smiled. "Yours must be the exception that proves the rule."

"And all the time, she was right," Janet reflected. The little picture shook in her shaking hand.

John, returning unexpectedly for the wallet that he had overlooked, found her standing beside the table, absorbed, deaf for once to the sound of his foot on the stair. Indeed, she only recognised his presence when his hand came over her shoulder and took the photograph away.

"Why, John! How you startled me! I was looking for stamps ..."

For a moment he said nothing. He was literally beyond speech.

On rare occasions during their life together she had seen him moved to anger, and then never by individuals as such, only by a cause. Now for the first time she saw that white flame turned against herself.

She said again quickly, "I was looking for stamps," and he opened a flap of the wallet and gave her some.

"This is where they are always kept. No, take them all. You will be writing more letters to-morrow."

He believed her; it was not in Janet's nature to pry. Nevertheless, she had invaded the past, she who had present and future and should therewith have been satisfied. That the fault was his for speaking so freely of Laura in the first instance he did not pause to consider. She was still so real to him that such speech came easily, once he was off his guard. But it seemed a cruel result of a few minutes' indiscretion. He heard her voice, conciliatory, gentle. "You are right, John. She must have been very beautiful. One can see that still."

He closed the wallet and put it in his pocket. "It does not do her justice," he said in a low voice, and then, to indicate that he would not hear another word on the subject, he added, "They gave me this in the hall. It is a telegram from your sister. She and her husband arrive to-morrow."

Without any further comment he left her seeking for words to repair the breach between them. After he had gone she knew fear for the first time since her marriage. For the first time she felt deserted, and she knew she must hasten to restore their relationship on its old footing. She loved him too much to blame him, though a wife has surely good reason to feel outraged when she discovers the picture of a previous love cherished for more than ten years. But this was not a wife and a husband. It was herself and John. This was the first real breach between them and for her part it could not be healed too soon. She wanted reassurance, not only that he nurtured no anger against her but that his former regard for her was unchanged. After some thought, she clapped on her hat and visited an art dealer in the town. Here she asked for a reproduction of a work by an English sculptor called Sorley. Her command of German was very small, and when she wished to indicate that it was sculpture that interested her she could only touch a little statuette of the Venus de Milo, who was apparently international since you found her everywhere. The man, pardonably confused, quoted its price, and when she said helplessly, Nein, nein, brought out a larger edition of the same work. In despair she seized a pencil and printed the name SORLEY on the back of an envelope. At once the man's manner changed. Now he understood. With

some difficulty he made it plain that, while he had no reproductions in plaster of any of Herr Soriey's work, there were photographs. If there was a particular work in which the Fraulein was interested. Janet said baldly, "Youth Aspiring," wondering whether the English title would flummox him anew, but immediately the man opened a portfolio and brought up a large, handsome photograph which he laid on the counter before her. At once she was repelled by the arrogant male figure, full of a fierce, a terrifying resolution, a ruthlessness that appalled her. She did not comprehend all the aspects of the boy Sorley had immortalised in bronze, the quintessence of desire, the negation of defeat. The man watching her thought she was overwhelmed by the magnificence of the conception and workmanship alike.

"Ah yes, Fraulein," he said eagerly. "It is incomparable, is it not? I assure you, the first time I set eyes on it, on the original, you comprehend, it seemed to me it was the most exciting thing I had ever beheld."

Most of this was lost on Janet, but she perceived that she was expected to admire the work. She made some confused and quite unintelligible reply and arranged to have the print framed, the finished work to be called for on the morrow. Her dismay was such that she felt she could not yet return to the hotel. The whole thing seemed to her horrible; she could recognise in the taut figure a lust for experience that made her shrink uncomfortably from the prospect of meeting the man who had been possessed by such a vision. It was as she anticipated. Cassie had married a man out of the pagan world in which she had found all her pleasure since leaving her father's house as a mere girl. She shied from the memory of John's expressed admiration of the work. Was it true, then, that every man was not one but several people, and did she, in truth, know only one John Hardwick or at most two? John the husband, Hardwick the reformer—but how many others were there she had yet to meet?

When she returned to the hotel she found John waiting for her. He appeared unconscious of any barrier between them, and she persuaded herself that she had been absurdly sensitive. His momentary anger was due to shock, nothing more.

After all, he had spoken freely enough of Laura on the day of their arrival. Yes, that was it. She was making a mountain out of a molehill. Her peace-offering had not been necessary, but she smiled to think of John's pleasure when he saw what she had brought him. Her complacency, however, was shattered when, going to their room to remove her hat, her attention was caught by a spent match on the rug. Since John was no smoker she was at a loss to know what it was doing there, but when she carried it over to the fireplace she received her answer. In the grate was a tiny heap of ash. Just as she had known at once whose the picture was in John's wallet, so now she saw what had happened. Sooner than share the dead girl with her, even to this minor extent, he had destroyed the picture. In this she wronged her husband. During her absence he had realised the folly of cherishing the old dream. Laura dead, to him was Laura lost for all eternity. And John Hardwick, the man of action, had no time for dreams. As he had met her in Vienna, here let him bid her a last farewell.

When Janet went down to the picture shop next morning she cherished a hope that the aggressive nakedness of the strained figure would, by the glass and the decorous frame she had chosen, be shaded into something approaching decency. But the sense of shameless power was just as vivid as before. She paid for the work and hurried back to the hotel, where she found John writing letters.

"I have brought you a little present, John," she told him, breathlessly, as eager as a child to watch him open the parcel. Eager and a little apprehensive.

His head came up with a jerk. "Why, Janet, what is this? Have I forgotten an anniversary?"

"No, no. This is just a present, not intended to commemorate anything except, perhaps, our first trip abroad together. There," as he removed the last wrapping, "that is the work you spoke of?"

"It is a very fine photograph. And what an unforgettable achievement. How thoughtful of you, Janet, though no representation does full justice to the power of the original."

"It will be pleasant to be able to tell Cassie's husband that

we both know something of his work," she beamed. She went away smiling her pleasure. As soon as the door had closed behind her John's expression changed. Not for an instant was he in the dark as to her motive. Having, albeit unwittingly, robbed him of one picture of abiding youth, she had attempted to replace it with another. Not that that was her intention. She lacked the subtlety for such an idea. But he knew that hereafter he would never see this photograph without recalling his first sight of Laura at the Opera House. That, then, was what Janet had achieved, taken Laura out of the past where he had been (at last) prepared to bury her, and set her in the heart of their daily life.

Janet had proposed meeting her sister at the station, but John demurred. "The porter will be there and they will have had a long journey. They will have no time to notice you properly. Wait till they are settled in their hotel, and then we will go round to see them there."

Janet looked uneasy. "You don't think they will find that unaffectionate?"

"I doubt whether they are thinking of us at all," returned John, drily. "After all, Cassie has been in no hurry to look us up these ten years."

"She said in her last letter she was burning to meet you."

"A remarkably slow fire," commented John, refusing to be hurried. "No, Janet, we will not go round to the hotel to be on the spot when she arrives. Your sister will want to look her best after so many years, and ..."

Janet laughed scornfully. "It is easy to see you have never met Cassie. She is never less than beautiful, not even at the end of a long journey."

"You make me quite curious to meet her."

John resumed his reading, paying no heed to his wife's obvious restlessness, her constant consulting of the little watch pinned to her breast, her unquiet movements from chair to table and thence to the window. When she suggested for the fourth time they should start to walk round to the hotel, he closed his book.

"I see you mean to give me no peace. One would suppose your sister was a dragon to see your agitation. Did she tyrannise over you when you were young?"

"She is a natural tyrant. And she has always had her own way, or practically always," she added quickly, remembering the Castlebarry incident.

"You shouldn't give in to her," said John, sensibly, taking up his hat.

When they reached the hotel there was no sign of Cassie in the lounge or anyone who might be her husband. It occurred to Janet that she would not recognise her brother-in-law if she met him face to face. It was characteristic of Cassie to keep them thus cooling their heels in the hall, after delaying her arrival for three days. But when she urged John to make enquiries of the hotel clerk he only said, "We can wait. There is no hurry. She will come when she's ready." He wondered why women set such store on inessentials. Janet believed that she would live for ever, yet she wanted to cram each moment with its appropriate activity. That time should be allowed to run by like water from a tap, not filling a bowl or a jug, just running—that was intolerable. For himself he was happy to rest here, watching the people come and go, overhearing an occasional phrase, seeing faces that, forgetful of their surroundings, sank into lines of reverie or anticipation. The ends of a score of lives touched his; he felt their warm flow. Presently he didn't even hear what Janet was saying . . .

A woman wearing peasant dress came through a doorway on the left and entered the lobby. She had a radiance and vitality that put him instantly in mind of Laura, and despite his resolve and the urgings of common-sense, the past came rolling up round him like a tide sweeping over the sand to lap his feet. Now he was young John Hardwick again, amazed and spellbound before the miracle of love at first sight. When he could see her more closely he realised that she was not really at all like his dead love. She was years older and bore the stamp of experience on her sophisticated features. But

he recognised in her the quality of beauty he had loved in the dead girl, the delicate recklessness, the undimmed ardour for the sheer adventure of living, and he felt the blood warm in his veins, knew a sensation to which he had for years now been a stranger, a feeling that at any instant life would start to revolve at a dizzying pace, and draw him into its irresistible wheel. It was a feeling utterly unrelated to the customary throb of existence, just as the excitement that seized him bore no relation to the sober affection he had for his wife. There was, he knew, no security in such an instant; dangerous, impermanent, it demanded everything, promising nothing. Then the woman looked up and met his eyes, and at once sanity and security were simply words without meaning. For here, long after he had accepted his way of life, anticipating no great change, no new thrill of experience this side of death, was the miracle that happened in nature every spring when life renewed itself even in branches that seemed withered, in untended plots where, it seemed, no flower would bloom again. Deliberately, four-and-twenty hours ago, he had set lire to a dream he should long since have outgrown. And here in this hotel lobby, with crowds pressing on every side, with Janet, his wife of ten years, close at hand, he had found the substance of that dream in the shape of a woman whose name he did not even know.

"So this," he thought dizzily, "is why I came to Vienna, not to say farewell to the past, but to meet the future."

There seemed to be nothing unreal or improbable in this encounter. Towards this goal he had been journeying for ten years, for this instant he had treasured those gifts that had never been Janet's. He saw nothing, could think of nothing but the Now. The past was gone like water poured on the sand; the future as yet had no existence. It was wax to be moulded by himself, to what likeness he could not consider. With no sense of blasphemy a text he had often read surged into his mind. He thought he said the words aloud, but those watching him heard nothing. "I am he that was dead and am alive again . . . and behold, I am alive for evermore."

Out of the music that seemed to fill the air he heard Janet's clear, flat tones.

"Why, Cassie, for the moment I hardly knew you. It is that foreign dress you are wearing. And, of course, it is so many years—we must both have changed greatly."

He heard a soft, rich laugh, a lovely voice to match the lovely face. "I promise you, Janet, I should have known you anywhere. You have scarcely changed at all. You are as English as ever. Foreign dress, indeed. It is you who wear foreign dress here."

Janet was so much excited at the thought of introducing John that she let that pass.

"At least, you would not have known John, though that is nobody's fault but your own. If you had had any affection for us, you would have met each other long ago."

His heart swelled, hesitated, raced ahead. Had it touched her, too, this sense of inevitability, this spontaneous recognition? Their eyes met again and he had his answer. Yes, the recognition was mutual. How could I guess that after so many years, so many loves, I should find you waiting for me here in Vienna? That was what her eyes said as clearly as speech. But when her words came, they were easy enough.

"Oh, John and I are old souls. I can see that at once. Perhaps we met in some other life. Or, no doubt," she added quickly, seeing Janet's face cloud over, "it is because you have written of him so much and so often it's hard to feel we're strangers."

Again their eyes met; they were laughing, full of amused confidences. Strangers? they said. What nonsense is this, that we who have known one another always, should have to suffer these formal introductions? How could Janet stand so close and see nothing? Yet it was obvious that she was utterly unaware of the miracle, for now she was saying in a gay, practical tone, "We only need your husband, Cassie, to complete our party. John is a great admirer of his work, and is dying to meet him as an artist, quite apart from the new member of the family."

"You must be sure to tell him that," Cassie informed her. "But you mustn't expect him to be greatly impressed."

Janet bridled. "John has very little time to keep *au courant* with new developments in art," she began, but Cassie intervened, "If you know anything of artists, you will know they're fluid, unreliable, living only for their work, not fettered like the rest of us by ordinary human relationships. Already I think Michael sometimes forgets he has a wife, or, at best, thinks of me as just some attractive woman he married, not as Cassie, someone individual, different from anyone else in the world."

"You will find," said Janet with an air of worldly wisdom that exasperated John and made Cassie smile mockingly, "that a good many husbands are like that. I am sure I have been a grass widow quite as long as I have been a wife." But the look she cast at her husband, an assured, confident, *married* look, reflected Cassie, gave the lie to her words. She sees to it that he never forgets he is married to her, she told herself.

Their reflections were interrupted by a man noticeable even in a country where beauty and grace are universal, who came striding across the hall and paused beside them. He was like a Viking, thought simple Janet, with his penetrating blue eye and the great golden-brown beard and moustache that were a shade lighter than his thick thatch that seemed pure gold. For an instant she felt he was unreal. In the presence of such exuberance she began to shrivel. For this man was one size larger than life. She thought angrily, "It is like Cassie to marry someone not quite like anyone else". For, except to her prejudiced eyes, even John must pass unnoticed when such a man was in the company. And she knew anger against her husband because, uncaring, unaware, he allowed himself to be dwarfed by the newcomer.

Cassie laughingly performed introductions. "And only think, Michael, both Janet and John know your work. That is fame indeed. You know what they say about a prophet in his own country, but even in Northweston you are acclaimed."

"Northweston is not a land of barbarians," cried Janet, "though perhaps to you, accustomed to continental living, we should seem that."

"I am sure," said her brother-in-law courteously, "it has a Browning Society, and a reading circle ..."

"And a Debating Society," agreed Janet, "at which John is often asked to take the chair, though his professional engagements seldom allow him to do so."

With a start John came to himself, drew Janet's arm through his own. "They are teasing you, my dear. You mustn't take them seriously."

"Cassie has been away from England for so long she has forgotten there is still one country in Europe where we take life seriously," said Janet, telling herself she would not be deflated by her younger sister. After all, she was the matron here. For once she would make the suggestions, plan their evening. And indeed in her mind it was settled already. The Sorleys should dine with John and herself at their hotel, and afterwards there would be a great deal to talk about. If Cassie proposed going out after dinner she would restrain her, remind her she had had an exhausting journey, suggest that the men must become acquainted. Everything was so plain in her eyes that she could not understand how it was that, five minutes later, it was settled that the arrangements for the evening should be left with Michael.

"Michael," explained his wife, "knows everyone in Vienna."

Janet looked expectantly at her husband. This was his opportunity to explain that he also was no stranger here. But when he said nothing she filled in the gap herself.

"Vienna was my first adventure," agreed John, seeing that something was expected of him.

"I can see you have excellent taste," returned Cassie, gravely. "I think if I could choose a city to haunt when I die, I should come back here. There is such gaiety, such colour. I have danced in all the capitals of Europe but never with quite such abandon as in Vienna. To-night, John, after dinner, we will go to a cabaret, and after that we will dance."

Janet looked horrified. "That may be very well for you, Cassie, but our dancing days are over, John's and mine."

"You are speaking of Northweston," laughed Cassie. "But you are in Vienna now." She turned to John. "You will never

persuade me you were not a dancing-man before you turned serious."

"When I lived with my uncle, I was known as the frivolous nephew," acknowledged John. "I would go miles for a dance, walking across the fields with galoshes over my dancing pumps. There was a family living close by," he added reminiscently. "Three charming daughters—and I received many invitations to accompany them. I can see us now, they and their parents and their brother, Roger. He was in the —Lancers, which was fortunate for me, since he and his brother-officers were uncommonly kind in procuring me invitations. We would walk over the fields to dinner, Mrs. Somerset and the girls with their long skirts draped over their arms and cloaks over their pretty frocks. In those days in the country, if it were fine, we never thought of driving out to dinner."

"And how you enjoyed yourself!" exclaimed Cassie with delight. "What made you abandon anything so pleasant? Or is that one of the penalties one pays for marriage. Janet must advise me."

Janet's lip quivered; she was remembering, as she was sure Cassie must also do, her own miserable attempts on a ball-room floor.

"Janet's favourite flower must be the wallflower," Cassie had remarked maliciously at the end of one such evening. The elder sister never forgot. To this day she would not have the flower in her garden, despite John's mild protestations in its favour, and when once she found that a seed had taken root and established itself, she tore it up savagely and flung it over the wall.

"Oh, I had given up dancing before marriage," John was saying to Cassie. "The fact is, I was involved in an accident that caused me to go lame for some time, and though the trouble eventually cleared up, by then I had filled my life with so many activities there was no space for frivolity."

"Janet, as a good wife, should have seen to it that you found time to enjoy yourself. All work and no play is as bad a philosophy as any there is."

"In Northweston," said Janet, clearly, "people of our age are not expected to dance."

"And then you are surprised that I prefer to live out of England? Still, John, you are not in Northweston now, and I for one intend to dance so long as I have a leg to hop on." She drew a deep breath. "How homesick all this makes me for English ballrooms, in spite of everything. You remember, Janet, the year Aunt Florence brought me back to be ushered into English society? It was my baptism in blood, and how I loved it. I was probably the most bloodthirsty creature who ever took the floor. I was resolved to miss nothing, and I think I may safely say I did not—not even a broken heart."

Janet was scandalized by such candour, but John detected beneath the light words the scar of an ancient grief, and his heart warmed to Cassie, who knew that at the last grief goes over and the spirit of man is unconquerable. Janet here changed the subject by enquiring where her sister thought of settling down.

"Oh, any roof will do for us," was Cassie's careless rejoinder. "I never saw the attraction of living in a museum, which is so many women's notion of a home. I have wandered very successfully for several years now, and I see nothing against continuing such a course."

"And Michael?" Janet turned shyly to her new brother-in-law. He had the robust masculinity of a man who sees women only as they affect himself, only, that is, as the companion and complement of man. For women's achievements, apart perhaps from the artistic, he would not give a jot, and by his standards, Janet knew instinctively, she scarcely existed. Why, not one of the tricks Cassie employed by instinct was natural to Janet, and she looked fondly at her husband, thankful that he was a very different sort of man. Michael would have told her there are no different sorts of men; it was simply that, to date, John had filled his life with so many activities, probably of set design, that he left no room in it for the delights of the body, to which, Michael would have insisted, he was as susceptible as other men. Fortunately the frail structure of skin and bone that conceals the brain conceals also the thoughts passing through it.

Now he said politely in reply to Janet's timid question, "You have forgotten what Cassie is like if you suppose my wishes will make any impression." But she saw the glance he gave his wife and thought, "He is as proud of her as if she were one of his own works. But if ever she were to lose her looks or her gaiety he would forget her at once. I suppose Cassie would say that is what it is to be an artist."

She fell silent once more, confused by the welter of thoughts and emotions that surged through her. She had greatly looked forward to this meeting, had seen herself presenting John to her sister—and how surprised Cassie would be to discover that her brother-in-law was no pursy little attorney (probably she expected him to have bandy legs and a squint, she told herself in indignation) and that, surely, would create in her a respect for her sister she had never known before. But nothing had turned out as she anticipated. Cassie had immediately taken possession not only of the situation but also of John. Why, he was infatuated, talking and laughing like any boy. She had shrunk from referring to his earlier visit to Vienna since she knew that it was here he had met Laura, but Cassie knew no such delicacy, and was questioning him eagerly about that time. Painfully she tried to turn the subject, but John was smiling and saying, "I shall always associate Vienna with romance. I am like Mary who swore they would one day find *Calais* carved on her heart."

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"If Richard could see him now," reflected Janet, seething with incredulous fury, "he would not recognise him."

Poor Janet! She always assumed that no-one could discover more in a person or a situation than was clear to herself. As for Michael, she realised that to him she was virtually not a woman at all. All the qualities he demanded in the sex, beauty, graciousness, charm, were lacking in her. She threw back her head. It was of no consequence what Michael Sorley thought. As an artist he might be pre-eminent, but to Janet Hardwick he had no significance at all beyond being her sister's husband.

As last she beguiled John away, saying they must return to their hotel, and agreeing to meet the Sorleys at a later hour. John saw no reason for hurry, but he came without

demur. He would be seeing Cassie again to-night and on the morrow and the day after that. For the rest of their time in Vienna they would do everything together. As for the future, now he could cry with Laura, I cannot think of that. That is the way to lose the present.

"And what do you think of Cassie?" enquired Janet as they made their way back to their hotel.

He flung her a sharp glance, suspicious of irony, but Janet's face was smooth and candid.

"Oh, she is quite irresistible," he replied gaily. "One sees how her life must have been a triumphal procession from city to city. Sorley is a remarkably fortunate fellow."

"She has certainly kept her looks," Janet acknowledged. "And yet, she hardly seems like a wife."

"You must give her time," John protested. "Remember, you have ten years advantage of her." She read into his answer the unspoken thought that, in fact, was not in his mind since he was not comparing the sisters. "And, of course, she is eight years your junior." Cassie, thought John, was of the company of ageless women. Even when she was old beauty would stay with her. And so, perhaps, in happier circumstances, it would have done, but he could not then or ever visualise the shapeless, spiritless old woman who, forty years later, would die and be carried to her rest in Bury Green Churchyard.

"As for her husband," Janet continued, "he looks every inch an artist. I am glad, my dearest, you don't feel it necessary to be so conspicuous." And she thought again of those magnetic blue eyes as brilliant as the blue shirt Michael had worn. She tried to picture John in such clothes and shivered.

"You are cold?" said John, attentively.

"Not in the least. I was thinking how different their way of life is from ours."

"That is because they are cosmopolitans, while we are what they would call provincials.*"

"It is all very well for you to laugh, John, but there is no sense in perpetually under-valuing yourself. You are a greater man than Michael Sorley, you will leave the world a far

greater legacy when you die, and yet at the first meeting you are prepared to occupy a second place. It is this ridiculous modesty in you. However, if Cassie has any discrimination, she will not be deceived by that."

He let her chatter on while he pursued his own thoughts. She does not look like a wife, Janet had said, and he found himself whispering, "She is the very stuff of which poetry is made." He came out of his reverie to hear Janet say, "Now, remember, this is your holiday, John. You are not to let Cassie make a slave of you. She is accustomed to that, but once we are back in Northweston you will give yourself no rest. You must take life easily here."

And he, smiling, told himself, "Take life? She is the very source of it. A tired man could find refreshment just by being in her company. She revivifies by her very presence. Why, I had forgotten what it was like to feel so charged with energy. If she does that for me at a first meeting I shall return to Northweston like a giant refreshed." And even the thought that he would be in one country while she remained in another could not dim his spirits. To-night he was as buoyant as a cork, and Janet, perceiving this, said, "How much good your holiday has done you already. How glad I am that we came."

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But long before the date of their return to Northweston she was wishing with all her heart that they had clung to their usual plan of a week at Scarborough or at some country farmhouse where John would have remained entirely hers. For during the enchanted fortnight that followed he seemed to move steadily away from the man she knew and had married and to reclaim identity with the John Hardwick Laura had known, the John who had been, she thought, dead and buried by the time he came visiting at Abbot St. Mary, and in this new life her place was shadowy and ill-defined. Now, instead of serious discussion as to how the day should be spent, they found themselves whirled along in Cassie's train, members of a party of holiday-makers instead of a holiday-making couple. Her dreams of establishing a

fresh intimacy with her husband withered at a touch. She was like a cripple limping after a band of athletes, all engaged in activities that were beyond her, and though again and again John turned back and, as it were, gave her a hand, she still felt the stranger on the fringe of the crowd. Even their language was unfamiliar, and she strove in vain to engage John in any form of personal conversation on the rare occasions when they found themselves alone. Cassie had spoken the truth when she said in her sweeping way, "Michael knows everyone in Vienna." At least, if he didn't know everyone, he knew so many people that privacy became an impossibility.

"Cassie is an extraordinary person," she burst forth one night when she and John were in their own room. "You would never think she was newly-married. She never seems to wish to be alone with her husband. Life with her must be like being perpetually on a stage."

"You said yourself that we are here for a holiday," John reminded her, smiling. "The essence of holiday is change."

His words comforted her sore heart, seeming to promise that, once back in Northweston, he would revert to the familiar John she loved and (she believed) understood. In the meantime, she must make the best of a difficult situation. Since she had never seen him in such surroundings, never assembled in his house any company but the most staid, the most high-minded of their neighbours, it was *no* wonder, she said sensibly, that he had given her a surprise. Now she knew of this side to his nature she would pander to it, entertain more widely, make John Hardwick's house a place where people would deem it a favour to be invited. Mrs. Hardwick, that charming hostess. An invaluable wife. In imagination she heard the whispers. They tided her over these trying days when John seemed more of a stranger than when they first met. But it is only for a few days more, she reminded herself. And she wrote long, detailed letters to the servants warning them of the time of her arrival, giving instructions, planning all John's favourite dishes for their first meal at home. So she endeavoured to relieve the burden of her loneliness,

Meanwhile Cassie said to Michael, "It is clear that he married her out of pity. But she would be wise to pay him larger dividends. However, since she thinks us hopelessly worldly. I may as well save my breath and since she does not know what she misses I daresay she is all right."

Not for an instant did it occur to her to relinquish her hold on John. To her to love was to live, and love itself its own justification. As for John, he perceived only too clearly the direction in which they were drifting, yet, when the prospect of the future troubled him as, in spite of himself, it had begun to do, he knew in his heart that Janet stood for the permanent things in his life, while Cassie was only the dream. Ah, but it was for dreams that men bartered all their hopes, tossed their caps over windmills, "gave up the years to be of work and joy and that unhopèd serene that men call age". And yet—and yet—what future could they hope to share, they, the sport of fate, she the rootless and reckless, the inconstant, the adventurer *par excellence*? And he, the sober seeker after justice, rooted in his beliefs, bound by honourable scruples she would never recognise, to a life in which she could play no part?

The last day of their holiday coincided with Cassie's birthday and she and Michael resolved to give a party at which John and his wife were to be the guests of honour. When Janet heard of this plan she was bitterly disappointed.

"Of course, we must accept," she agreed reluctantly, "but oh, John, how I had hoped we might have our last day together. I seem to have seen so little of you since they arrived."

"You will soon have as much of me as you want, back in Northweton," he told her, but she said with a flash of her fine eyes, "Once we are home I never see you at all. However, I mean to alter that."

The party was not until the evening and she insisted on spending the morning buying souvenirs for her Northweton acquaintances. John protested in vain.

"You will wear yourself out going round the shops, and then you will, perhaps, develop a migraine and ruin the end

of your holiday," he prophesied. "If you must take anything back, surely a selection of framed views would be the most suitable. I noticed some charming ones in a shop close by."

But this would not suit Janet. She liked to choose each gift individually, a lace jabot for this one, a fancy pin-box for that, and she ran from shop to shop, putting her accumulation into a large coloured basket she had bought for the purpose. "It is not really an extravagance, John. It will be most useful in the garden at home."

John accompanied her and made a pretence of helping with the selections, but in his heart he wondered how she could waste the last precious day buying gewgaws she would find quite as well in the *bon marche* at home. And his prophecy came true. On their return Janet confessed to "just a tiny headache, no, my dearest, nothing to make you frown. But I think I will just rest for a little to be ready for to-night." Long before the evening came, however, it was clear that she would be unfit for any exertion. She lay on her bed in a darkened room, with eau-de-cologne on her forehead, and pleaded with John not to leave her.

"I could not bear to feel myself alone in a strange hotel," she said. "I am sorry about to-night, but after all, we have seen a great deal of Cassie during the past fortnight, and she is certain to come to England next year."

She spoke as inconsequently as though next year were only a few days away. All through that bright afternoon she lay, moaning a little, refusing all food. John sat quietly in an armchair, making and rejecting plan after plan to snatch at least a few moments with Cassie before their departure early the next morning. Common-sense assured him of the futility of such a course. What benefit would five, ten minutes together be? This incident must end with his holiday and Janet's migraine might be regarded as a blessing in disguise, since it would excuse him from the necessity of bidding Cassie farewell. He had a ten-years-wife, she a three-months-husband. Any development of the strange unhallowed love that had sprung up between them in the instant of meeting was out of the question. Yet his resolve remained unshaken.

In some way he would contrive to see her, even though no conceivable good could come of it.

At about six o'clock Janet had an attack of sickness and he attended to her very kindly, knowing how she shrank from being seen by the servants in so pitiful a state. He bathed her face and hands, put fresh eau-de-cologne on her forehead, and replaced her crumpled pillows with the smoother ones from his own bed. He brought her a small glass of brandy that he insisted on her taking, adjusted the blinds, drew up the covers.

"Now you will be more comfortable," he said, when he had assisted her to change her nightdress. "Are you sure you will not take a little something? You have had practically no food all day."

But Janet shook her head. "If I could have a cup of good English tea, I believe that would cure me, but that is one of the things they do not understand on the Continent."

He went back to his chair and remained a little longer while she fell into a light sleep. Taking his writing-case he scrawled a note to Cassie to be delivered to her hotel, explaining Janet's indisposition and, in consequence, the enforced absence of both from to-night's festivity.

"I cannot leave Vienna without seeing you again" (he added). "Will you not send me some message of hope. Somehow I will contrive to meet you wherever you suggest."

When he had written the preposterous words—for how, in her present state, would Janet consent to be left even for a few moments?—he hurriedly sealed the letter and despatched it by messenger. As he closed the door behind the fellow, Janet stirred.

"You have not gone away, John?"

He made his voice gentle and kind. "I was sending a note to Cassie to tell her that unfortunately she will not see us to-night."

"I daresay she will hardly notice we are not there. She is always surrounded."

John could have laughed at her blindness. Cassie not miss him, when for either of them the lights were extinguished in the absence of the other. "I am really becoming very extravagant in my notions," he reproved himself. "There is no grief, no loss that could put out Cassie's flame."

He waited in a fever of anxiety for a reply to his note. None had come when Janet, waking from another uneasy doze, suggested that he must dine downstairs, "and then perhaps you would help me with my packing. I had hoped to be capable of it myself, but if we are to travel to-morrow, I dare risk no exertion to-night."

He grasped eagerly at that straw. "My dear, there is no hard-and-fast reason why we should return to-morrow. Richard can hold the fort for another twenty-four hours, and it would give you time to recover."

But she said at once that of course they must not change their plans. She had written to the servants, it would occasion a great deal of unnecessary upset, and to calm her he withdrew his suggestion. He saw that she was willing herself to be fit to travel on the morrow. When he was sure that she would sleep again he went downstairs in the hope that some message from Cassie might have arrived, but still there was nothing. Waiting for dinner, he wandered out into the street, to clear his head after the stuffy atmosphere of the sick-room. In the window of a nearby shop he saw a quaint trinket, an oval silver locket with the letter C. engraved upon it. The pretty thing caught his fancy, and he went in and bought it for Cassie. When he came back to the hotel her answer had arrived in the shape of an envelope containing a minute pill-box, and a three-lined note.

These pills are for Janet's migraine. I shall be at Rum-magens at midnight and will wait for you there. C.

A flood of exquisite relief swept over him, to be followed by an almost unbearable exaltation. He told himself he had known he could count on her, yet until this instant he had not been absolutely sure. He looked at his watch. Four hours, rather more, before he could hope to see her, and then for the briefest

space. There must be no risk of Janet waking and finding herself deserted. Because he loved Janet differently and in a lesser degree from Cassie he was the more aware of his responsibility towards her. Come what may, Janet must never guess. Yet it still did not occur to him that he could abandon his appointment with Cassie, preserve beyond all doubt Janet's ignorance of the situation. When he opened her door she looked up, saying fretfully, "What a long time you have been, John. I thought you had forgotten me."

He brought the little box from his pocket. "I have something here for your head. They were specially recommended."

She looked at him in instant mistrust. "What are they, John? You know I dislike drugs above all things."

"Unless you get some sleep to-night I shall not permit you to travel to-morrow," John told her.

She sank back on her pillow with a smile. "How good to me you are," she whispered. "I am sure a sickly wife must be a great nuisance on a holiday."

Her faith in him when he least deserved it would, on another occasion, have touched him to shame, but now only one consideration held his mind. Cassie would be at Rummagens at midnight and he would go there to meet her. Therefore, if these pellets would induce sleep, Janet must take them, whether she would or no. It appeared, however, that Janet was ready to be docile. She was really afraid of being compelled to stay in Vienna for an extra day, and when John brought her the glass of water and stood beside her bed while she put the pellets in her mouth, she swallowed meekly.

"I am sure I shall sleep soon," she told him.

And still he knew no pulse of pity for her. All his being was obsessed by the thought that, once Janet was asleep, he would steal out and meet Cassie.

The drug took some time to act, but at last he knew from her deep, regular breathing that she was asleep, and his evening was saved. At half-past eleven he rose quietly and went over to the bedside. Janet lay sunk in a sleep so deep that for a moment he was startled. So, he thought, she would look in the hour of her death, skin glistening and yellow over the narrow bone structure, lips a colourless line,

eyes like black pits under the broad prominent brow. She roused in him no sense of compassion; this Janet was a stranger, and it was without compunction that he stole away, hastened down the stairs and so out into the gay lighted street. In an instant he had forgotten the rigid figure, the dreary atmosphere of the sick-room, the bottle of smelling-salts, the glass of water, in case, by some mischance, she should wake before his return. The rest of his life, he supposed, belonged to her. This next hour—no longer, he told himself—was Cassie's right.

He was a little early at the rendezvous, and he sat at a table sipping a glass of wine, waiting tensely, heart almost bursting from his breast. The music seemed to be playing her name. Cassie. Cassie. He whispered it adoringly under his breath.

"Cassie. My darling. Come quickly."

Oh, Janet was right. Not Richard Gladstone or any of the Northweston familiars would have recognised him now.

The clock had just struck midnight when she came in, crossing instantly to his table.

"I never thought of Janet as a diplomatist," she said, taking the wine he poured for her and forgetting to taste it. "I was at my wits' end to know how we could achieve a little time together—and here is the one solution I never thought of."

He said quickly, but with ardour, too, "I must not stay long. Janet may wake and it would never do for her to find me gone. But I had to see you before I left. There is no knowing when we may meet again or in what circumstances." But he thought that once he was back at Northweston, this incident would appear to have no more reality than a dream. It wasn't John Hardwick, the solid attorney, who had lost his head and his heart in Vienna. So, at all events, he professed to believe.

"If Janet took the capsules, you need have no fear of her waking," said Cassie, gaily. "As for seeing you again, I had no intention of letting you go without a word. Somehow I would have contrived a meeting. And now, John, that is enough of Janet. You have been thinking of her for the past

ten years, and I daresay you will be cherishing her ten years hence. Tonight is ours, so let us make the most of it."

But when John understood what her words proposed he was, for all the passion that possessed him, utterly aghast.

"But, Cassie, that is impossible," he protested. "Janet..."

"I thought we had agreed to forget about Janet until to-morrow."

"She is still my wife. That's something I can't forget."

"Remember it to-morrow as much as you please. Indeed, Janet herself will see to it that you do. But to-night there is nothing of importance except that we are together and we are in love."

To John, however, the situation was less simple. Infidelity to Janet had never so much as entered his mind.

"Then how," gibed Cassie, "did you suppose the incident was to end? A pleasant handshake. Good-day, Mr. Hardwick. It has been so delightful to meet you. Why, John, what a hypocrite you are. You know you have been unfaithful to Janet in your heart since the moment we met."

"A man cannot help his feelings," protested John, "but I would not for the world so injure Janet. You must remember her history has been very different from yours. You are a woman accustomed to success; all your days you have been feted, admired, beloved. Janet has had none of these things. She relies on me, and if I were to fail her . . ."

"She need never know," said Cassie. "That way how could she be harmed? Are you sure, John, you are not thinking of your reputation? Perhaps someone has recognised us, will whisper a little. Perhaps that whisper will come to Janet's ears. Oh, I am not surprised she is disappointed, if you put your good name before all other considerations. Women are far less concerned with reputation than with devotion. Surely you know that."

But to John there was something so repellent in the vision of himself stealing away from the bedside of a drugged wife to lie with another woman, and that woman her sister, not a mile distant, that he would not even entertain her proposal.

"Then why did you come to meet me to-night?" she enquired passionately.

"I wanted to bring you a keepsake, to be sure you didn't forget..." His voice faltered, he was as ill-at-ease as a school-boy as he plunged his hand into his pocket and brought out the little jeweller's box.

"This is like you, John," said Cassie tenderly, looking at the trinket lying in her hand and remembering the gifts of other lovers. "Years hence, when you perhaps will have forgotten my name ..."

"So long as I live my love will be unchanged," said John warmly.

"That is what you think to-night. But—did you never love anyone but me?"

"Years ago, when I was young, I loved deeply. But that was ten years ago, and she is dead. Since then there has been only you. But Janet..."

She held up an imperious hand. "Verboten. But attend, John. You loved this girl as now you love me."

"The man I was then loved her utterly. But time doesn't stand still. It moves on and we must move with it. I am not the same man as I was ten years ago, and the man I am to-day will love you for the rest of his life."

"Ten years ago you would doubtless have said the same about—what was she called?"

"Laura."

"And yet, ten years afterwards, she is thrown over in my favour. Ten years hence there may be another woman, and we shall have wasted the only opportunity we can be certain of having. Love isn't like a coat you can lay by in a bottom drawer until a convenient season for wearing it. When you come for it you may find it devoured by moths, crumbled away, or even that it no longer fits you. There's only one tense known to love, and that's the present. And remember, by to-morrow it has become the past, and you have no domination over that. Upon my word, John, you are behaving as though love were a cake you hesitate to taste in case it proves a little rich for your digestion."

"If I were not convinced that you returned my love I

should be tempted to think you despised me," cried John. "Don't you suppose it's torment for me to reject what is mine for the asking and what I desire more than anything in the world? But I cannot buy happiness out of Janet's purse. It was weak of me to come to-night, I recognise that, but at least to sit at the same table, to hear your voice, to see your beauty, enriches me, though I cannot, dare not, take more of you. Oh Cassie, I beseech you, don't spoil this little time we have together. As you say yourself, there's no knowing when we shall meet again."

"It is clear you do not know how pertinacious a woman in love can be," Cassie warned him. "Do you really think I shall let love go so easily? Oh, go back to Janet now, you married man, if you must, but remember that when I want something desperately I am accustomed to having it no matter what the cost. My reputation, my position, these are nothing. I am that dangerous creature, a woman without scruple. Now never say you were not warned and remember—I shall come to England in the spring."

When he left her, dazed at the turn events had taken, John intended to return to Janet at once, but out in the street that, for all its lights, seemed to him to be as dark as imperishable night, he found he could not yet go back to that stranger he had left in a darkened room, her yellow face rigid, her body stiff and withdrawn. The contrast with the woman he had just left was too great to be bridged all in an instant. Besides, his own pain imprisoned him. In a spiritual dereliction greater even than he had known when Laura died he plunged through the streets, each step unwittingly taking him further and further from his hotel. In vain he assured himself that a thousand others endured as anguished wounds as he, were as impervious to night's sweet airs and the sparkling stars. Now he could comprehend only his own grief. The poorest in the land might tonight taste that ecstasy he must never know.

Turning a corner abruptly he blundered against two young men coming in the opposite direction; he jerked himself free and went by, without apology.

They turned to watch him go, "Drunk/' said the first with a good-humoured shrug, but the second, more percipient, replied gravely, "Did you see his face? It was that of a man in torment. There goes a rejected lover."

At last sheer exhaustion wore him down; a clock chiming awoke him to a sense of the lateness of the hour. Now he was concerned lest Janet had awakened and discovered his absence. He looked round hurriedly for some conveyance and was soon driving back to the hotel. Here he found Janet still sleeping, but more peacefully now, the yellow tinge dying from her face, her body relaxed, and realised with relief that she would be able to travel, after all. Her wish to return to England within a few hours was now no stronger than his own. To remain another day, to see Cassie once more, was merely to prolong the torture.

Seeing that he was unlikely to wake his wife, he began to move quietly about the room, collecting his personal belongings and packing them into his bags. In the morning his hands would be full helping Janet to assemble her clothes, strap her bags and make the final settlement with the hotel. He had never been able to cure her of a fear of missing a train, QF imbue her with his own philosophy that reminded him that there is always another a few hours later on. To Janet it was essential that a particular train should be caught, just as it distressed her to have to postpone the hour of a meal or the date of a journey. His packing practically done, with nothing left to put in but those toilet articles that must wait till morning, he sank for an instant into the armchair, worn out by the emotional strain of the day. A little later, or so it seemed, he was aroused by a hand on his shoulder and, opening his eyes, saw his wife standing fully dressed and smiling, at his side.

"Oh John, it seems cruel to wake you when you are so tired and it is all my fault, but unless we move now we shall never get our train," she said. "I have let you sleep as long as I dared."

He roused himself with an effort, then remembered to ask after her headache.

"Oh, it is quite gone, I assure you. Those tablets you

brought me were miraculous. I slept right through the night and woke feeling absolutely well. It would be a good thing to take a supply back with us, if you can procure them." But before he could think of any excuse she had forgotten about the tablets and was asking him to fasten her box—It is all packed but the straps are a little beyond me, she apologised. Her happy gratitude to him for all his kindness and forbearance was intolerable, but he dissembled as well as he could. Only when she said, "I wonder if Cassie will come to see us off, since she missed us last night," did he lift his head to say sharply, "Oh no, it would be too early for her." For how could he endure to see her as Michael's wife, Janet's sister, she who in a few short days had come to be the meaning of life and love, who had promised that, with the violets and the swallows, she would return to him in the spring?

19

One effect on Janet of her unusual holiday was to fill her for a while immediately following her return with social ambitions she had never cherished before. If John objected, why then she would remind him of his success in Vienna, enquire whether he could not make a similar effort on her behalf at home, since it was absurd to be the wife of a notable man if he persistently concealed his light under a bushel. To this end, therefore, she plunged into a round of hospitality as unusual as it was bewildering. John was reminded of the biblical command, Compel them to come in. She harried the servants, who characteristically enjoyed the change, held up their work with suggestions of this alteration or that, considered exchanging the sites of dining-room and drawing-room, talked interminably of the fittingness of the dining-room carpet for the drawing-room and vice-versa, even wondered if she should put the dining-room upstairs until John reminded her that by so doing she would not only double the work of the servants but would also have the dinner carried up the front stairs, which would be highly inconvenient. It could, of course, be taken up the servants' staircase and along an interminable passage, but by that time all the food

would be cold. Reluctantly she agreed to leave the rooms as they were.

"You have become very ambitious since your continental trip," Richard Gladstone teased her.

"Men are so conservative. I believe John could live happily in a two-roomed hut. He has no personal ambition at all and no regard for appearances. All he cares for is his clients. He could make a big name for himself if he wished, even now."

"But he doesn't wish," said Richard, exasperatingly, "and is he not to be allowed to shape his own life? No, don't answer me. I know he won't be allowed to do anything of the kind if by any means you can prevent it."

"You know what they say, that behind every great man stands a woman."

"Ah, but you're not content to stand behind. You want to rush forward, carrying a banner, like a herald."

"It is of no use. I can make no impression on him at all. He has not been back two weeks and already he is up to his ears in some obscure case, where he can have no hope of success."

"Are you conceivably referring to the Shepherd murder? And presuming to call it obscure? I tell you, with John at the helm, the affair is going to ring like a tocsin through the length and breadth of the country."

Janet stared. "It's a perfectly straightforward and rather sordid murder."

"A number of quite inaccurate statements, my dear Janet," remarked Richard in his most irritating manner. "To begin with, the affair may not turn out to be one of murder at all."

"Shepherd killed his wife. He has admitted as much."

"All the same, it is only murder when it has been established that he was in his right mind at the time. The defence is certainly going to postulate that he was of unsound mind."

"John says he was not."

"In that case, he'll certainly hang. Penton, who is defending, won't be at all pleased to lose a client to the gallows. As for your other statements, whatever the affair is it's not

sordid, since Shepherd declares he killed his wife sooner than see her incarcerated for the second time in a public lunatic asylum."

"But if she was mad . . ."

"You should ask John to explain to you that madness is only a mental illness as pneumonia is a physical one. And since a patient with pneumonia needs the best possible treatment if he is to recover, so a patient with a malady of the mind requires suitable surroundings and treatment that may effect a cure instead of confirming him or her in his unbalanced condition."

About one thing at all events Richard was right. The Shepherd affair was going to oust many more important matters, or at least matters concerning people of superior social importance, in the public attention during the weeks that followed. The case was an unusual one. Shepherd was an artisan in regular employment, happily married for ten years and the father of three small boys. During the tenth year his wife had a serious miscarriage which affected her mind, and when she made a homicidal attack on one of her children, whom she regarded as indirectly responsible for the tragedy, her husband had no option but to agree to her being taken away to an asylum for the insane. For a year she remained there, and he contrived as best he could, first with the help of a sister and, when she married, with a local woman who acted as housekeeper. The situation, however, was uncomfortable and at the year's end the authorities agreed to release his wife as cured, though the doctor told Shepherd she should never bear another child. Since contraceptives were unheard of at that time, at all events in Shepherd's circle, the abstention so highly recommended by St. Paul was the only way of limiting a family, and for some months the Shepherds lived apart in the cottage. Then Mrs. Shepherd began to have fits of depression, culminating in a tempest wherein she blubbered to a neighbour that, since she'd been in that place, Wjll thought of her as a monster and wouldn't have aught to do with her. The unhappy husband was at his wits' end, but finally, believing that children are sent from God and that everything that happens is, in some inscrutable

way, part of His Will, he took his wife into his bed and for a time harmony was restored. After some weeks, however, she was again pregnant, and during the sixth month of her pregnancy a further gust of insanity struck her and for the second time she made an attack on the life of her boy. And now Shepherd was in despair, for the poor soul was sane enough to realise the proposals being made for her and to understand that a second visit to the asylum might well involve imprisonment there for the rest of her days. Weeping, she clung to her husband's arm.

"Don't send me back there, Will," she pleaded. "I'll go stark, staring mad, if you do. You dunno how it is there, the filthy gibbering creatures, like dead souls that aren't allowed to die."

The graphic phrase caught the man's slow imagination, and because he loved her and because she had been a good wife to him and a good mother to her sons until the madness took her, he was loth to put her away to what she had made him understand was a living death. He conceived the idea of sending the children to stay with relatives or foster-parents and keeping his wife with him. When the relatives, all poor men like himself, found they had no room for any additions to the family, and besought him to harden his heart, he shook his head.

"I can't do that to Lil," he insisted, stubbornly.

"It's best really," they assured him.

"She's no more out of her mind most of the time than you or me."

"It's when she is you have to think about, Will."

He next tried to persuade the authorities to take the one child against whom she had vented her spleen, but again without success. The upshot of the tragic affair was that at length, in desperation, when no solution save the one he would not accept could be found, the demented man cut his wife's throat and immediately afterwards surrendered to the authorities. He was, of course, arrested and sent for trial on a charge of wilful murder.

"I suppose Richard is right and he is mad," observed Janet. "Nothing else would explain what he has done."

"A man who loved his wife as Shepherd did might think that death was less appalling than—how did he phrase it?—a living death among the dead who cannot die."

"But you cannot hope for an acquittal on such grounds," Janet protested. "He has admitted that he killed his wife, and only lunatics and criminals do that."

"You speak like a lawyer," he told her with some bitterness. But he had to confess that her words were true. It was a terrible alternative, the madhouse or the gallows. And he said sturdily that the real murderers were those who were responsible for conditions existing in pauper lunatic asylums. In a civilised country, he claimed, a man would have no justification for believing his wife better in her grave than in such an institution.

"I daresay they are not so bad as she made her husband believe," said Janet in an attempt to persuade John to sleep, to eat, in short to live a normal life. "After all, these people are not the same as ourselves, in their minds, I mean . . ."

"They are sick people who should be sent to sanatoria, but public opinion is satisfied to house them in conditions no man would tolerate for a valuable dog." He opened a drawer in his desk and drew forth a document. "This is Lord Shaftesbury's report made about ten years ago," he told her, "and there is no reason to suppose conditions have improved to any great extent." He began to read.

"One of the first rooms we went into contained nearly a hundred and fifty patients, in every form of madness, a large proportion of them chained to the wall, some melancholy, some furious, but the noise and din and roar were such that we positively could not hear each other; every form of disease and every form of madness was there. I never beheld anything so horrible and so miserable. Turning from that room we went into a court appropriated to women. In that court there were from fifteen to twenty women whose sole dress was a piece of red cloth, tied round the waist with a rope; many of them had long beards covered with filth; they were crawling on their knees and it was the only place where they could be."

There was more to be read, but when Janet whispered gently, "Is that all?" he folded the paper and thrust it back into the drawer.

"All," he said. She saw that he was incapable of further speech and she was roused to a gale of anger, not against the blind and heartless community that allowed such conditions to exist, but against the very man he longed to help for being the cause of John's anguish. For not then or ever did he learn to regard his clients impersonally.

"John should never have been a lawyer if he looked for a happy life," observed Richard. "But, being John, that was probably the last consideration in his mind."

At that time an accused man might not go into the witness-box in his own defence, and Shepherd's counsel observed grimly that this was as well, "since no man I have met has been as anxious to put a rope round his own neck," he said. Shepherd, however, defeated counsel's best intentions by a furious outburst from the dock which could not at once be silenced, declaring that he was not mad, that he had killed his wife knowing what he did, knowing that it was against the law, but believing it to be the lesser of two evils.

The summing-up was dead against him. "Gentlemen of the jury," intoned the judge, "it will be clear from the evidence that the prisoner considered his opinion to be beyond the law of his country. If every distracted husband is to be permitted to exercise his own discretion in matters of life and death to the detriment of law and order, then law and order will shortly vanish from the earth."

But the jury had already made up their minds. A verdict of Wilful Murder was recorded. Counsel for the defence was furious. The jury, he said, were prejudiced before ever they came to court. John, however, could not regret counsel's overthrow. It would have been a shocking piece of irony, he said, if Shepherd had killed his wife to save her from the asylum, only to take her place. As for the verdict—"It is expedient that one man shall die for the people, and if this case does anything to stir up the public conscience regarding these unfortunates who, because they have forfeited their right to liberty, are also held to have forfeited their rights to

the lowest standards of living we accept for human creatures, then Shepherd will not have died in vain."

"I have always believed Don Quixote must have been a very tiresome fellow," confided Richard to Janet. "Why should John suppose that the execution of an obscure labourer is going to convert society? Why, the death of the Son of God has not succeeded in doing that, yet."

But Janet, sighing, said, "One thing it has certainly done, it has destroyed any good his holiday may have done him. He is more like a ghost or a scarecrow than a man these days. He doesn't sleep, he doesn't rest. He holds himself personally responsible for every man he represents. Why, Papa is a clergyman and I never once in all my life saw him disturbed by sin or suffering as John is disturbed every week of the year."

But if he had been disappointed of his hope where Shepherd was concerned, John could not declare that the case had passed unnoticed. Correspondents from all over the country, knowing of his connection with it and his unorthodox championship of a man who was, as they were swift to point out, a self-confessed murderer, wrote to upbraid him for his attitude. Nor was he immune from those who had been his friends. Samuel Dyer in particular took him gravely to task.

"Why, you are putting on Shepherd's shoes," he accused him. "You are setting yourself up above the law of the land, the very law you are paid to support and administer. You remember Holy Writ—the servant is not above his master (in your case, the profession of the law), nor the disciple above his lord."

"Which doctrine may be well enough when the master or the lord has achieved perfection, but the most sanguine lawyer would hesitate to make such a claim for our penal system as it now stands," was John's hot-blooded retort.

Dyer looked more shocked than ever. "It is not for us as individuals to assert our private beliefs. We are servants, not masters."

"Servants, perhaps," agreed John. "But you would have us slaves."

He was busying himself trying to safeguard the future of Shepherd's three boys, but here again he found himself up against authority who assumed responsibility for the children.

"Their future is obvious," he said with great bitterness. "They will be taken into institutions, and, as soon as the law permits, which will be while they are still children, they will be hired out to masters whose methods are seldom investigated, and their lives be no-one's concern."

At this time he passed through a period of great dejection. "I understand Keats' choice of an epitaph," he told a friend at this time. "Here lies one whose name was writ in water. It is one record of failure after another. I am like a minister who continues to hold office when he has ceased to believe the tenets of the church that employs him."

Christmas, therefore, was passed at Northweston under a cloud of melancholy, since the Canon, who had followed the case in the press, wrote that he viewed his son-in-law's proceedings with the gravest misgivings and in the circumstances did not feel he could extend his usual invitation to Abbot St. Mary.

"Acceptance on your part might occasion serious misconceptions in the breasts of those to whom I owe my loyalty," he wrote, meaning, of course, his parishioners. John threw the letter in the waste-paper basket. "In any case," he said, "I should hardly have been disposed to accept."

20

That was a hard winter. In January the snow came and, with it, a fine cold wind that froze the surface of the snow and preserved it like a counterpane in lanes and fields, where there was no traffic to trample it into slush. Morning after morning they woke to grey skies and piercing winds, and when he went to his office John felt that that unsympathetic atmosphere accompanied him. The trees were without promise, the ground as hard as iron under the snow. John contracted a heavy cold, and not all Janet's possets could defeat it. But worse than physical ills was this deep sense of spiritual lethargy. As it seemed to him that the season of

bursting buds and the spears of spring blossoms would never pierce that pitiless earth, so did it appear that never again would hope bloom in his own heart.

"I am an insufferable companion to you," he confessed to Janet. "You shouldn't be so patient."

"You are wearing yourself to death," cried Janet passionately. "It is vanity really, that you should suppose justice and right to depend in such a large measure on one man."

More and more as the years drew on did her world contract to a kingdom containing this one man and his affairs, and more and more bitterly did she resent the incursions of the outside world on that fragment of life she pleaded with him to retain for himself.

Then, one day, through the darkness and despair, the light came bursting. During these frigid weeks he had not allowed himself to remember Cassie and indeed he had had little time to think of her. When he did, it was to reflect that that happy, vivid woman would find no common ground with the haggard man he had become. It seemed not months but years since their meeting and their secret tormented farewell. On this day he came back from the office rather earlier than his wont to find the morning-room scattered with a profusion of flimsy coloured baskets, tissue-paper and string. He could scarcely believe his eyes, for wherever they turned they beheld beauty arrayed in all the colours of spring. Entranced, he stooped to bury his nose in a great bush of mimosa, whose fringe of gold balls was already beginning to fall, but whose scent seemed to fill the world with perfume.

"Silver and gold have I none yet what I have I give thee," he misquoted, looking entranced at the orange cups, the golden trumpets, the shining silver flowers of the narcissi. "Why, Janet, what has happened? It is like the spirit of spring brooding over chaos."

"My dear John!" protested Janet, half-laughing and stepping back the better to appraise her formal arrangement of blossoms in a white Wedgwood bowl. "You are positively poetical. As for chaos, if it really exists, you must blame Cassie."

"Cassie!" A great sense of joy suddenly possessed him. "Of course. I should have known. Since she cannot come herself, what ambassadors to choose."

"I am afraid your temperature is still above normal," commented sensible Janet. "Yes, it is kind of her. And if she had remembered that I cannot endure mimosa it would have been kinder still."

She looked expectantly at her husband, but for once John failed her. Oblivious to the hand Janet put significantly to her forehead he continued to smile in what seemed to her a fatuous manner at the great flowering bunch in his hand.

"John, I really must beg you to put that outside," she said after a moment. "Already I feel a headache coming on. You know it always affects me like that. Later I will send it down to Thora Dyer. She may like it."

John put his head up, saw her gesture and moved towards the door. "There is no need to do that," he said. "As you know, I don't share your abhorrence. I will take this and put it in my study."

Janet looked up, amazed. "Why, I thought you detested flowers in your room. You have always said they were out of place there. That is why I have always left it severely alone."

"I am not so churlish that I can refuse this harbinger of spring."

He carried it away, aware of the astonishment in her face, wondering if perhaps he had betrayed himself. But no, Janet would not suspect. He was sure of that. When he had placed the mimosa in a bowl on his table it seemed to him that its living fire defeated even the grey day beyond the pane. He did not for an instant believe that Cassie had forgotten Janet's antipathy to mimosa. The inclusion of this defiant gold was her particular message to him that when the real spring came she would fulfil her promise to return. Long after the little gold balls had shrivelled and fallen he kept the grey-green foliage on his desk to remind/him, long though she might tarry, spring was yet on the way.

One morning in early April, when John went out, he knew that the days of waiting were almost past. Northweston,

though pleasantly suburban, was too near a town for the inhabitants to watch the pricking leaf, the slow unfolding of protecting sheaths, the buds' first pale colours peering through the black twigs of winter, the piercing blade of the first spring blossoms. To them spring came with the hawkers' barrows in the side streets, the first window-boxes breaking into fearless beauty. In brief, though they missed spring's harbingers, she leapt into their midst like a living flame.

On this April morning the signs were unmistakable. Small vivid hands of leaves unfolded in a silken wind, a flash of rosy blossom lifted against a glittering sky, the very air seemed painted. Now, after ten months of desolation, John felt life stir in his veins as the sap stirred in the trees and plants. He put back his head to snuff up the vigorous air, smiled with the sense of someone who at last sees doors open and casements flung wide, and he finally arrived at his office carrying his hat in his hand, with his hair disordered in the wind, to the scandalisation of his clerk who was heartily astonished to see such vagaries on the part of his sober employer. Inside the office John found Richard Gladstone, who appeared quite unmoved by the anniversary.

"Why, Richard, you are so buried in those fusty law books you are dead to all else," John rebuked him. "Indeed, you might almost be the spirit that inspired them. Are you never afraid of drowning among all these files?"

"Dear me!" said Richard, keenly. "What has overtaken you to-day? You're looking as pleased as Punch."

"I don't know how pleased he was," returned John. "But—can it have escaped you that this is the first day of spring?"

"By which I suppose you mean that Janet has demanded a new bonnet. You forget, my dear fellow, I am a bachelor."

Hearing this, John was instantly struck by the notion of buying Janet a bonnet, something he had never dreamed of doing before. He had never been one of these happy-go-lucky fellows, the courageous husbands of the world, who can march into a milliner's and boldly make his own selection from the ridiculous wares spread before his eyes, though Janet, he suspected, would put on with pleasure and pride any hat he brought home, simply because it was his choice.

Yet now he knew a sudden longing to do that very thing. Not that he intended to go to the lengths proposed by Richard. No, he wouldn't chance a bonnet, but he would buy her something, some geegaw, some luxurious trifle she would never allow herself to buy or ask him to give her, yet something for which she secretly hankered. His mind made up, he shortly afterwards, on the flimsiest of excuses, left Richard to deal with the office and made his way into the High Street. Here the sun shone on plate-glass windows and on the bright parasols women had brought out and put up to guard their complexions from this sudden hot sun. The tubs outside Davies's had been newly-painted and filled with flowering plants, the carriages of the well-to-do bowed smoothly past, their sides as gleaming as the coats of the horses that drew them. Even the old ladies borne along, in feathered bonnets and dark cloaks, seemed touched to-day by the magic of spring.

"It is like a potion, this air, I mean," he told himself, moving leisurely from window to window and constantly looking up to savour the day's delight. "It goes to one's head." And he wondered whether Janet, too, was aware of the miracle.

The first shop at which he paused was a milliner's, the window newly-dressed with the latest seasonal creations. Absurd little hats they were, he thought, smiling for the sake of that very absurdity, little rakish top hats with plumes, designed to be worn on the top of elaborate coiffures, severe little hats suddenly relieved by egrets, fascinating, enchanting little hats, mirroring woman's perpetual revolt against the sartorial conservatism of men. He was not aware, standing there, leaning on his stick, conjuring up in his imagination the women for whom these hats were intended, of the many glances, curious, sympathetic, admiring, that were sent in his direction. But after a minute he moved away abruptly. He had realised that though a dozen different images had floated into his mind, every one of them had Cassie's face, Cassie's smile, Cassie's gay indomitable eyes. Resolutely he expunged the visions his minute of day-dreaming had conjured up. Cassie was in France, married to a man called

Michael Sorley, and he was John Hardwick, a solid and reputed citizen, married these ten years to an excellent and devoted wife. And it was for her, and not for some dream-woman with Cassie's attributes, physical and mental, that he had set forth to buy a belated Valentine. It was odd to realise that even now he knew her private desires so little that he was flummoxed when it came to buying her a present. He stopped before a jeweller's. A brooch, perhaps? A pair of silver and crystal ear-rings, a chain? But Janet cared little for gems, and seldom wore even the pearls he had given her on a wedding anniversary. Flowers then? But the garden is full of flowers, John, she would say in perplexed tones, almost before she had begun to thank him for his gift, which she would privately consider extravagant. Gloves? But for the life of him he could not be certain of the size she wore. Then a fan? a piece of lace? But from these, also, he sheered away. These, too, presented Cassie before his yearning eyes. Then, when he felt almost at his wits' end, he saw the muff, and immediately knew that this was the very thing he had been seeking. Janet suffered from an indifferent circulation, and the thickest gloves failed to keep her hands warm. Yet he could not remember she had ever used a muff, though they were common enough among her acquaintance. She had never asked him to buy her one, and he—well, he simply had never thought of such a thing. This one was charming, a barrel of smooth grey fur, satin-lined, with a tiny bunch of violets pinned against the gleaming silvery surface. No wonder women loved muffs, they gave them such opportunities to display the charming affectations of their sex. They nestled them against their cheeks, held them beneath their chins, held them extended at arms-length . . . Oh, it was no good. He was like a man in a maze, constantly losing his way and returning always to the starting-point. As soon as he began to think about women and their delights, he came back to Cassie. All his thought was for her, all his desire also. Angrily trying to shake off these disturbing thoughts, blaming the spring and his own idle imagination, he went up the three steps and into the shop. The price was considerably stiffer than he had anticipated, but he made no

demur, realising that if he had been buying it for Cassie he would gladly have paid twice as much. Soon he was back in the street, carrying the pretty, candy-striped box with its saucy green and silver ribbon bow, bound for his own home. Heads turned to watch him as he went down the street, but he didn't notice them. He was wondering how he should explain this sudden impulse to his wife. Would she think he had taken leave of his senses? Perhaps. She would never look for some secondary explanation for any gift of his. Where he was concerned she had neither subtlety nor suspicion. To her this would be one more in the succession of generous gestures he used towards her, differing in degree though not in essence from the first gesture that had caused him to offer her his hand and name more than ten years ago.

Janet was standing in the hall reading a telegram when he let himself in. At sight of him she forgot the telegram, which fluttered to the floor, and exclaimed, "Why, John, what has happened?" and then when she saw what he carried, she broke off, to add an instant later, "Why, you look like a Valentine."

"And that," said JoBn, coming forward and kissing her cheek, while he put the box into her hands, "is precisely what it is. A little behind time, I fear, but then spring was late this year."

"You mean, this is for me?" She stared uncomprehendingly at the box, and indeed it seemed incongruous enough in her thin powerful grasp. "But, John, we have never given one another Valentines."

"Then it is high time I started. You must regard this as carrying ten years' interest at compound rates."

Quickly she carried the box into the morning-room. Not all her curiosity and pleasure would allow her to tear off the ribbon in the hall, where she might be seen by her servants. But when she had unfastened the great flaunting bow and smoothed out the folds and put it by thriftily for use on some other occasion, had lifted the sheets of tissue paper and seen the nature of John's gift, then, though she performed none of the gestures John had seen in his mind's eye as he stood looking at the muff and watching it being packed up, there

was in her face an expression of such pride and joy that for an instant even Cassie's image was blotted out. After that moment of silence they began to speak simultaneously.

"I hope," began John, but for once her voice drowned his.

"But, John, my dear, dear husband, how did you know? How did you guess? I never said a word, never dropped a hint. You are so good to me how could I ever ask for more—and now . . ." Again she fell silent, choked by her own gratitude.

John felt overwhelmed. "Why, Janet, if Dr. Lee were here, he would dose you for spring fever. Is it the right colour and the shape you like? I thought of so many things for you, but this was the best I could find."

"That is what I am trying to tell you. It is the very muff I have been longing for. I have seen it in Madame Elspeth's every day for three weeks, and each day I have thought, If only I might have that for myself."

"And you never said a word?"

"How could I ask for more when you have given me so much already?"

And now she did, in fact, slip her hands into the pretty trifle, fondle and play with it, if not with Cassie's instinctive grace, at least with an innocent delight that went straight to his heart.

"It is like caressing a cat, a Persian cat," she whispered. "And yet no cat could be so soft, so smooth, so enchanting to the touch. Oh I wish I had thought to get something for you. But to-day is no particular anniversary . . ."

He smiled at her pleasure. "You say that because you have allowed your morning to be frittered away on domestic interests. If you had so much as put your nose outside the door you would have recognised to-day for what it is, the dawn of spring."

Ecstatically she rubbed her thin cheek against the soft grey fur. "I doubt whether Cassie has anything more beautiful," said she, absurdly, "and Cassie has everything for which she asks."

"Cassie?" He repeated the name sharply. "Why do you speak of her?"

"Because—I intended to tell you when you produced the box and everything else went out of my head—she is coming to England. There was a telegram . . ."

"You dropped it in the hall. Do you mean she is coming here?"

"The day after to-morrow, she says. I wish she had given me more notice. Then I could have begun spring-cleaning last week."

"Cassie will hardly notice if the spring-cleaning is done or not," he assured her. His voice sounded strange in his own ears. He hardly knew what he said. All he could think of was "She is coming home, coming here," and immediately he knew why the day had seemed to blossom in such prodigal beauty. "So that, in fact, it is to Cassie that Janet owes her muff," he reflected. "If she knew that, what would she do with it? Fling it on the fire? Quite possibly." She could not be impersonal even about a muff if he had given it to her. Apart from its actual value it had achieved a second, greater worth because it was his present to her. It would never be a common possession like the clothes she bought for herself. Old and patchy, it would still have beauty in her eyes.

"I have married a very loyal and loving woman," he told himself, sternly. "I am glad at all events that I bought it before the telegram arrived."

21

Once again Cassie's plans miscarried. On the day that she was expected at Northweton, she telegraphed that essential business kept Michael in Paris for at least twenty-four hours longer. Janet said, "How like Cassie that is. Michael spoils her, of course. Men always have. I daresay really she wants to do a little more shopping."

John came hurrying back that afternoon, his whole being inflamed at the thought of the meeting, and Janet's casual, almost contemptuous announcement, came like a physical blow. He stood staring at her, unable for the instant to accept the truth.

"She is not coming? Ah, not for another day or two." And

his heart cried warningly, "Be careful. She is your wife's sister. Don't go mooning in the clouds."

He shushed it impatiently, thrust his disappointment out of sight and all the next day waited in mingled apprehension and hope for the hour of his return. But he had only to enter the hall of his own house to know that she was still delayed. When she came there would be a sense of warmth and vibrancy that were unmistakable.

And on the third day she returned.

When John let himself in that evening she was standing on the landing that separated the first and second floors. Her hands were full of flowers, and a trick of sunlight suddenly bathed her in a flood of gold. There was no sign of Janet or Michael, and for an instant it seemed as though the world contained only these two.

"Cassie!" He laid aside hat and despatch case and began to mount the stairs. "It is really you at last." The bathos of his greeting escaped both of them. Poets and lovers from the beginning of time have spoken a magic language tipped with fire, but all the poetry of this man's nature was in his voice, the ardour of his gaze, the eager adoration of his eyes. Cassie waited for him at the stairhead, confident, unsurprised. So she had pictured their meeting, without a shadow of doubt as to its outcome. He took her hand, he looked down, being so much taller than she, into her lifted face. He thought that no-one would ever satisfactorily define beauty. It was more than perfection of contour, exquisite features, a fine skin. Here as ever it was the spirit informing all this outward loveliness that was the heart of beauty. And the lover, he thought, discerns more than the outward signs. To him, in old age, in sickness, even in death, this woman would be beautiful. For the moment he, the cautious, the controlled, forgot caution, forgot everything but that here beat his own heart in another bosom. He could feel that heart throbbing against his. Now he could be amazed at his own scruples in Vienna. Now to refuse Cassie seemed to involve a refusal of life. Indeed, life, that had appeared stunted and unprogressive through the winter months immediately began to stir fiercely, to rush like a river, to spring up like some plant

nourished by the food of the gods. The metaphors raced through his mind as he stood there holding her to him for what seemed a second or an age, since time had lost its meaning. Now his life came to its late flowering. Laura, even Janet, belonged to the past. Of the future he would not or could not think. Nothing mattered but the present and the present was Cassie. In the course of his legal career he had often experienced the anomaly of men of good position and reputation who, overnight, it appeared, changed their whole way of living, their very personalities, acting in a manner so at dissonance with their normal conduct that he, and others with him, had fallen back on the easy explanation, "Of course, he was mad." Now he himself had joined their company. When they had told him, "It seemed inevitable. I had no choice," he had secretly considered them weaklings. Man, he held, is always in matters spiritual the arbiter of his own destiny. If he takes the wrong, the forbidden road, he does it of his own free will. If he fails to count the consequences he is a fool. If he jibs at paying the account he has himself contracted, then he is a coward and a knave. But now he understood how men are so lightly betrayed into folly, and how sincere they are in their protestations that it is life, which is greater than themselves, that is responsible. Now, he knew, he could no more resist Cassie than he could refrain from breathing. He did not even consider the moral issues. Here was Cassie, and Cassie was the meaning of life.

At last—it was perhaps thirty seconds later, though to him it seemed the time necessary to transform him from one person into another—he heard her speak. Her voice was as familiar to him as his own. She at least in this changing universe remained familiar and beloved.

"I should make a good gardener, John," she told him. "I know how to wait. I warned you to expect me in the spring."

Afterwards, when his first madness had spent itself, when he could take stock of the situation and be amazed at his own immediate capitulation, for now the time of doubts and withdrawals seemed as far removed as the winter months lying behind him, John supposed that this moment was the turning-point of their relationship. In that space of time, less than

a minute, he shaped the course of all his future, and though it was still some weeks before they became lovers in fact, since such a situation was out of the question so long as Cassie remained his guest under his roof, there was from that moment no turning-back.

"Were you insane?" Richard Gladstone was to say to him in that future into which at present he could not even look, and he replied, "That, of course, is how it must appear to you. But when the fury of love overtakes a man it seems to him *at that time* the only possible course, and so for him it seems right."

During the three weeks that the Sorleys remained at North-weston John could endure their constant association in the knowledge that the consummation of his love was no longer a feverish dream that would never become reality but was simply delayed for a little while. Yet when, at the end of the third week, he came home to be greeted by Janet with the news that their guests were going to London to a furnished house with a studio where Michael would work, executing a number of commissions, until the mood seized him to return to the Continent, his heart seemed numb.

"You are going away?" he said.

Janet at least noticed nothing strange in his tone. Perhaps the realisation that she would soon have her husband to herself again dulled her sensibilities.

"London is not the end of the world," said Cassie, softly, and Janet chimed in, "London in May? Can you conceive of it?"

Michael turned from his place by the window. "Surely the summer is the right time to be in London. So I have always, been given to understand."

"Oh, for you and Cassie, perhaps," agreed Janet, and there was a faint undertone of scorn in her voice. "But John and I are not the *haut monde*, and North-weston is good enough for us. Do you not agree, John?"

"Oh, but even John goes to London sometimes," Cassie teased her. "And now that we are there he will have double excuse."

Janet began to fold up the fancy-work on which she was perpetually engaged in her leisure hours. "Oh, John may come, if he pleases, but I shall stay at home. How anyone can be in London of free choice I shall never understand. Why, Londoners can never smell fresh air."

"But there are other smells." Cassie spoke with a touch of delighted reminiscence. "The cosy smells of cabs and streets, and the warm smell of theatres, the aristocratic smell of private views, the haughty smell of dowagers."

"Now, Cassie, you are being quite absurd." Janet tried to laugh it off, but she had turned a little pink. Michael said reproachfully, "In England, Cassie, dowagers do not smell."

Janet hastened to change the subject. "When do you start looking at houses, Cassie? I believe in the season it is not always easy to find precisely what one requires."

"Oh," said Cassie, carelessly, "Michael has heard of one that he thinks will do very well. He has taken it for six months."

Janet looked appalled. "Without your so much as seeing it?"

"In any case I shall see very little of it. Michael may be going to London to work, but I am going to be gay. When you come to visit us . . ."

But Janet said quickly, "Oh, John will be too busy for a holiday for some time to come. He is chained to his office, are you not, my dear? I daresay it is different for artists, who have no particular working hours . . ."

"And in consequence, may work all round the clock. But he has promised to sit for Michael . . ."

"Why, John, you have said nothing of this to me." Janet's voice was full of hurt. Yet now she remembered that the matter had been broached more than once, but she had never expected him to treat it seriously.

"You have been asleep, Janet," Cassie assured her, laughing. "We have spoken of it again and again . . ."

"But we were never in earnest," protested Janet, clearly in great distress.

"Michael is always in earnest when he talks of his work," replied Cassie. "Surely you have noticed that."

"But, John, shall you be able to spare the time? You must not allow your good-nature . . ."

"Anyone might suppose I was luring John to the Bastille," observed Michael, drily, and at the same moment John, embarrassed for a variety of reasons, partly on the sculptor's behalf and also because at the back of his mind lay the unspoken thought, "If I come to London to sit for Michael, I shall see *her* again", exclaimed, "Why, Janet, you have always wanted to have a celebrity for a husband, and here is your opportunity."

"It does not need Michael to make you a celebrity," insisted Janet, stubbornly.

"Not to you, perhaps, but to those who are less prejudiced ..."

"And perhaps," suggested Cassie, "one day, when the grateful citizens of Northweston wish to erect a memorial to their most distinguished citizen, they will be glad that Michael took the fancy into his head."

In fact, John did not care a jot if the bust or statue were never made, but any opportunity that furthered his love became important for that reason. He was so much obsessed by this feeling that all the considerations that might be expected to weigh with him, the dishonour done to his wife and Cassie's husband, the risk of ruining his reputation and his career, and the personal damage that must be done to himself by the intrigue and falsehood involved in the course he knew he was going to pursue, were simply swept out of his mind.

As casually as they had alighted at Northweston, the Sorleys departed. John had intended to suggest a small dinner-party to celebrate their last night; love was making him subtle and the next best thing to being alone with his love was to be with her in a crowd. But before he realised that their plans were concrete, Michael and Cassie vanished. Once again Janet gave him the news on his return from the office.-

"No, I don't quite know where the urgency lay," she told him in a light, happy voice. "I believe Michael had a telegram,

and you know what Cassie is—any woman who will allow her husband to rent a house she has never seen is not likely to take anything very seriously. Well, it was delightful having them, and I had always wanted to entertain them under our own roof. But it will be more delightful still to return to our own routine again. I fear I am the very antithesis of Cassie. Without my home, my familiar surroundings, I am like a crab that has lost its shell. She, of course, fears to put down roots in case she cannot pull them up again and she has no interest in the permanent and secure."

There was so much truth in this that John could only look at her in silence, as if beseeching her to stop. But Janet went on happily, "She says I am like the curator of some museum, but I like my house to be the expression of a definite personality."

He thought, "Ah! But Cassie has the quality of imbuing any place, a railway station, a room where she rests only for the night, with something of herself."

As soon as he could escape, John went softly upstairs and along to the room the Sorleys had occupied. Surely, surely, it still retained some impress of her. But when he opened the door he found that Janet, the good housewife, had been before him. Every vestige of the travellers had been brushed, dusted, swept clean away. The beds were stripped and covered with check dust-sheets, the dressing-table was covered with a cloth, the mirror that could surely never forget the bright face it had reflected during these weeks, lay glass downwards. The drawers of wardrobe and dressing-table were open to display emptiness, none of Cassie's fashionable frocks or mantles embellished the hangers, the carpets were paper-covered and the dark blinds drawn to exclude light that might fade the rugs. As well look for Cassie in the grave as seek for her here. Quietly he closed the door and came away. There is always a sense of change, of something missing, when visitors depart, even though they may have outstayed their welcome, but to John on this evening it was as though a funeral had taken place from the house and it was his melancholy duty to prepare the chamber of the deceased for the future.

"Gone, gone," sighed the wind round the house. "Cold, cold," whispered his heart. It was as though the very spirit of life had departed.

During the following month he was brought to London on business.

"Be sure to see Cassie's house and tell me what it is like," Janet instructed him.

"Why do you not come yourself?" he suggested, but she laughed and shook her head. "It was very pleasant to have Cassie here, but I've no mind to go to London. It is not my milieu at all. Besides, I have many things to do, I shall be too busy to be lonely."

John wondered that she had not discerned the change in him since Cassie's departure. Night after night, pausing on the step, feeling for his latch-key, he had had to overcome a sense of dismay.

"I am growing absurd in my middle-age," he would assure himself. "I did very well in the winter, and I had nothing then that I do not still possess."

His business in London completed he drove to the furnished house Michael had engaged without so much as seeing it, but afterwards he could remember no details with which to satisfy Janet.

"You must surely have noticed the number of rooms, the way they are furnished," she urged him, and how could he reply that Cassie furnished each room in turn as she entered it?

At last he said, having racked his mind and imagination for something, no matter how scanty, to offer her, "Michael says it is like a furniture shop. So much of everything."

"I dkresay Michael is difficult to please," was Janet's unexpected retort. "I sometimes wonder if Cassie does not regret her marriage."

"What makes you say that?" exclaimed John.

"She is used to so much attention, and his whole life centres on his work. When he is engrossed he forgets her existence. Surely you saw that. She is just any beautiful woman, not Cassie, the particular and beloved."

He was startled at her acute observation, for, now he gave the matter thought, he saw she was right.

"Still," continued Janet, "she has known so much violent emotion she may enjoy a little neglect." Her tone added, "And if she does not, she will have no hesitation in solacing herself."

He said angrily, "Michael should take better care of her," but Janet only smiled.

"You are incurably chivalrous, John. Cassie can take excellent care of herself."

John recognised by this time what had been clear to Cassie from the first, what, indeed, she had intended and schemed for. He knew that any affair between them must end in tragedy and frustration, since he could not make hay of his career—would even Cassie continue to love a ruined outcast?—and in any case Janet would have religious objections to a divorce. Besides, even at this juncture he knew that Cassie did not stand for permanence. Always she would love and, when love died, would let go and set forth on her next adventure. She didn't believe, as Janet did, that love was an enduring thing, one man for one woman, not only here but hereafter. While she loved Cassie would display a prodigality undreamed of by her sister, but she would close an incident that would, he realised unhappily, be only one of a series of similar affairs, without hesitation when love had gone over. Yes, she represented the impermanent, the untried, but also the irresistible.

On his next visit to London they became lovers. It was a day of furious rain and wind, and from the streaming carriage window John saw the grasses flattened, the flowers drowned, the trees beaten down and defeated by the fury of the storm. His heart in him was very heavy, as though it were weighted with all the day's destructive misery. When he reached the station at London Bridge it seemed full of dispirited people, as drowned and characterless as the anonymous woods through which he had passed. But when he passed through the barrier Cassie was waiting for him in a fantastically unsuitable hat that defied the rain, and her beauty and the strength of her love, that she made no pretence of

concealing, changed for him in a moment the face of **the** world.

"How late your train is!" she reproached him. "Trains bearing lovers should not be delayed. Already you have hurtled down an embankment, plunged into a river, been involved in a collision."

A cab sprang up from the wet streets, and in an instant they were in it, driving to an hotel whose prim aspect seemed a guarantee of ultra-respectability. John, indeed, was dismayed by the first sight of the room that was to be the setting of their consummated love. These greyish walls, thick, dreary curtains, the forbidding bedspread with its dingy honeycomb quilt, the outlook on to wet roofs and back streets, chilled him to the bone.

"Why, Cassie," cried he in distress. "I never meant to bring you to this—desert of comfortlessness. I had dreamed . . ." But there he paused, for he had not, in truth, considered the probable nature of his surroundings.

Cassie looked amazed. "Why, John, what is wrong? I bade them light a fire and those chairs are a deal more comfortable than they look. I think we shall do very well here."

After she had said this the room seemed to him less dejecting. Was not she here, and could she not transform even a prison cell?

"You are right. There is nothing really wrong."

Presently, the tea-tray removed, the fire a warm red glow, she became his lover. John, the husband of a decade, had never dreamed of such rapture, such fusion of body and spirit with the beloved as this. Janet accepted love, but Cassie gave it as though she were its very source. Janet had grown up with the well-bred spinster's indifference to physical delight. But Cassie loved her body with its power to enchant and enrich men. She had had many lovers, yet she seemed to come to this adventure fresh and unstained. And experience had made her wise; she could take pleasure as she gave it, and for the first time John was aware of the great lack in his emotional life as Janet's husband. She would have thought such passion shameless, repugnant. Marriage, proclaimed the prayer-book, echoed by Janet, is for the mutual

help and companionship the one of the other. Love, declared Cassie, is for the mutual happiness and delight of the contracting parties. Janet loved with her heart and her spirit; Cassie with her flesh and her senses, knowing her body had been fashioned in beauty and believing that beauty is only formed for love.

Presently, as they lay at peace and in perfect concord, she suggested a small restaurant where they might dine.

"It is quite obscure, though the food is excellent. But you need not be afraid of being recognised there," said she.

John stirred restlessly. "I wish we didn't have to preserve this secrecy," he protested. "I wish I could take you in the eyes of the world."

"You are like all virtuous people, and they are the most arrogant kind there are. Because you are naturally good you think you should have everything, that life should be simplified for you. If you have to plot and be a little deceitful, you feel your integrity is being outraged. The rest of us, who are a little lower on the moral plane, have a deal more sense. We know that life is a matter of taking what one can get of what one wants at the price demanded. I agree that it would be more pleasant if we could contrive to be together without deceiving Janet and Michael, if we didn't have to be careful that we are not seen together in public places. But since that is impossible, I am prepared to make the best of things. If I can't have you openly, then I am grateful that I can have you in secret, if much of your life belongs to Janet and North-weston, then I am glad to take what I can get and make the most of that. If we must cheat and lie, as clearly we must, though that burden will fall most heavily on you, then I accept the conditions. That English poet who said he could not love his dear so much, loved he not honour more, was less concerned about honour in the abstract than with his own good name."

He realised with a shock that the burden of deception which weighed heavily upon him sat light as a feather on her shoulders. Indeed, the excitement of their stolen meetings was increased by the knowledge that only by secrecy could they hope to come together. In short, she loved intrigue for

its own sake. At this stage she had no desire to represent the safe, housekeeping side of his life. Let that belong to Janet. She, Cassie, would be the colour, the richness, the hidden delight whose very insecurity heightened its worth.

During dinner they spoke eagerly, exchanging reminiscence. In ten years Janet had questioned John little as to his early days. It was as though she wished to believe that everything that had happened to him before he came to Abbot St. Mary was forgotten or had never existed. But Cassie wanted to probe and explore, to make for herself a place in those unknown years.

"And now," said John at last, "it is your turn. I know so little of your life before we met, and even that is at second-hand. And how does one person ever truly know another?"

"I don't think I can be very like you," Cassie mused. "I never remember wishing I had a home. Even when I was young, all my dreams were of escaping into a personal life. I mean, I never wanted to pull family life over my head like an eiderdown as so many girls do. When Aunt Florence kept urging me to marry, saying it was my duty, I felt instantly like a butterfly on a pin. Sometimes, you know, a butterfly isn't dead when it is mounted, though the collector thinks it is, and when it comes back to consciousness it flutters its wings in agony, unable to escape, and for a time, unable to die. I didn't want love to be a matter of duty and compassion, part of a bargain made in public and sealed by the authority. In return for a home, maintenance, a position—so much love. No, I thought of life as a series of rooms all opening into one another, but each with a door at the further end through which I could make my escape. I suppose you would say I have no stability, no loyalty even, but that isn't true. I am loyal to myself, my conception of my own life."

"In that case," said John, "what made you marry Michael?"

"I was the only woman to whom he had ever offered marriage. That was irresistible. And then he was like myself, he didn't want to build a house and live there for the rest of his days. As well be a flower in a herbaceous border as reduce life to such terms."

He knew she was wrong, that behind this apparent desire for freedom was fear, the fear of mortgaging the future. Cassie was of those who wish both to eat their cake and to retain it. Richard would have said in his dry way that so are all women, but John's experience of them did not lead him to make so sweeping an assertion. All the same he wondered whether, if he had been free, she would have married him and shared his life at Northweston. Abruptly he asked her. Smiling, she took his hand.

"Oh John, how typical of you! You are not free, you cannot ask me to be your wife, and I daresay it is better as it is. You have to consider your own interests. Should I be the right wife for you? I fancy Aunt Florence was right when she said I was not made for marriage. It takes a steady sort of courage and determination that I seem to lack. I never wished to arrange my life once and for all, and to follow that pattern till death. I live for to-day and when to-morrow comes, why then I will forget yesterday, so each day is its own little life. That to my mind is the way to live."

"With no continuity, no pattern, no certainty?"

Again she laughed. "I have sometimes thought I should make an excellent butterfly. They have only four-and-twenty hours to live, and into that period they can pour everything they have."

The waiter at the little restaurant knew them for lovers, and brought Cassie a rose to wear in her breast. Other diners, also living their secret lives in such obscure corners, smiled and accepted them into their fellowship. The doors of the half-world where truth must go veiled opened to him that night, but though vaguely he perceived the danger and knew that he had now given a hostage to fortune he might never be able to redeem, his joy in her was so great he could regret nothing.

So it began, that new strange life of a John Hardwick Northweston would not have recognised. This life was something quite apart from the frank open existence he lived with Janet, with Richard Gladstone and the men and women he

met in the course of his profession. Only by rigidly separating it from the existence of every day could he hope to safeguard it, not only against the joint enemies of public opinion and conventional morality but against his worst enemy, who was himself. At such times as he was with Cassie time itself seemed to lose all meaning. A moment could seem like an hour, an hour like a day, and when he had left her to return to the familiar world a whole lifetime seemed to divide him from his life. He had supposed that at forty a man has learned to live soberly for duty and kindness, but as though the years were resolved to recompense him for his early loss, he felt youth return to him, a youth disciplined by experience, yet not dulled by self-indulgence or despair.

Such a state of affairs could not last indefinitely, and, when the first rapture was past and he could take stock of his situation with clearer eyes, he trembled sometimes at the thought of what discovery must imply. Had he not loved his wife, though differently from the manner in which he loved his mistress, his problem would have been less difficult. But throughout the two years of his relationship with Cassie, before tragedy descended on them like a summer storm, he was insistent that Janet should not pay for their delight. So long as she knew nothing, was deprived of none of the rights to which marriage entitled her, for so long he would continue to enjoy his love. But where their interests clashed, then always it was Cassie who must give way. She learned the grief of unhallowed love, during those two years, became accustomed to the telegram postponing his arrival, must feed as best she could on memory and the letters he allowed himself to write her.

Sometimes she upbraided him bitterly. "For all your protestations it is Janet who comes first with you," she would accuse him. "Otherwise you would sometimes put me first. Is it unreasonable that she should suffer a little? Why must things always be made smooth and simple for her?"

"Because she has the right and we both know it. When we began this thing I promised myself that only you and I should pay for it. She has the first claim on my time if she presses it, a right I will not deny her. It's unreasonable in you,

Cassie, to expect it. We've chosen the hard way, we might have resisted as others have done ..."

"You talk like a clergyman," cried Cassie. "Oh, when I think of my other lovers, was there one who would have urged his wife's convenience before mine?"

"Was one of them prepared to destroy his home life for your sake? and would you have allowed that to happen in any case?" he demanded.

"At least," flamed Cassie, "they were not simple enough to tell me the truth. I never thought to play second fiddle to Janet."

John was as pale, as tense, as she. "If I make you so miserable, my dearest, I ought to let you go. I meant to bring you only joy. Cassie, is that what you wish?"

"You might as well ask a cripple if he would prefer to have his crutches destroyed. You know I couldn't do without you now. But of course it is different for you. If I died to-morrow, you would still have the life you have safeguarded so carefully, your home, your reputation, your wife. But I tell you I never meant it to be like this. Always until now I have been mistress of my life; it's you who've turned me into a slave."

Then she threw herself into his arms, crying, "John, don't mind me, don't heed what I say. You know I would sooner have the little I can of you than a whole life with anyone else. You have given me happiness such as I never dreamed. It's only that when you are absent I can't help remembering you as you must be, still at home in a familiar world, while I'm detached, lost, except when you are with me."

For it had happened at last, the thing she had never believed in, the love without end that is the very spirit of living. She, who had been the initiator of one affair after another, who had loved lightly, gaily, taking love as an impermanent delight, whose course was unpredictable as the climate of the country wherein she had been born, now experienced the last love she would ever know. That love should flower like that countryside in spring, later to fade and give place to a new and equally rich beauty, had seemed to her part of the natural process of living. That she, the fickle, the born adventurer, the pilgrim following not-one but a

score of stars (where Janet would hitch her wagon to the only star that ever dawned on her horizon and, when that came tumbling down her sky, find herself in the city of perpetual night), that she should at last experience a love that would outlast her own body's capacities and end only with the withering of the flesh, the darkening of the eyes in death—against this she struggled fiercely and without avail. The jealousy that is generally the lot of the betrayed wife, the plain woman, became her lot. She was racked by it, grudging Janet every hour of her husband's company, every demonstration of his kindness and affection.

"Perfect love casteth out fear," Janet told Cassie once, and "She cannot know very much about love if she really believes that," was Cassie's scornful comment. "Until you love you scarcely know what fear is. Afterwards, you are like someone who has shaken hands with death. You can never be certain when the door won't open and his face peer through the crack."

It was harder for her than it was for John, and though she would swear that he had given her all the true happiness she had ever known, he, in his wisdom, realised from the first that happiness was not of the essence of their union. Rapture they knew, enchantment, ecstasy—but happiness is not contained in moments. Contentment is the background all men desire for their lives, and he knew that with Janet he had tasted greater content than Cassie could ever bring him. Sometimes, indeed, he was so moved by her pain that he felt they could not go on. The fire seemed burning away the core of his life. Yet to both the thought of separation was so intolerable. Whatever the price life demanded of their love, this price they must continue to pay.

"One day life will separate us," Cassie said. "I know it. One day one of us will be careless, take the one fatal step that cannot be retraced—the dropped letter, the indiscreet word. That day I shall begin to die. But that I should sign my own death-warrant, no, that is unthinkable."

John, too, had not dreamed love could be so bitter-sweet. If separation pressed more hardly on Cassie, he had his pain in plenty. He never became reconciled to the deception he

must practise on a woman who trusted him, to the network of intrigue and dishonesty in which he became more and more deeply involved. Sometimes he wondered that Janet noticed nothing. Like Cassie, he feared the involuntary betrayal, and this perpetual sense of vigilance fined down his already thin features, made him peculiarly alert, with the ironical consequence that Janet's admiration and love increased daily. Had he known it, he need have had little fear. Her belief in him was so absolute she would not have credited the story, if an angel had repeated it to her.

All this while, work on the statue of John Hardwick had been in progress, and a year after the beginning of the affair that was to wreck three lives, it was exhibited in Paris. Here it created considerable excitement. In years to come it was generally agreed that it marked the high-water-mark of Michael Sorley's achievement. If he had never produced another piece of work he would be remembered for this alone.

In his subject he had displayed a man of power and uncommon force of character, a philanthropist who was also a statesman. There was something of arrogance in the tilt of the head on the fine shoulders, of the steely craft of the organiser in the lines of forehead and jaw. Yet this was no man of stone. If there was greatness, there was weakness also, the over-sensitive lip, the delicate moulding of the temples. A man at the mercy of his heart, said Ducros, the great French critic. But a man of stone? Never.

Michael received a number of offers both from collectors and from public art bodies, but here Janet cheated a difficult situation. No-one but herself, she declared, should own this masterpiece, and she wrote to her brother-in-law offering him the entire proceeds of her small fortune, which she estimated at two thousand pounds. In reply, Michael did a thing no-one had anticipated. He made her a present of the statue, with the proviso that after her death it should be given to a public collection. And it should be on loan on demand at exhibitions of contemporary sculpture. Janet was inclined to take exception to these conditions; John, on the other hand,

said forcibly that they could not accept such a gift and in any case he would not have the statue displayed in his own house during his lifetime. Janet was startled by the passion he evinced on this subject.

"It is quite absurd," she complained angrily to Richard Gladstone. "You might think he was ashamed of it, whereas everyone agrees that Michael has been unusually successful in catching the very essence of John himself."

"Perhaps he feels humbled by it," suggested Richard. "It makes a great man of him."

"He is a great man." She was up in arms at once.

"Say, then, that it declares his greatness to the world. That must indeed be a burden to bear, for the best man has his heel of Achilles, of which he himself, if no-one else, is aware, and it would be galling to any but the most conceited to be faced with that masterpiece every time he crossed his hall. In a sense, Sorley has created a legend and John will never be able to live it down."

"If I didn't know you so well," said Janet, "I should think you jealous of John. A legend indeed! Why, everyone admits it is John to the life. And I must confess," she added, complacently, "he has seen a great deal more of the real John than ever I gave him credit for seeing."

Richard looked at her in half-affectionate exasperation. "If you talk to John like this, I wonder he doesn't give you a black eye. Has it ever occurred to you that an excess of admiration may be responsible for as many broken marriages as too little?"

"Now you are talking nonsense," said Janet, proudly, "John knows how much I admire him, not only from an individual standpoint, because he has been so good and generous to me, but as a citizen. He could never do anything dishonest or mean."

"If that's a fact, then he's not a human being at all, but a paragon without a heart. You don't like home truths, Janet, but you are riding for a fall. You are putting John on such a pedestal as would destroy the sanest man's balance, and one day he will become dizzy and lose his footing, and you will declare he has broken your heart."

But Janet laughed and asked him how he supposed he could know her husband better than she, who loved him and shared his life? And to this Richard could make no reply that would not have betrayed his friend.

For Richard knew—not everything, certainly, above all not the identity of John's mistress, but he had no doubt at all of her existence. The instant of betrayal John had always feared would one day overtake them had been noted by the astute lawyer during a conversation on a case that had attracted considerable interest.

Early in the New Year a man called Bennett was accused of murdering his wife that he might be free to marry his mistress. Once the facts were established, without much difficulty, for it was clear from the outset that the crime was premeditated and the husband's motive glaring, the issue was never in doubt.

"I see Flood has undertaken the defence," observed Richard in casual tones. "One's sorry for the poor chap. Bennett has handed him a completely empty plate. It's not even as though a plea of insanity could be urged. Bennett knew precisely what he was doing when he committed his callous crime."

To his amazement John demurred. "I agree that he knew what he was doing when he poisoned Mrs. Bennett, but as to whether he realised he was doing wrong, well, I am less convinced."

"According to that," cried Richard, "you could argue that all murderers are insane. Why, the fellow was discretion itself up to a point. . ."

"And after that he practically demanded to be arrested. Touching the last point, Richard, I imagine it would be possible to argue that any man so inflated with the sense of his own importance that he puts his personal satisfaction before the life of another creature is insane. But, from the evidence given in court and from the letters Bennett wrote to Mrs. Rivers I can believe he did actually reach a point where he felt he was justified in taking any step, no matter how culpable or violent, to clear his path of obstacles. He

was admittedly completely obsessed by this woman, and so, to all intents and purposes, he was like a man who is partially blind. He can only see a little instead of the whole view, and all he saw was Marguerite Rivers. With that single-track mind you so often find in murderers he made a dead set at her, and anything that was in his way he swept aside with no more compunction than you might tread on a beetle."

Richard was looking at him with growing astonishment, though he had not yet arrived at the conclusion he was so soon to reach and that later was to lead him to understand (almost alone in England) the tragic situation that would presently develop.

"Would you put forward such a defence?" he demanded.

"Oh, I agree that could never be advanced in court. In any case, I daresay by this time Bennett is as sane as you or I. I suppose if he were not he would have confessed the truth instead of doing what any sane man would do at this juncture and resolutely protest his innocence."

"You speak with great assurance," said Richard slowly, and saw John's head come up with a jerk, heard his swift tones, "It is just that I try to understand the other man's point of view."

But the defence came too late. Even as he spoke Richard recognised the horrifying truth, was shocked at his own knowledge, made an instinctive effort to deny it, and failed.

"So that is why he is so vehement," he reflected. "Because he, too . . ."

Such revelations were by no means uncommon in his professional experience. Men who were quoted as models of domestic virtue were sometimes proved to be leading dual lives unsuspected by their closest friends. Richard had too much experience of the world to agree with those excitable preachers and reformers who spoke of such men as monsters of iniquity. He himself had never been greatly interested in women, even as a young man, and he was not willing to judge his fellows for yielding to a temptation that presented no great attractions to himself. Nevertheless, the discovery that John was as venal as other men shocked him into silence. That he would never enter on such a relationship lightly he

was convinced; that he knew what consequences must attend discovery he was also certain. Not only his domestic but also his public life would be utterly wrecked. Janet would not easily forgive such deception, while the very men and women for whom John had laboured so whole-heartedly and for such meagre rewards would forget all his past virtues and concentrate on his revealed wrong-doing.

"It would spell absolute ruin for him," he reflected, "and what is John without his work? He must, like Bennett, be utterly obsessed so to jeopardise not only the present but also the future."

Characteristically, he did not attempt to identify John's mistress. It was improbable that she was a local woman. John was too well-known to be able to embark on a liaison with a woman in the neighbourhood without a rumour at all events being circulated. But there were his frequent journeys to London and elsewhere. On one of these, no doubt, he had met and become infatuated with some siren who had rendered him temporarily out of his mind. For John, sane, would never have committed himself to such a course. "So that his defence of Bennett," Richard wound up, "is founded on his own experience, though it would be as easy to convince Janet that he was temporarily insane as to convince a court that a verdict of insanity was justified in Bennett's case." It seemed to him fortunate that John no longer discussed his cases with his wife, saying that women had not the impersonal mind essential for reaching true conclusions.

He wondered how far Janet herself was to blame for this wretched situation. She could be exasperating enough, he knew, and to a natural romantic like John Hardwick she must often appear cold and unyielding. Nevertheless, he experienced a pang of bitter disappointment. He had, unconsciously, demanded more of his friend than he would be disposed to consider just where a lesser man was concerned. And probably his own feeling for Janet made it more difficult for him to view the position dispassionately.

"Heaven help him if Janet ever finds out," he thought. For though she loved him, he questioned whether she loved him so selflessly that she could not only forgive but forget. The

devil of it was that neither of them took human relations lightly, and if his suspicion was right and John was deeply involved with another woman, it must imply ruin to one at least of the three before the tangle could be smoothed out.

"And Janet is more likely to smooth it with a hatchet than with soft words," he told himself grimly. "Then John will have the privilege of seeing her in the dock facing a charge of murder, and she will defend herself as John has defended Bennett. Pray God she never learns the truth."

23

The fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much, but presumably the prayer of one tied to no particular dogma, claiming no especial code of virtue, is less powerful. At all events, for all his hopes and his vigilance, the facts about John and Cassie came out, in a truly tragic manner, when their affair was two years old.

On this second anniversary Cassie proposed to her lover that he should invent an urgent appointment in London and meet her at the Hotel Orleans where they had consummated their love. John, as a reasonable lawyer, placed no reliance on intuition. With Mr. Gradgrind he protested, "We want facts, sir, nothing but facts." There was no ground for supposing that such a plan would prove disastrous. Janet was never curious about these excursions to London, nor did she ever wish these days to accompany him. Yet hitherto he had steadfastly refused to make a particular journey for no other reason than to meet Cassie, though of late her recklessness had increased and, in Michael's frequent absences, she would come to meet John at places dangerously near Northweston. As to Michael, he appeared to take no interest in his wife's movements, and she had no reason to suppose he was faithful to her. In addition to which, his life was in his work.

"You are so reckless," John would protest sometimes. "One would almost think you wanted the world to know the truth."

"If it were not for you, I should proclaim it from the housetops," was Cassie's ardent reply. "Do you never remember that one day we must part, if only because one of us must die first? And that being the case, surely we are mad to deny ourselves any opportunity that presents itself or that we ourselves can contrive."

"I think you hardly appreciate the consequences if the facts were made public," John cautioned her. "You are not living on the continent now. In England, when a woman is publicly disgraced, as you would be in such circumstances, she toses everything, her place in society, the respect of her friends, all her future."

"You are all such hypocrites," flamed Cassie. "It is not the thing itself you inveigh against, but the fact that it is generally known. On the Continent we are more honest, and more skilful in our handling of such situations."

"I must think for you since you will not think for yourself. Do you think I wish to see you ostracised?"

"Do you imagine the loss of public opinion would be any great hardship to me? That is where you have been cleverer than you know. You have spoiled all other men for me. If I lose you, I have nothing."

He found it hard to believe that even a momentary hesitation on his part awoke in her doubts she had never known until now.

Is he tiring? Does the game seem to him no longer worth the candle? Is this the beginning of the end? And because he could not endure to see her torment herself thus, and because his love for her was so great that, if he could, he would have borne the double burden, he ignored the inward voice of warning and agreed to her plea. But in his mind the doubt persisted.

Cassie, having secured her own way, was gay as a bird. "You have promised that you will allow nothing to prevent you this time, John?" she besought him. And because twice in succession he had been obliged to cancel their meetings he promised that, come what might, this time he would not fail her.

It was his rule, when duty took him to London, to engage

a room at Arnolds, the hotel where provincial lawyers were wont to congregate. Always, as he bid his wife good-bye, he would say, "Remember in an emergency you can reach me by telegram at Arnolds." On this occasion he omitted the usual words, and as he turned to leave her, Janet exclaimed, "Why, John, what is the matter? You have never changed your plans?"

He whirled round. Foreboding was heavy on him that day. "Why, Janet, what makes you suggest such a thing?"

"You forgot to remind me that in an emergency I can reach you by telegram at Arnolds."

He forced a smile. "Do you contemplate some disaster?"

"I hope not. But there is always the thousand-to-one chance."

"Yes," he repeated, slowly. "The thousand-to-one chance."

He kissed her again, wretchedly recalling Judas Iscariot as he did so, and hurried away. On the way to London he tried to cast his thought forward to the meeting with Cassie, but could only reflect wryly that those who sing of the delights of illicit love were certainly without experience of it. He had found it a matter of perpetual shifts and evasions, secret treacheries, half-acknowledged fears. Yet he still could not contemplate an end. To visualise his life bereft of Cassie and these stolen hours of love was to face a future empty of hope. Yet he could envisage no future in which Janet did not play a part. The years of their marriage had created a bond that nothing could destroy. Separated, divorced from her and married to Cassie, if such a situation was permitted by the law, he would still feel the tug of old association. Cassie is right, he told himself, she is not intended for a wife, whereas Janet would be a wife or remain forever unwed. And despite the poets and lovers of all time he knew that he and Janet had created something indestructible that had become part of their very existence and could not be denied.

Cassie had contrived that they should have the same room as they had occupied two years ago. Her imagination had given it an atmosphere of romance that was instantly dispelled by the reality. There was no more welcome in the drab

walls, the stark furniture, the heavy pictures in their dull gilt frames, than they had experienced on that other afternoon. As he had wanted then to escape from its prison airs, so his instant reaction was to exclaim, "This will never do. We must change our plans. The very air here is full of the sense of decay."¹

Cassie laid a detaining hand on his arm. "We cannot change our plans at this time of day. But is it not strange? I always supposed that any room where lovers had been happy must bear some imprint of that happiness for ever. But you might think no-one had ever spent even a night here, it is so cold, so unoccupied."

Presently, however, as before, the warmth of her mood, the certainty of their love for each other, dispelled the comfortless atmosphere. Curtains drawn, fire burning, they once more experienced the delights of mutual love. Gradually a great sense of relief descended upon John. This was Cassie's miracle, that, where Janet would have shared his fear, Cassie dispelled it. That was her special gift to him. her power to set up a barrier between him and the world of everyday. She created a little kingdom, separate as an island, in which they could meet and be at ease and alone. Once more, therefore, he abandoned himself to the rapture of reunion.

Later, tranquil with the sense of satisfied love, they sat talking in the firelight. Someone had brought apple-wood to stoke the flames and the scent of the burning logs brought a recollection of the country to the chill London room.

"The last time . . ." John began, and involuntarily Cassie shivered. "You are cold, my love."

"Someone walking on my grave, perhaps. How I hate those words," she continued fiercely. "The last time! They are like a funeral bell. Do you ever hear them suddenly, as clearly as though someone had spoken aloud in your ear? The last time. There must be a last time for everything, even for making love. I suppose I have a very possessive nature. I hate to realise that someone else may seek happiness in this room which we have made ours. I hate to think that one day, when I am old, you may turn to some other woman. I tell you, John, I am even jealous of Janet ..."

But he would never let her speak of his wife. She belonged to the other, the real life, from which all this must be rigorously excluded.

"Life is kinder than we are apt to remember," he assured her. "It is seldom given to men to know the last time of anything. The man who goes out from his house in the morning, with a final word to wife or child, a final glance to his dog or to a rose-bush that has blossomed overnight, has no thought that he will never see these things again. If he had, he would think not of the beauty of the beloved, but only of the sadness of separation. That's why I say it is our blessing, that we never know."

⁴⁴Ah, but we know the day must come, just as we know the young spring leaves must presently fall, that beauty must decay. Sometimes I remember that one day even I shall be old. No, don't try and make me believe that each season has its particular beauty and that when old age overtakes me I shall cease to care. If I do, it will only be the peace of despair, the acceptance of defeat. I shall accept it because I must, but that I should ever be resigned to the knowledge that I have outgrown my power to inspire love—no, that I can't believe. It's easier for people like Michael and Janet. They have other sources of life, but I have only the one and when that is dammed to all intents and purposes I shall be dead already."

He understood then, as never before, the tragedy of her nature. For one day, unless death claimed her, she, too, must pass into the realm of old age. For himself, he deplored the thought that one day he would be compelled to cease work, that his brain would be less sure, his faculties dulled, yet he believed, too, that even this period would have its compensations. There would be memory, and old friends, books, and the leisure life had always denied him. And surely, too, in those days desire would pass. That it should remain to torment the ageing body seemed to him unnatural, ugly even. But now he saw that for her that realm would be a barren kingdom, and he took her again in his arms as though his love could defend her from that terror, also.

But, though she smiled and returned his embraces, clinging to him with the cry that he was the meaning of her life and that, even in old age, her love would be undiminished, he could not wholly comfort her. That night, while he slept peacefully, she allowed her fears to gnaw at her heart like a tormenting worm.

"Whatever John may say, I am right," she agreed with her desolate heart. "There is always a last time. One day when I expect him he will not come. I shall wait—and wait—not believing it is the end because I dare not believe. And the shadows will lengthen and night come down, and at last I shall know I have lost him. One day when he is settled and beyond middle age and free from all the storms of love that I shall never escape, it will be at Janet's fireside that he will find content. And I?"

But here she shivered, because she dared not visualise the future of the woman abandoned by love. She remembered once discussing with Janet the life of a woman married to an artist, that fluid, undependable creature from whom security may never be sought.

"You should find something permanent to tie yourself up to, Cassie," Janet had warned her, "or one day you will be wandering over the world with no roof anywhere to call your own."

She had laughed then, so strong, so safe she had felt, but where was that strength, that security now? Oh Janet was right, Janet the stay-at-home, the prig, the contented woman. Cassie knew, far better than Janet could imagine, the sort of future beckoning to such as she. Her kind of woman, grown old, was to be found all over the continent, in hotels and apartments, youth and beauty gone, buying favours, buying companionship, buying a spurious substitute for love, old, painted, desperate, the scarecrows of life, perching in any field, a ripe harvest for the crows and birds of prey. From such a vision she shuddered aside in horror. One day she would envy even Janet growing old under her own roof-tree, secured to life by the ties of familiar usage, knowing that death waited perhaps only just out of sight, but at least knowing she could count on companionship up to the end.

She would never be one of those hapless wanderers on the rim of the world, spent, undesired, unrecognisable.

"Adventurers should die young," thought Cassie. "Old age holds nothing for them but hunger and regret."

Unable to sleep, and fearful that by her restlessness she would wake John also, she stole softly out of bed and drew back the blind. An apple-green dawn was flooding the sky, a single star was like a point of silver in that sea of colour, and somewhere a bird was singing. It was so early that at first there was no other sound. Then solitary figures began to pass silently under the window, going forth to the day's labour, a cart rattled by, men came from night shifts, little golden lights wavered and broadened in dark windows. Here was the perpetual mystery, the new day ruthless as fate, as unpredictable as an uncut book. By to-night the whole face of the world might have changed. She dropped the blind and, conscious of cold, came back to the bed. John still slept peacefully. In sleep he seemed infinitely remote, and she sat beside him, seeing not only John Hardwick, her lover, but those other Johns who were strangers to her, John Hardwick, husband to Janet, John Hardwick, partner to Richard Gladstone, the John Michael had perceived who was a mixture of all three, the secret John whom no-one knew save the God in whom he did not believe.

She thought feverishly, "How lonely is the human soul. For a little time two people can seem to be utterly one, but the moment of separation comes so soon, and one's alone again." She understood, as never before in her full, rich, restless life, how dangerous is the house whose foundation is human passion. Man is a pilgrim, journeying solitary across the face of the earth. Now and again he achieves contact with some other traveller, but none of these can endure, and he must go down to his grave as alone as in the hour of his birth.

"Does Janet think these thoughts?" she wondered. "Do all women in love suffer like this? Or does assurance of legal claims bequeath a sense of possession that can defy even death?"

John, opening his eyes, saw her watching him with a face

so beautiful in its sad wisdom, fcp quiet for once from the urge of passion, that for an instant it was like seeing the face of a stranger whom, spontaneously, one loved. He knew then that, come what might, he must love her-until death.

He put out a hand and touched her. "Come into bed," he bade her. "You will catch cold."

"I'm never cold. The grave will be cold enough one of these days. John, it is the most perfect morning. Get up and come out before humanity has spoiled the day."

"Go out now?" He could not conceal his surprise.

"We have such a little time."

He felt for his watch. "My dearest, it is not six o'clock. Everyone will think we are mad."

"Are we bound to consider everyone but ourselves?" Suddenly her sadness seemed to fall from her. "John, who knows when we shall be together again? And at this hour we are so safe. You are not likely to meet any acquaintance before the day is well begun."

Catching the infection of her mood, he rose and began to dress. The green had faded from the sky when they came downstairs, threading their way between sleepy servants yawning their way to their early morning duties, passing the indifferent porter in his green baize apron desultorily polishing brass. The streets were full of light and the sun rode into the sky, irradiating the tall buildings, the London trees with their persistent foliage, the swiftly flowing tide of the river pouring eastward. They walked down to the Embankment and stood for a while watching the infrequent river traffic. Above them gulls swooped and rose, making a pattern as intricate and graceful as a ballet. A barge went past with a black figure in the stern, sucking on a black pipe. A black cat, feet and tail tipped with cream, stood beside him, rigid as wood, staring at the gulls.

Cassie's spirits rose momentarily. They began to walk eastward to where the gilt cross on the top of St. Paul's seemed illumined as by fire. "Why, we should do this more often, John," she cried. "This is a strange world as unlike the world of ordinary experience as Fairyland."

"Fairyland is an extravagant description for the men whose day normally begins at this hour," objected John. He thought of them leaving their dark houses, wrapped against the cold morning airs, going forth almost before it was light, seeking for casual labour. To him there was nothing novel, nothing romantic, about a creation whose keynote was bread.

They stopped presently, at Cassie's insistence, at a coffee stall and she looked frankly about her as she drank from the thick cup and ate the "doorstep" she insisted on John buying for her. Contrary to her expectations, she attracted no attention. Men at that hour had more important considerations on hand. Work and wages, fuel and food, that was how their thoughts ran. Of the romance of the early morning light, the fragrance of the shining airs, they had no time to think. Besides, in the docks unloading cargoes, in workshops and factories, stables and storehouses, it was little enough they got of either.

John proposed returning to the hotel, but Cassie shook her head. "You have time and to spare, and this is a unique occasion. We will go a little further, while we still may."

Presently they heard footsteps hurrying behind them and as they drew aside a boy shot past, running to be on time for his work. He moved with such precision, such natural grace, his head up, his cap in his hand, that involuntarily they paused.

"Why, he's beautiful," exclaimed Cassie. "Those proportions, the way he carries his head, those long, free movements—how Michael would enjoy modelling him."

"It's odd how one seldom recognises the beauty of youth until one's past it," mused John. "I suppose he would be an errand-boy or perhaps a factory hand."

"And if he were a duke's son he couldn't be more perfectly formed. John, that is the crown of my morning."

He found himself wondering if she, like he, ever regretted her childlessness. To have such a boy of one's own would compensate for the lost years, the knowledge of weakening powers and the darkness ahead. But when, impulsively, he questioned her, she said at once, "Oh no. They would tie

one down, and I never wanted to be tethered. It is far worse for you, my poor John. I suppose Janet never made a second attempt."

"It was out of the question," said John. "And it is her grief as well as mine."

And then, since the running boy was out of sight, as though now there was nothing to wait for, he took her arm and turned her gently in the direction of the hotel.

24

After he left Cassie John happened on an acquaintance who insisted on detaining him until after lunch, and it was not until the late afternoon that he reached Northweton. As he rounded the corner of the road and came in view of his own house the first thing he beheld was the doctor's carriage, standing in front of the door. Instantly all the forebodings with which he had opened this last chapter of his adventure rushed back into his mind; he felt half choked by apprehension as he hurried forward and opened the gate.

It uttered its usual creak and before he could fit his key into the door this was opened for him by Kate, who stood, trembling and red-eyed, on the threshold.

"What has happened?" asked John, quickly. "Is it your mistress?"

He could not have said precisely what he anticipated, but that it would be bad news he was convinced. The truth, however, was more horrifying than he had conceived. It was given him by the doctor himself, who, hearing John's voice, came hurriedly down the stairs and drew him into the morning-room.

"I'm indeed glad to see you, Mr. Hardwick," he said. "I suppose that in some way my telegram miscarried."

"I certainly did not receive one," agreed John, sharply. "It is something to do with my wife?"

"We understood you always put up at Arnolds when you were in town and I telegraphed asking you to return at once. There has been a most unfortunate accident."

"If you will tell me as shortly as you can," said John, in an

agony. Lee cast a sharp glance at him and explained the situation.

"You will recall that some time ago I prescribed a particular mixture for Mrs. Hardwick for migraine. It was to be used only in emergencies, and she kept it in a cupboard in her bedroom. It appears that last night, or rather, early this morning, she felt the beginnings of a headache and decided to take a dose. Unfortunately she had burned her candle down, and made the fatal mistake of assuming she could identify the bottle in the dark."

As though she stood his side, John could hear Janet say, "I suppose you would **call me** a devotee of method. I could lay my hand in the dark on anything I wanted."

"Yes," he said, but already he had some notion of what he was to hear.

"Unhappily, she picked out the wrong bottle, one containing a domestic preparation clearly marked Poison, and kept in her room to prevent precisely this accident occurring among the domestics. The bottles, you see, resembled one another very closely in size and shape, and in the first grey light of the morning—it was just light enough to pour out a dose but too dark to see the actual fluid—she drank a draught from the wrong bottle. I fear," he added, soberly, "she has suffered greatly."

John said in a stiff voice, "You used the word fatal. Does that imply ...?"

"She is alive," said the doctor, simply, "but at present I can say no more than that. Fortunately she was able to summon a servant who had the good sense to come for me immediately. I have applied all possible remedies, but I cannot disguise from you that her life hangs in the balance."

"I had to leave my hotel very early this morning," murmured John. "It is one chance in a thousand . . . Did she ask for me?"

"She has scarcely been capable of speech, and in the circumstances I thought it best to administer an opiate, whose effects have not yet worn off. But let me assure you that even if you had been here you could have done nothing."

To John's tortured conscience, however, it was plain that,

had he not taken this furtive journey to London to be with Cassie, it would have been he who fetched the bottle and poured out the draught, and since it would not have occurred to him to do anything of the kind in the dark, this disaster could not have taken place.

After a brief pause he asked, "Is there any objection to my seeing her?"

"None in the world, though I fear you can do no good at present. However, I won't disguise the fact that it is an enormous relief to me to have you on the premises. For one thing, she is certain to ask for you as soon as she recovers consciousness. By the way, I took the responsibility of engaging a nurse, an excellent woman whom I can thoroughly recommend." He continued to talk in this strain as they mounted the stairs, but John heard little of what he said. In his mind was the appalling suspicion that this was no accident, but a deliberate act on Janet's part, because she had, somehow, discovered his unfaithfulness and had decided to put an end to her life. To no-one, not to the doctor or to any friend, could he voice this fear which, if she did not recover, would haunt him for the rest of his days.

The nurse rose at their entrance and moved a few steps from the bedside. John took her place. Janet presented a ghastly appearance, taut, shining skin, sunken cheeks and temples. They talk of the peace of death, thought John, but there is no peace here. This is the face of a woman who has died in torment. Yet the sight of her aroused in him some memory he could not at once identify. At his side^the doctor said urgently, "Mr. Hard wick, I beg of you to take some rest while you can. Later you may be able to be of use, but for the moment you can do nothing."

Instantly time rolled back. He was the John of two years before, seated in a cafe with Cassie beside him. She, too, had used almost those words. You can do nothing for her, she will not wake till dawn. He groaned involuntarily, and the doctor gripped him firmly by the arm.

"When Mrs. Hardwick returns to consciousness she is certain to ask for you. It will help none of us if by that time you are in a state of collapse."

He suffered himself to be led from the room. The remainder of the evening passed in a daze. Food was presently brought him, and he supposed he ate. There were letters on his desk and these he opened, but it was useless to attempt to concentrate on their contents. Relentless memory swung him from his recent vision of Janet to his last sight of Cassie, giving him no respite. "If I could be convinced it is an accident," he said aloud, and then looked sharply round, as though the furniture, the very shadows, could hear and accuse him.

In the early hours of the morning, having received no summons and the doctor having departed some hours since, he made his way to his wife's room. The nurse stumbled to her feet at the sound of his hand on the door.

"There is no change?"

"At all events, there's no change for the worse. If we can maintain strength ..."

"When will Dr. Lee return?"

"There's nothing he can do for the moment. He will be back before long, though," promised the woman eagerly, her heart wrung by the sight of John's pale face, his obvious wretchedness.

"Tell me, you have had experience of a similar case?"

"Oh yes, sir. It's not unusual for poor women, when they're driven by some trouble, to take a draught. I often think if they knew what they were letting themselves in for they'd think again."

"You mean, in their case it is deliberate? But this, this is an accident."

"Of course, sir." The nurse seemed shocked at the suggestion that it could be anything else. "The doctor should have explained ..."

"He did," said John. "Tell me, do they normally recover?"

The nurse seemed reluctant to answer his question. At last she said, "To tell you the truth, sir, we're not generally called in soon enough. It's mostly a question of time. And then the neighbours don't know what should be done. But Dr. Lee has the case well in hand." Then she begged him to try to get some sleep. "There's nothing to be done at the moment," she told

him, and promised he should be called the instant there was any change.

John, however, knowing sleep to be out of the question, insisted on spending the remainder of the night in the room. He made the nurse take a comfortable chair and cover herself with a rug, saying that she too must be exhausted. After some demur the woman agreed, and for the rest of the hours until dawn she dozed fitfully, getting up every now and again and coming to the bed. But the sun had risen before Janet struggled back to consciousness. Then, before she could be aware of her surroundings or recall anything that had happened, she said his name.

"John!"

He took her cold hands in his warm ones. "I am here, my dearest." And then, quickly, "Don't try to speak. You have to safeguard your strength."

She was content to be quiet for a moment or two, but then memory began to return.

"I was afraid I would die before you could return," she said, weakly. "John, tell me the truth. Am I going to die?"

He had been deceiving her, at all events by implication, for the past two years, but now the comfortable lie would not be spoken.

"Not if anything we can do can save you," he assured her.

"I must not die," she whispered. And he echoed her words, "You must not die." If she did, she would be like the albatross hung round the neck of the Ancient Mariner, a burden from which he could hope for no respite till the day of his own departing.

Shortly after this the doctor arrived, and for the first time gave John a good hope that all would yet be well. "There's a theory that doctors save people," he remarked. "That is only half the truth. When people recover it is usually because they don't intend to let go. The will to live is more powerful than any antidote. If your wife does recover it will be due to yourself and to her as much as to any medical or nursing attention she has received."

He persuaded John to lie down for a while and later told him it would be best for them all if he went out for a short

time. Janet was now sleeping and should not, in any circumstances, be disturbed. John, unable to think of anything better, went round to his office, where he found Richard Gladstone in ignorance of everything that had happened. When he heard John's story he took a far less grave view of the matter.

"If Janet has made up her mind to live you need have no fear," he said, grimly. "Even Providence must have his work cut out to defeat Janet. You must remember, she is a very jealous woman."

John had gone to stand by the window, where he stood twisting the tassel of the blind until he had almost separated it from its cord. Now he released it with a twist that sent it spinning against the glass.

"That is why I cannot be certain—why I would give everything I have to be assured ..."

He had no time to finish his sentence. Richard came forward quickly and caught him by the arm.

"My dear John, what has overtaken you? You cannot mean to suggest that this affair is anything but an accident?"

"It is so unlike Janet to make such a mistake," cried poor John. "She is the soul of precision."

"The most exact person is not necessarily infallible. Why, man, how little you know of your wife. Do you suppose that if Janet felt she had some—grievance, shall we say?—she, of all women, would take this way out? Choose a path that would leave yours absolutely clear? Why, John, you're suffering from lack of sleep and anxiety, and that has fogged your vision. If she felt she'd been wronged, she might meet you on the doorstep with a carving-knife, but she would never take a dose of poison." He reflected that she wouldn't be subtle enough to realise that that would be the best form of revenge she could take. Dead, by her own hand, she would imprison him as, living, she could never do.

John said slowly, sinking into a chair, "You know Janet very well. Sometimes I think you know her better than I do. And if you are so sure ..."

"Putting every other consideration aside, don't forget that Janet is a Christian, who believes that self-murder is as

heinous* as any other. I shall never believe myself that she would take any step that might part you even for a while, and to suppose that she would risk being parted from you for eternity—no, no, John, you can put that idea right out of your head."

"You have taken a great load off my mind," John confessed. He took his hands from his distraught face and, looking up, he added, wryly, "It is too late in the day for pretences between you and me. When I heard what had happened I leaped to the conclusion that she discovered something I never intended her to know, a wrong against her she must most bitterly have resented, that would destroy her happiness . . ."

Richard put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "There's no need for you to say this to me. This is your concern and, if you choose, it need never be anyone else's. You're not yourself at the moment, and if I let you speak now, you may regret it later. Be assured that Janet has no idea she has any ground for jealousy, and there is no reason why she should ever be undeceived."

He spoke with great kindness, for John was his friend and nothing could undo the years of their association. But even at this instant he could not quite control a feeling of scorn for a man he had whole-heartedly admired, even in his own undemonstrative way had loved, and who could turn from the fierce integrity and the unswerving devotion of the woman he had married to some softer, less exalted love.

"But then in fairness I must remember that I've never hankered after these emotional women," he reminded himself. Celibacy had never been difficult for him. He was the sort of man to make foreigners fling up their hands in dismay, crying that the English have neither heart nor bowels.

When John made no reply he picked up some papers and went along to the clerk's office, where he remained for some time dealing with a number of minor matters. John was grateful for solitude. Richard had shown him clearly what must in any case have been plain when he had time to think of the future, that the John Hardwick who had been Cassie's lover was finished. He would not love her less, since for each

this was the one true love of their days, but they would never again be alone together. Always the ghost of Janet would accompany them. He tried to envisage the future without her. As she had frequently reminded him, with bitterness, he would still have much left. There would be his work, his life with Janet, his friends and acquaintances, his hopes for the future. But it would be like a world from which the sun is banished for ever. Light would remain, health and strength, labours to be accomplished, it was by no means an empty world on which he now gazed, yet in his exhausted state it seemed to him he had nothing left that made life worth the effort it entailed. Having no faith in God, he did not see his situation in terms of crime and punishment. He only saw that, after what had occurred, any extension of his relations with Cassie had become impossible. This was the end of his fervent joy, and he was, he reminded himself, no more to be pitied than any other man who loses his love. But it was useless to think along those lines. His grief was too immediate, his sense of loss too crushing. He recalled with a stab Cassie's whisper, "The last time ..." and his own assurance that when that day dawns it dawns unrecognised by those who are chiefly affected by it.

Hearing Richard's feet in the passage he stood up. "I must let her know what has happened," he thought. It never occurred to him that she might adopt any other view than his own.

Richard was shocked at the change that had overcome his friend during the past few hours. With his face drawn by suffering, with black shadows under the sunken eyes, the whole being stamped by pain, he looked like a man slain upon his feet. Except that no dead man could exhibit such despair.

"He must not be allowed to go home looking like that," he told himself. But when John insisted he must return the other made no further attempt to stop him. "Janet will conclude this is the effect upon him of almost losing her," he reflected. "It will flatter her vanity and if she had any suspicion it will allay it absolutely." And after all, he asked himself, why should he consider John's interest? It was Janet who had

been wronged, Janet who had suffered almost to the point of death.

But after John had left him he thanked Providence he had never known this destructive, indestructible passion called love.

25

Janet was safely out of the wood and was down to tea for the first time. Richard Gladstone had been invited to join the party, and he repressed a start of dismay at sight of her. She looked extraordinarily feeble, the flesh sunk on the prominent bones of the face, almost an old woman now. Yet, listening to her praise of John—"If it had not been for him I doubt whether I should have recovered. They tell me he would not leave my room all through that first night"—he thought that, for all the emaciation caused by her illness, she remained one of the most striking women he had ever seen. She had never had any pretensions to beauty, but her skin was now a strange ivory colour and, seen in profile, there was something about the face that was unforgettable.

He thought, "It is a strange face, not without nobility, but utterly without pity". And he knew that was one of her attractions for him. He had always deplored that soft streak in women that clouded their judgment. Janet was not like that. Where John was concerned she was prejudiced certainly, but let her be convinced of his deception and she would be hard as a coffin nail. "She may know love," he assured himself, "but her religion is the religion of Jehovah, never the all-embracing love of Christ." To her white and black were separate kingdoms, and she knew nothing of that no-man's land lying between them that softer spirits learn to accept as man's normal dwelling-place. It was this very hardness, allied to integrity unassailable, that gave her that touch of magnificence that made her for him different from any other woman he had ever known.

After tea, when John left them together, she turned to him at once, saying, "Richard, I am glad to have a minute alone with you. I need your help."

That was her way, direct and unhesitating. John must be

crazy to suppose she would fly to a dose of disinfectant, without so much as leaving a line for his enlightenment. What? She retire from the stage? leave him to the woman he had preferred to her? She was neither generous nor subtle enough for such a solution.

"You had better tell me what you have arranged for me to do," he said drily. "I see I am to have no choice."

"It is perfectly simple. I want you to assure John that it can do me no conceivable harm to have Cassie down here for a short visit."

"And he has objected? Does he say why?"

"Oh, he had a number of objections. First that she would tire me out, which is nonsense. I should like to see her. Then, that she would expect a measure of entertainment we are not in a position to offer her. He says she will not realise how quietly we are living just now. He says he is too busy to act as her escort. The fact is he does not want her to come. I daresay they had some ridiculous disagreement when they met in town for the sittings, of which he has never told me."

"Perhaps he is anxious to save you disappointment. Perhaps he fears she will not accept your invitation, and you will be hurt. It's not like John to put obstacles in your path, particularly just now."

"Did I not make it clear that Cassie has invited herself? She has been very good while I was ill, sending me luxurious presents of fruits, and writing perpetually. She says in her last letter that she and Michael may be going abroad again shortly. Richard, how can I refuse, even if I didn't wish to see her?"

"Does she propose to bring her husband? In that case John may be right in thinking you will overdo things trying to be the perfect hostess."

"No, she says particularly that Michael is so busy he has no time for her, and it would be an excellent occasion for her to come alone. Even if I didn't wish to see her, it would be unkind to refuse. I feel she must be very solitary or very unhappy to write so urgently. I have never been convinced that her marriage is a success, and I am so fortunate it seems to have enlarged my heart. I cannot write that we do not

wish to see her. Now, if you will only speak to John, make him understand that it is far worse for me to be thwarted in this way than to be a little energetic, I am sure he will listen. It's surprising how much we both depend on you. I am sure I could not make these confidences to anyone else, and I dare say John seeks your advice when he would seek it from no other person."

She was smiling as she spoke, but Richard's face was suddenly rigid as a mask. Her words conjured up a picture of himself and John on the morning after Janet's accident, and he knew without a doubt why John was so vehement in his refusal to have Cassie at Northweston. It was an appalling thought and he tried to drive it out, telling himself it was impossible, monstrous. John and Cassie, his own wife's sister—no, he had jumped to unwarrantable conclusions. There was some far simpler explanation. Cassie was too exotic a visitor for an invalid, and indeed Janet looked unbelievably frail, though Richard knew how deceptive that frailty was. But none of these frantic arguments convinced him in the least. He knew that his first dreadful suspicion was true, and now, though for the moment his feeling for John was one almost of hatred, he must make himself his ally and persuade Janet to abide by her husband's decision. He felt *he* cared no longer how much John suffered; no penalty could be too great for such treachery. But at all costs Janet must be saved.

"You told me a minute ago how grateful you were to John for all he has done for you, particularly during your recent illness," he urged. "If that's true, then grant him the first favour he asks of you. Make some excuse to your sister. In your heart you don't really want to see her, you simply want to flaunt your happiness. Believe me, Janet, nothing could be more dangerous. Only the unfortunate can afford to tempt Providence, because they have nothing to lose."

"You don't understand," insisted Janet. "I must invite Cassie to come. You see, not being a happy wife herself she is sceptical of the happiness of other women. She wrote rather oddly about my absurd mistake, and if now I put her off..."

But Richard interrupted, incredulously, "You are not trying to tell me that she suggested it was no accident? What conceivable motive could you have for such an action?"

Janet fired up. "None, of course. But Cassie is not like us. If I won't have her now, she will foster her suspicions."

"So you wish to ask her down here to see how happy you and John are together?" His worst enemy could not wish John a severer punishment.

"You forget. She is going abroad shortly. I won't have her go with the faintest doubt in her mind. However, Richard, I see that you are not disposed to be sympathetic. Very well, then I shall write to Cassie myself. John cannot very well shut the door in her face. And even if I didn't write," she added with an air of finality, "it would make no difference. Cassie is not sensitive, and if she wishes to come she will come, without warning. And that would make matters ten times worse."

When Cassie announced airily to her husband that Janet had urged her to come to Northwinton and she was disposed to accept, Michael said calmly, "You had better accept for both of us, that is, if I am included in the invitation."

She was so much taken aback that for a moment she was speechless. Then she said, "Are you developing a social conscience at last?"

"I like John," said Michael in the same voice, "and for various reasons I should like to see him before we go."

"Before we go where?" But there was fear behind her amazement. What, she was wondering, were these affairs he wished so urgently to discuss with John? She remembered how Janet said one forgot about Michael, he seemed so uninterested, yet on an occasion he proved himself a first-rate observer.

"The lease of this house is up at the end of the quarter, and Mrs. Hunloke writes that she wishes to return to it. As for ourselves, we've been in England too long as it is. We came for six months, we have been here more than two years."

"And where do you propose to go next?"

"I had thought of Mexico. I'd like to study the types, it would be pleasant to have some light and heat again ..."

"You can get both in this country," she interrupted, warmly.

"A certain water-colour effect," he acknowledged, "but that is not quite what I want. As for you, I believe you have never visited Mexico."

"I have never visited the steppes of Russia, but that doesn't make me eager to go. And at such short notice."

"You have till the end of the quarter. That should be ample time."

"But we have no friends in Mexico," she protested.

"Since you are so skilled at making friends wherever you find yourself, you needn't let that trouble you."

She saw that he was in earnest, and instantly set herself to foil his plans. For, come what might, she would not at this juncture agree to leave England. Perhaps, thought the unscrupulous creature, she could persuade her sister to ask her to stay—not actually in the house—but near by. That would be better than establishing herself beneath the same roof. Then John could visit her with more frequency than of late. Since, like Richard, it never occurred to her that Janet's recent illness was due to anything but carelessness she did not dream that John would choose this time to put an end to their liaison.

As to her fears that Michael might suspect the truth, these were readily allayed when he explained that he wished to leave certain matters in John's keeping. He had made a number of investments, and, since Mexico was some way off and his address was hardly likely to be a stable one, he proposed to give his wife's brother-in-law a power of attorney to act for him in emergencies.

When Cassie arrived, in the middle of the tea-hour, their train being unaccountably late and Janet, not unnaturally, having decided that once again she had changed her plans, she was startled at the change in her sister.

"Why, she is an old woman," she told herself. "Rigid, terrifying—dignified, I daresay, very conscious of her position

as mistress of the household, but undeniably old. She might be sixty, to see her sitting there in that black dress in that uncomfortable chair."

Janet never lounged. At the Rectory the straightest-backed chair was her choice, and she used to say it had preserved her erect where other women stooped or became round-shouldered. Even after her illness she refused to pander to comfort, and sat bolt upright, her severe dress of black silk relieved only by the pearls John had given her to mark their tenth anniversary and a new pearl brooch that, guessed Cassie, was his gift also, a thank-offering, no doubt, for her recovery. Cassie's beautiful mouth curled.

"That is a new brooch, Janet," she said, disregarding all the pother caused by their late arrival. "Why, you are becoming quite vain in your old age."

"John gave me this," said Janet, as her sister had anticipated. "I never cared much for jewels, but when I was a little girl I always longed to wear Mamma's pearls just once, so that I could imagine they were mine. Of course, after I married John I never gave them another thought."

"I suppose Cora has them now. And very handsome she would look in them. Has she been to see you?"

"Papa's gout has been very bad. He does not like being left nowadays. But she wrote very kindly. Later we shall visit Abbot St. Mary when John and the doctor will allow me to travel."

This was the first time Cassie had seen husband and wife together since John became her lover, and she was immediately affronted by what she considered her sister's possessive attitude. John must wait on her hand and foot, see that she was served with cake and biscuits, though the plates stood at her side, bring her a footstool, fetch her a shawl.

"She is playing up to her part of an invalid," thought Cassie, disgustedly. "There's no virtue in being ill, particularly an illness like this which should never have happened, but sick people like to behave as though there were."

In consequence, Cassie exerted herself to be particularly entertaining, and was so successful that Janet, smiling and applauding, exclaimed, "This reminds me of my visit to Paris

the year after I was married, I felt as though I were at a perpetual Guy Fawkes Exhibition, so many rockets and brilliant stars bursting all round me. I was blinded and deafened, but I was bewitched, too."

"ReneVs house was always the meeting-place for artists," agreed Cassie in a rather disagreeable tone. "It was reckoned an achievement to receive one of her invitations."

But Janet continued, deep in recollections, though apparently she had forgotten the wretched conclusion to her visit, "I used to wonder if it was always like that and, if so, how often you had to go into retreat, as it were, to recuperate."

"To recuperate? Why, it was as stimulating as champagne."

"But you cannot drink champagne all the time," Janet protested. "Did you never wish for a plain homely cup of tea?"

"Oh, it's no use," cried Cassie, "we are unlike in everything."

"Except, of course, that we had the same parents," suggested Janet.

"But no-one would have thought it," exclaimed Cassie, impetuously.

For an instant no-one spoke. Then Michael began to talk of their plans.

"You are going to Mexico?" said Janet. "You know, Cassie always reminds me of someone out of a fairy-tale where something miraculous is perpetually happening. I suppose it's a matter of temperament, but you announce your plans of going to the other side of the world with no more concern than if you were planning a holiday in Bath."

"Can you conceive of us in Bath?" asked Cassie, and Janet said, "No. Though John and I could be very happy there for a time. In fact, he is going to take me there for a holiday shortly, and I am as excited at the prospect as you can be going to Mexico. I suppose the truth is we're not adventurous people in your particular way, and it is useless to try and do things that are out of character."

Once again Michael took command of the situation, speaking of Bath, a city he appeared to know well and presently

he and John were deep in conversation, while the two women exchanged desultory remarks.

"Really, Janet has become quite fatuous of late," exploded Cassie when she and her husband found themselves in their room, unpacking. It was typical of Janet that she expected her guests to perform this function for themselves. "She treats John as if he were her slave or a pet poodle, simply there to please her."

Michael looked at her thoughtfully. "I wonder if you believe that, Cassie. If so, you're less observant than I supposed. Isn't it clear to you that if John waits on her it's because he wishes to do so? She didn't make a single request to him, he forestalled all her needs. I fancy he was harder hit by that illness of hers than you appreciate."

"It has certainly aged her," agreed Cassie, venomously.

"Don't make the mistake of under-rating your sister. She may be a provincial, narrow, brittle, with no appreciation of art, but she has at least one achievement to her credit. She has made a marriage."

"Most women do that," riposted Cassie, scornfully.

"You don't understand. There's more to marriage than just some mumbo-jumbo recited in front of a clergyman or a *maire*. There is—what is the prayer book definition?—an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Neither you nor I is capable of marriage in that sense. We're nomads in our bones, the rootless people who pull up our stakes overnight and are as much at home in one place as another. Eventually our bones will lie in no local graveyard, no-one will put flowers above them. They'll whiten some desert, and we shan't care. It's women like you who make the colour and beauty of the sex, but Janet makes its security."

"Why, Michael, has Janet cast some spell over you? I always thought you found her insignificant."

"She will never be that. Oh, she could never hold any lure for me, but she had something, integrity is perhaps the word, a kind of hard courage that must be extremely uncomfortable to live with, but that even I must respect. Do you notice that a dozen years of marriage to a man whose shadow she worships haven't changed her views on any of the major questions of

existence—religion, social justice, a particular code of manners and morals? Her black is black and her white white, and not even for John Hardwick would she compromise. He chose better than he knew when he married her."

"I have never understood why he did it. I imagine compassion was at the root of it. She really had a very poor time of it with Papa."

"If John is a great man, as many people believe, he owes his success, in part at least, to her. She has provided him with a stable background, something unchanging in an undependable environment. Whatever disaster overtook him, and it is never safe to prophesy even with the most stable of men, she would be one of the foundations on which he could build anew. As I say, she has no attraction for me, but in her own way she is a thoroughly successful woman."

"I wonder why you take up the cudgels on Janet's behalf." Cassie's voice shook, partly with apprehension, partly with rage.

"Perhaps I should be sorry to see you made to appear foolish. No, Cassie, I am not so blind as you suppose. Can you stand near fire and not feel the heat? But when you gibe at Janet for her short-comings, don't forget that if John belongs to Janet it is by his own wish."

He went into the dressing-room adjoining leaving Cassie in a state of mental turmoil and more resolved than ever to let nothing come between her and the man she now loved insanely and whom she had no mind at any cost to lose.

Right up to the moment of their arrival John had been sure that Cassie would not come. Even when he heard the pealing of the bell he had believed it would be a telegram announcing an eleventh-hour change of plan. When she walked into the drawing-room he had felt his bones turn to water; the resolution with which he had fortified himself in her absence oozed out of him like blood from a mortal wound, leaving him as weak morally as Janet had been physically during the worst days of her ordeal. He was astounded that love should cause such suffering as he now endured. The grief he had known at Laura's death now seemed to him no more than a

needle-prick on the hand of a child. He was hard put to it to preserve a calm exterior, and when the Sorleys left him alone with Janet he sought desperately for some excuse to leave her also.

Behind him he heard her sigh, and he turned quickly from his place of refuge beside the window.

"What is it, Janet? You are tired? I was afraid this might be too much for you."

"It's not that. I was thinking of Cassie. She is looking older, her face is more drawn, though I suppose that comes ill from me who have scarcely any flesh left on my bones. No, John, indeed I was shocked to see myself in the mirror. I looked like the ghost of a woman. But if she were to resemble a skeleton she would still have some indescribable quality that would draw people like a magnet. She is beautiful, certainly, but by all standards that beauty should lessen with the years. But in her case she is as irresistible as ever. I suppose it is some element we can't put a name to, something that will ensure against her ever being solitary or deserted. Surely you, too, feel it. When she walked in this afternoon, though she was tired and spoke less than usual, I felt she had only to lift her hand and no-one could refuse her whatever she asked."

To this John found it impossible to make any reply, and after an instant Janet continued, "When I was in Paris I thought her conduct utterly reprehensible, I could find no excuse for it. I thought her wanton. Now I begin to understand that her nature may have needs that are incomprehensible to me. I'm a very fortunate woman, John. You, ray dearest, can satisfy every demand I could make of life. But Cassie must have brilliant surroundings, worship, a throne from which to reign. One thing you may be sure of, she would never lack courtiers. Surely, John, even you cannot be indifferent to that quality in her that makes her singled out from the rest of the world?"

But by now the talk had become intolerable to him, and coming across the room he said firmly, "My dear, Cassie's beauty has always been a legend, and you would hardly expect me to be so blind that I didn't acknowledge it. But I

shall not allow you to talk any more now, if you wish to be with us for dinner. You know Dr. Lee was insistent that you should rest after tea, and for myself, I have some letters I must attend to now, if I'm to spend the rest of the evening in the drawing-room."

She laid her hand on his arm as he paused beside her chair. "Don't imagine I envy her, John. I couldn't be so ungrateful. I envy no woman in the world. I sometimes wonder if the angels in heaven know greater happiness than you have given me."

26

It was the last evening of the Sorleys' stay at Northweston. Early to-morrow morning the fly would come to the door and they would drive away to the station, never to return. The past week had brought John to such a pass of despair that he had wondered their secret was not glaringly obvious even to their neighbours. As to Janet herself, it passed his comprehension that she should remain insensible to his feelings. In the first throes of his remorse at her illness renunciation had seemed to him a foregone conclusion: that Cassie could take any other view had not then passed through his mind. But from the first hour of her arrival it had been plain that she accepted no such premise. Her love for him was in no way lessened, nor did she agree that a piece of stupidity on Janet's part, even though the results might well have been fatal, should put a period to their love. During the past week he had been at great pains to see they were never alone together, and Michael's presence had helped him considerably in this resolve. Now he looked forward with a kind of wretched relief to the coming day. Had she been returning to London he felt that his good intentions might not have stood the strain of separation, but Mexico was the other side of the world, and he would not allow himself to see their relationship as one incident in her career of love, turned his mind from the picture of her in some other man's arms. Then a wild mood of revulsion would seize him and he would feel like a man who knows that with to-morrow's dawn an executioner will enter his cell to put out his eyes.

"When she is gone, when life starts revolving again to an accepted pattern, I shall understand that there is no limit to man's capacity for endurance," he would tell himself, and he would remember all that would still remain to him. "Why, when I lost Laura I felt I had said good-bye to happiness, but the years have proved me wrong." And surely, surely, he comforted himself, with the passage of time passion dies, resignation takes its place, I shall become absorbed again in the things that made up my days for so long.

But this was cold comfort. He might tell himself that this would be so, but as yet he could not believe it.

The clock in the hall had chimed the hour some time since, and the party had dispersed to dress for dinner. John crossed the hall to the library, to find some paper he required and, with his hand on the door, heard someone speak his name. There was no need to look up to identify the speaker. Blind, he would have recognised that voice. He did, however, turn towards the staircase to behold Cassie coming towards him. She was dressed already in a gown of midnight blue, with a diamond necklace round her throat.

"I have never known anyone possess so many jewels as Cassie," Janet had remarked. "I am certain that Michael did not give them to her. He would need to be a millionaire for that."

She had also remarked that Cassie seemed to think herself still in London or Paris, so magnificent was her appearance at the dinner-table, but in reply to this Cassie would say carelessly that these were the simplest gowns she possessed, and surely Janet would not expect her to buy anything merely for a week's visit.

To-night she was so lovely she took his breath away. Coming slowly down the stairs, against the background of the crimson landing curtain she seemed not only beautiful, but noble. John remained where he was, rooted to the spot. She, crossed the hall and stood beside him. He saw that she had diamonds in her ears, diamonds on her wrists and on her fingers. Poor Janet in her plain black dress and her pearl necklace would be snuffed out like a candle by that magnificence.

He thought, "Janet is right, she has more than beauty. She possesses the very quality of life. When she is gone it will be as though we have had a funeral in the house."

Because he could not trust himself, he said quickly, "You are looking for Janet?" but she answered, "Why do you pretend, even to yourself? You know, it is you, you, I have come for. All this week you've avoided me. I have had to scheme to get even these few minutes alone with you. Would you have let me go to-morrow without a word?"

In that house of plain women, for it needed a lover to discover Janet's distinction, while none of the servants had been chosen for their comeliness, her beauty had the quality of insolence. "Cassie is like a day in full summer," an enemy had once said of her. "So much foliage, so much blossom—the eye is dazzled. It longs in vain for the simplicity of the flowerless thorn."

To-night John knew that sense of exhaustion as she came down to stand beside him, glittering with gold and silver and the mysterious hues of night. His resolution began to crumble like a sand castle attacked by a rising tide. He could no more resist her than he could stand against a tidal wave. Without knowing what he did he had her hands between his own; to-morrow there would be marks on her fingers where the rings had cut deep into the flesh.

Once again it seemed to him incredible that this beauty was his for the possessing, and it came on him in a flash that he was mad even to think he could live without her. He was accustomed to these swift transitions when he was with her, she turned all his normal codes topsy-turvy. Why, if he did let her go, what would he benefit? A little safety, a little sense of virtue, a momentary salving of conscience. Now she was speaking swiftly, her face close to his, her voice vibrant with feeling.

"I know what it is, of course. It is Janet. Always Janet. But she is no more your wife than she was two years ago, and has she been less happy during those years? Or perhaps it's your work. But has that suffered because we have been happy? You talk of other people paying our debt, but no-one has had to pay it but ourselves. Janet and Michael." She

laughed, a sound without gaiety. "If I were tortured by Mexicans and Michael thought it made an effective group, he wouldn't spare me a thought, he would get to work completely absorbed. That is the measure of his love for me."

"Perhaps if he had loved you ..." But she was too honest to allow that.

"No, John, that would make no difference. From the moment I saw you I knew that for me this was the end. He had no further existence for me. Not Michael, not Janet, not the whole world could part us. Only you yourself, and that I will not allow you to do."

Her voice had lifted as she spoke and he said apprehensively, "Be careful, Cassie. You are so reckless."

"And you are so cautious. I believe you think the mice in the library will overhear and bring testimony against you. The others are upstairs dressing and as for the servants, they don't use the front staircase. They, poor souls, have to toil up that twisting back stairway, where anything less agile than a chamois might fall and break its neck on the stone floor below. No, John, that evasion is unworthy of you. Listen, for the time is short. Michael may be down at any moment. To-morrow, as you know, we go to London, and the day after we start on our journey to Mexico."

He had a vision of her, that brilliant creature moving under those burning skies, drinking in the colour, the heat, the luxurious opulence of that lazy atmosphere. It was like another world. How long would she remember Northweston when she was there?

"If only you need not go," he exclaimed, and then paused aghast. Until he spoke the words he had not known they were already on his lips.

"Oh, believe me, if there were any other way I would not go, but there is none. But it will not be for long."

"Michael spoke of two yqars."

"And at the end of two weeks he will not notice if I am there or not. Do you remember that night in Vienna when you left Janet asleep and stole out to meet me at Rummagens? What I promised you then I promise again now. I shall come

back in the spring and, trust me, John, spring will be early next year."

He leaned against the jamb of the door, exhausted by the need of proving to her how impossible was the future she pictured for them both.

"Even if you come back things could never be the same. We should never be alone together. Janet would always be with us, the unseen third, though she was a hundred miles away."

"I could drive her out."

For a minute he let himself drift with her mood. In the house the small multitudinous sounds of the evening went unheard. A door closed, feet rustled on the stairs, somewhere in the kitchen a voice called. At last he spoke.

"Cassie, it cannot be. So long as the secret was ours we were, perhaps, safe for a little. But now ..."

"Who knows?" Her voice came sharp as a sword. "Not Janet? But no. Of course not. If Janet knew, she couldn't have contained herself so long. With her, to think is to act. Then who? Who takes sufficient interest in us to be aware of our situation?"

He said heavily, "Richard Gladstone has given me reason to believe that he knows what is in the wind. Surely that convinces you that we cannot go on. He is Janet's friend and mine, and my partner. It is putting him in a false position also."

"It is certainly unfortunate that you don't believe in a heaven, John," said Cassie softly, "seeing that you consider everyone except yourself." Her voice lifted a little in scornful rage. "What is Richard Gladstone to me? Or Janet? And don't speak to me of pity. I have no pity for anyone but ourselves. You and I are to suffer, that Richard Gladstone may preserve his peace of mind, keep his conscience immaculate. I tell you, I care nothing for his conscience, and if Janet must endure a little pain, well, why should she be immune? She has had you to herself for ten years, she can claim you in the face of the whole world, while we must thief our little happiness as best we can."

Upstairs a door opened. "That will be Michael," said Cassie, gathering her skirts and preparing to depart. "Oh

John, I must love you very much. I could never have contemplated three months' separation before. But remember—spring will be early next year."

She seemed to melt away from him into the shadows of the hall. Just so, thought John, would she melt out of his life, despite her brave words. However, there was no time to think of that now. He went quickly up the stairs, to encounter Michael by the big landing window, where what remained of daylight came through the coloured panes in panels of rose and blue.

"There's something about these English skies," said he, "that one remembers nostalgically when one's away from them. Look at that." He nodded towards the garden.

John came to stand beside him. "It is majestic," he agreed, "but—I know these skies—presently there will be a storm."

That night at dinner Janet looked more than ever shrunken and severe against Cassie's magnificence. She wore an insignificant black dress that accentuated her pallor and the sharp lines of her figure, with no ornament but John's pearls. Even in the kind candlelight she now preferred to the gas-mantles she had thought so modish and convenient when John had them installed, she looked desperately ill. Michael, glancing once in her direction, thought with impatience that he had never seen a woman so subject to change. Gone now was that element of greatness he thought he had discovered in her. Now she was simply a prematurely-aged woman who had never had the smallest pretensions to beauty.

Conversation was spasmodic, each member of the party seeming sunk in his own thoughts. A general air of melancholy prevailed.

"One might almost think they were sorry to lose us," Michael reflected. "What must John's life be with that woman? What mysteries does she conceal?" Still, the very fact that there might be any hidden quality there enticed him. That was Cassie's failure. For him she had no secrets, which was perhaps why his interest in her had died so soon after their marriage.

John belatedly recalled his duties as a host, began to speak

of the Sorleys' plans. Why Mexico, he asked? Michael said he wanted to see the work of a native sculptor, which, it was claimed, was remarkable. Claimed by whom? asked John.

Michael looked surprised. "The only people competent to judge, the contemporaries of his own race."

A discussion sprang up as to the capacity of one nation to judge the work of another. It depended, Michael declared, on any particular country's conception of civilisation. As for the value of rival ideologies, time would be the only judge, "and time" he added, "is against us as individuals. We work all our lives in the dark, or at best, in the minute ray of light illuminating our particular corner."

The ball thus started, conversation became more easy and ranged further afield. They were not more than half way through the meal when the storm John had foreseen came riding up the sky. Janet shivered.

"I felt this in the air," she murmured. "Of all things I detest a storm. I am afraid of them. They are like lunatic manifestations of nature, purposeless in their violence, and ruthless in their course."

"But magnificent," Cassie insisted. "You must acknowledge that."

"The fires of Smithfield may have seemed magnificent viewed as mere spectacles," countered Janet, breathlessly. "But you would scarcely justify them for that reason."

As the tension in the air increased the faint colour that had stained her cheeks earlier in the evening was blotted out; her eyes seemed to sink back in her head till they were mere dark holes under craggy brows.

"She is distressingly thin," thought John. "I think I must get Lee to come in again. She has no right to look so exhausted." But to console himself he decided that this appearance of utter weariness was due to the proximity of the storm.

Cassie, who seemed suddenly to have recovered her spirits, proceeded to taunt her sister.

"What pleases me most about a storm is its utter indifference to human powers. It is superb, unconquerable. It puts humanity in its proper perspective."

"Now you are talking nonsense," exclaimed Janet, her voice sharp with nervousness. "Storms mean ruin to the countryside. Last time we had one of them a couple sheltering beneath a tree were struck by lightning."

"What else did they expect?" enquired Cassie, carelessly. "They should study science and stay in the open."

"You are quite pitiless, I know," panted Janet. "Indeed, you are not unlike a storm yourself. The same lightning set fire to Hobson's ricks and they were completely burned out. Hobson was ruined, and hanged himself a week later in his own barn. They found the body dangling from one of the charred beams."

"And you think the storm was responsible? That is the sheerest nonsense. No-one was to blame but the man himself. He was defeated by nature and his own weakness. If there had been no storm, some other disaster would have destroyed him. Nature has no respect for weaklings. The imperfect plant, the deformed animal, what sense is there in their preservation? It is only the sentimental human race that makes fetishes of the unfit."

During this exchange between the sisters John had sat appalled. "What is happening to us?" he asked himself. "Has Cassie taken leave of her senses? Does she mean Janet to know? Or is the warning intended for me?"

Before he could answer any of these questions the storm broke with a ferocity that startled them all. In a moment thunder was crashing round them, accompanied by a deluge so furious it was like grape-shot peppering the glass. For a minute it was as if the onslaught had deprived all four of breath; they sat hushed and abashed, hearing the rain dashing among the trees, drowning Janet's cherished garden, sucking fiercely at the stones of the little rockery she had been at such pains to make outside the dining-room window. Cassie was the first to find her voice.

"Why, it is like a siege," she said. "I hope your house is firm on its foundations, John. It seems as though the very fabric must be swept away."

At the first burst of thunder Janet had repressed an involuntary cry. John started from his chair, but she shook

her head, clenching her hands on the edge of the table so that the cloth stretched and the silver jangled softly together.

"No, no, it is all right. It was just I was not quite prepared."

She sat there, defying Cassie's scorn, meeting Michael's eye with a challenging glance. "Pity me if you dare," it said. "I am Janet Hardwick . . ." as though to be John Hardwick's wife was a protection in itself. Michael watched her with impersonal absorption. The contrast between her and Cassie was very great. If Cassie was blooming summer Janet had the austerity of the wintry bough, casting its pure outline against a grey sky. Once again she had changed. Now there was majesty in the indomitable face; her refusal to yield to an overmastering fear gave her a bleak strength that only a fool, he thought, would ignore. Compared with her, his own wife seemed imbued with the very spirit of the storm.

"She is like a Valkyrie," he told himself. "Most men would envy me, be sorry for John. But—I wonder if even now he knows the woman he has married." He thought sagely that, though his brother-in-law might possess a shrewd legal wit, he was singularly lacking in knowledge of women. "But then, he has had only the one wife and before that by all accounts he spent little enough time in the company of her sex. Nevertheless, one day Janet may surprise him." Ah, that was her secret that, for all her grim appearance, she retained the element of mystery.

Then, with terror barely concealed, a fresh ordeal descended on her, as the lightning came leaping through the sky, extinguishing the soft candlelight with its brilliance, sending its bright lances against the dark panes. John rose and secured the curtains, setting a -chair against them, for the wind had risen to a gale and blew the thick stuff apart as though it had been silk.

Michael, still watching his hostess, said, "If lightning strikes anywhere to-night, this rain would put out the fires of hell."

"It is the fire that I dread," Janet confessed. "When I was a child I once heard Papa preach a sermon on hell. It made such an impression on me that that night I had the most terrible dream. In it I went into the nursery and there in the

grate, surrounded by flames, writhing in torment, was a nursemaid who was part of the household at that time. Mamma found her unsatisfactory, mainly, I think, because she would wear red ribbons in her bonnet, which Mamma thought unsuitable to her position. I stood there as if I could never move from the spot, watching her for what seemed an age, always burning yet never consumed. For some days afterwards I could hardly endure to open the nursery door."

"In case she was really there?"

Cassie's voice was bantering, but Janet, was sober as a man faced with inescapable disaster. "I had been told about the martyrs, of course. And there was old Mrs. Hobbs in Abbot St. Mary, who was crippled, and fell from her chair into the hearth and slowly burned to death. That was a terrible story, but until the night of my dream I had never realised what burning alive might imply. I have never forgotten. Even after Amy left us, as she shortly did, the horror remained."

"And so you have been afraid of fire ever since?"

"Ever since. Sometimes I wonder if I shall ever conquer that fear, or if perhaps it is a premonition of the way I myself shall die."

"You are tormenting yourself for nothing, Janet," cried John, rising and going to her side. "I think perhaps you would be more comfortable upstairs. Michael and I will join you both immediately. For once, we will forgo our wine."

But again she shook her head. "Cassie is right. One shouldn't allow oneself to be defeated. Please sit down, John, and we will continue dinner."

Reluctantly he returned to his chair. Michael observed, "Do your storms always break with this tropical suddenness? But then there is an element of electricity in the atmosphere here. I have noticed it before."

Startled, Cassie's eyes swept round to his face. What did he mean by that? Anything? Nothing? But his face was as unrevealing as an empty house. This desirable residence to let. Shutters at the windows, door locked and blank. And even if you could break in, what would you find? Bare rooms, uncovered walls, a cobweb on the ceiling perhaps, a forgotten glove in the corner. The life of the house would be concealed

elsewhere, behind some secret door you would never find unless Michael chose to reveal it to you. Was that why she'd married him, she who could, as they say, have married anyone? (Except the only two men to whom she'd ever given her heart—Ned Castlebarry all those years ago, and now her brother-in-law.) And what a failure it had been. By the time she met John the guilt was off the gingerbread. Whose fault? Who could tell? What would he be like with a woman who loved him and was faithful? Ah, an indifferent husband at best. He couldn't really focus on anything except his art. If you spirited one woman out of his bed and substituted another, would he notice so long as she kept her mouth shut? He minded, she saw, less about the storm than any of them, but that was because he knew destruction was temporary while beauty was eternal. He perceived it, she supposed, in more diverse shapes than the rest of them. Why, hadn't he practically claimed to find it even in Janet? Cassie's eyes left her husband, satisfied that his words had no personal significance, and came back to her sister. A gaunt woman, with those high arrogant cheek-bones, that fierce contemptuous mouth. Difficult, plain for all Michael's assumptions, but negligible—no, she wasn't that. Across the table Janet's eyes met her husband's. John smiled reassuringly, and she smiled back. And now even Cassie had to admit that in fleeting instants she, too, had her meed of beauty.

The knowledge moved her to sudden flaming rage. She had seen so little of these two together that she had come to regard John as a separate creature. Now that small wordless gesture made her aware of a whole world of shared experience that could never be hers. They were friends, as lovers seldom are. For a moment, standing outside the charmed circle, she was filled with hate.

"Why, all his thought at this instant is for her," she discovered. "Does she realise that if she were some small animal in distress he would feel just the same?" Nevertheless, she could not endure this evidence of their intimacy. She was like a miser who shakes with fury to see other men carelessly dispensing their wealth. Every copper of courtesy John offered his wife meant a depleting of her own treasury.

As they went up the stairs together she whispered to Michael, "What a disaster for Janet to be reduced to a piece of wreckage because of a natural phenomenon like a storm."

Michael sent her an odd smiling glance. "But what an opportunity for John. You strong-minded women deprive us of our rare chances of asserting our superiority. It's hard to forgive you for that."

27

The storm, having raged for some hours, died down as abruptly as it had arisen. By midnight all was quiet again. But in the desolate gardens, the flooded barns, the memory of it would linger for weeks to come. Already in the kitchen whispers circulated, though how, on such a night, even a rumour could reach the house no-one could explain. But, standing at the window, the garden black with rain and shadow, the air clear and released of its burden, John could hear the River Western roaring down the valley, in a smothering yellow tide. Oh, to-morrow the town would enjoy itself, each raconteur outstripping his neighbour with tales of tragedy and loss. But by night men reputed to be drowned in the flood would be seen placidly drinking in the four-ale bar at the Red Cow, and sheep, whose swollen corpses had been watched by half a dozen witnesses swirling past cottage windows, would be staggering back to the sodden pastures in quest of food. And then in a few more days everything would be normal, and quite soon the storm would be no more than an incident whose very date would be forgotten. Life goes over. It would be intolerable if it did not. One day, reflected John, I shall be whole again, be able to think of Cassie in Mexico or Morocco or wherever fancy (and Michael) take her, without this sense of dereliction that robs every activity of its worth.

Perhaps it was true, there was no knowing, but to-night at least he could think of no-one but her. The others had gone upstairs some time ago, but he had pleaded work and a wakeful mood, and now he was seated at his desk, a pile of papers before him, and his thoughts in the past. After she **had** gone everything he beheld would have its particular

memory, the occasions he most poignantly recalled would all be connected with her. The simplest things he possessed, his pencil, his signet ring, would remind him, for she had borrowed his pencil sometimes, had sealed a letter with the ring. Spring will be early next year she told him. Ah, but the steps of last spring were still sounding in his ears. Days they had spent together, places they had visited, pleasures they had shared, came crowding into his consciousness. There was the morning when, flinging discretion to the winds, they had gone to Hampton Court. In his mind's eye he could see now the tall spires of the lupins, rank upon rank, like coloured swords upheld in the hands of warriors. There was a day when they walked beside the river at Kew, one of those mornings before the mist has risen from the water, and trees are seen as if through muslin, the outlines vague, the vision trembling with the faint ripple of the water. That had been a quiet day. They had stood looking at the swans that floated, like birds made of celluloid or china, so motionless they seemed, upon that motionless tide. And in the mud the voracious gulls strutted and probed until all of a sudden the sun leaped up, tearing away the mist, like a pantomime fairy leaping through a cloud of muslin, and the red legs of the gulls shone, and the swans arched their necks and ruffled their wings and came to life again.

He moved restlessly. Why couldn't he remember Janet like this? All those years together and now nothing, not even memories, or none that his more powerful recollections of Cassie could not disperse. Yet Janet, too, had her loves. Her garden, for instance. But, when he thought of her walking there, it was a figure armed with shears whom he beheld. Janet might plan her borders with care, but she was no sentimentalist. She did not stay her hand because a certain clump of blossom made a pleasing pattern against the blue sky or the trellised lattice that topped the wall.

"That spray is just the height, the shape, the colour for the Wedgwood bowl, the crystal vase." Snip, snip. So she moved round the garden.

He was never able to identify the voice that roused him from his reverie, shouting, "Fire! Fire!" in tones of such

panic that for an instant his senses were bemused, and he thought he must have fallen asleep.

Then the cry came more urgently, "Fire!" and now it seemed to him it was Janet's voice. He snatched at the knob of the door, came into the hall.

"Where is it?" he shouted, perceiving neither smoke nor flame. Indeed, the whole house seemed plunged into darkness.

The voice that answered him now was unquestionably his wife's.

"John, where are you? Where is the fire?"

"That is what I am asking you." He began to hurry up the stairs but Cassie's voice recalled him.

"We are at the head of the other staircase. Be careful how you come. Perhaps the fire is there."

He retraced his steps, ran down the passage and through the kitchen. Here everything was dark, only a faint glow in the hearth as the ashes fell through the bars. It seemed probable that Janet had suffered another nightmare, had wakened stiff with fear and called out before she could reassure herself. She was always upset by a storm. Sometimes she couldn't take food for twenty-four hours.

"I'm coming, Janet," he called. "Show me a light."

But when he reached the foot of the winding stairs all was darkness and confusion. He heard Cassie's voice. "Where is the fire, Janet?" and the thought went through him, hearing that cool amused note, that she had staged this scene deliberately, playing on Janet's acknowledged fear of fire. His heart burned against her.

"Janet, are you all right? I am coming."

Her voice sounded from above him. "They say there's fire. John, are you safe?"

In the darkness beneath him he heard movements. Two of the younger servants slept next to the kitchen, and now they had crept to their door, and were whispering together like mice in a wainscot.

"There is nothing to be afraid of," he said in authoritative tones. "One of you fetch me a light."

Stronger footsteps sounded above and Michael's voice joined in. "What is all this about? Who says there's a fire?"

He was carrying a small lamp lighted by paraffin, and this he now held above his head. "Be careful," he warned them. And then, "Who started this?"

"Janet had another nightmare," repeated Cassie. In the flaring beam of the lamp John caught sight of his wife's face. It was terrible, fleshless, twisted into a death-mask of fear. She stretched out her hands towards him, and the light caught the wedding-ring that had grown so much too large for her shrunken finger. As she extended her hands it slipped off and fell with a tinkling sound on the stone stairway.

"My ring!" whispered Janet, thrusting forward. There was an exclamation from Cassie, a cry from Michael.

"Cassie, is that you?" There was the sound of feet scraping on stone, and then John's threefold cry seemed answered, for now the fire was all about him as the lamp came crashing out of Michael's hand, pitching down the stairway, the burning oil running from step to step. Instinctively John recoiled, and, feeling his footing uncertain, grabbed furiously at the banister rail. Then it happened, the thing he was never to understand. For as he put out his hand it seemed as though something launched itself against him, thrusting him backwards, despite his fierce cry. He had swerved to avoid the tumbling flame, and now he was beyond salvation. For an instant he clawed at the empty air, then a desperate cry burst from his throat, and with a sound that might have been "Janet!" he fell down, down into the black pit of the servants' hall.

The lamp, shattered by its crash, continued to roll slowly and drunkenly from step to step.

After the cry there was an instant of silence, when horror seemed to freeze every throat. Then Michael came to himself.

"What was that? Who fell?"

"John!" whispered Janet. "John." She put out her hand to catch the rail, met an invisible hand moving uncertainly in the dark, and withdrew her own. The oil, finding nothing combustible, slowly burned itself out. But before it did so it gave them sufficient light to identify each other. Michael, Cassie, Janet—those three. And to them was added a fourth,

as Mrs. Whitaker came hurrying along the corridor, bearing a candle. Aroused by the commotion, she had paused, the decent woman, to put a shawl over her curlers, and draw on her thick woollen stockings under her solid flannel nightdress. Michael choked down a desire to laugh at her comical appearance. Neither of the women seemed to notice her coming.

"I heard something, Madam," she began.

"There's been an accident," said Michael sharply, taking control of the situation. "Tell those girls downstairs to stay in their rooms. There's nothing they can do. Here, give me the candle." He took it from her indignantly-shaking hand.

"I can't warn the girls without a light," she began.

Michael leaned into the dark well and shouted, "Get back, there. There's nothing you can do," and began to descend the stairs. All this had taken no more than a second or two. He descended a few steps skirting the flame, then was aware of Cassie at his side.

"Get back to Janet," he bade her. "We don't know what has happened."

"It was John," flared Cassie. "He always said someone would be killed on these stairs one day."

"We don't know he's dead," returned Michael, stolidly ignoring the anguish she was at no pains to conceal. "But for God's sake, keep Janet back."

"Give me the candle," commanded Cassie in the same fierce tone. "That was *John*" She tried to wrench the painted blue stick out of his hand, but he easily put her back.

"Do what I say. Do you want Janet raving on top of everything else? She was upset enough as it was."

But while they struggled and the victim of what was apparently some monstrous practical joke lay motionless and silent beneath them Janet came down, snatched the candle and was stumbling and slipping on the stairs below them. Michael loosed his hold of his wife and hurried after her. They reached the bottom of the flight together. John lay there horribly, unnaturally twisted, one leg doubled under hiip, his face, disfigured by the fall, smeared with blood. Janet dropped to her knees beside him, the candle tilting, wax falling on the stone floor, and on to his clothing.

"It's no use, Janet," Michael assured her after an instant. "He must have broken his neck in his fall. Someone had better fetch a doctor."

Mrs. Whitaker appeared just above them. "Is the master badly hurt?" Her little eyes gleamed, her forehead glistened. An accident, perhaps fatal—a disaster, a tragedy, and she in the very middle of it. She repeated her question, her voice warm with appreciation.

"Get a doctor," thundered Michael, and she stiffened, affronted.

"Is it . . . ?"

Janet straightened herself. "It was an accident," she said, and over John's body her eyes, blazing in that corpse-like face, challenged the other two. "An accident. We all saw it."

"How could we see in the dark?" Cassie demanded. But Michael saw and applauded the older woman's wisdom. Whatever the truth, let John Hardwick die by accident, since nothing could undo the irrevocable fact of his death. As to what had really happened at the top of the stairs—who was likely to discover the truth? In any case, proof was out of the question.

So he said sternly, in support of Janet, "He missed his footing in the dark. I told him only yesterday these stairs were a death-trap."

The situation seemed unreal. There they were, the three of them, arguing furiously above the body of a dead man. Furtive sounds in the house proved that everyone was astir. The story would go the rounds in the morning, completely effacing the importance of the storm as a conversational asset. Any number of reasons would be adduced for the tragedy. But the conclusion would inevitably be the same. He missed his footing in the dark.

Turning to Janet Michael was staggered by the look in her eyes. As yet she had no time for grief. "I know everything," said that dark, antagonistic gaze, "but what I know is not to be spoken."

What did she know? How much would she ever reveal? Nothing, if he was any judge, but with a diabolical wisdom she would keep fact and speculation alike locked in her own

breast. No coroner, no police officer even, would drag anything from her that she did not choose to reveal. And indeed, he thought, what did the truth matter now? John Hardwick was dead. If a man is killed by lightning what profit is there speculating on the actual flash that destroyed him? or wonder if he was culpable for being out in the storm? What did anything matter beside the fact that John Hardwick was gone?

At the inquest the coroner brought in a reluctant verdict of death by misadventure. He asked a number of inconvenient questions about the imaginary fire, but no-one would admit to giving the alarm. The explanation generally accepted locally was that Janet had fallen asleep and, "her imagination inflamed by the storm and the conversation arising from it, had raised the alarm that had had such tragic consequences. In any case, no other verdict would have been acceptable, for how could anyone cherish a grudge against such a man?

On the morning following the inquest Michael left North-weston, not even staying for the funeral.

"I hope you understand my going in such a hurry," he apologised to Janet, "but my plans for Mexico have been made with some trouble, and it would be very difficult to change them."

"I understand perfectly," said Janet. "And what are Cassie's plans? Does she accompany you?"

"I doubt if Cassie was ever very enthusiastic about Mexico, and now, of course, she will feel she should not leave you at once, if you feel you need her."

A dreadful smile spread over Janet's face. "That is indeed thoughtful. Do you think she will agree to stay with me for a time, until you can spare her no longer?"

Now Michael looked surprised. "You are surely not planning to keep this house on? After what has happened . . ."

"You are as bad as Richard. He has already urged me to put the house on the market. But he, of course, is a bachelor, he could scarcely be expected to understand. To dwell in a new house where John has never been, never opened the gate, unlocked the door, looked out of the windows—that would be to divorce the future utterly from the past."

"Gladstone's no fool," said Michael, bluntly. "You have had a serious shock, you must not under-estimate the probable effects. But, of course, if Cassie can really be of assistance . . ."

Janet watched him penetratingly. "But naturally. She is my only sister, if you except Papa, who is feeble and entirely engrossed in his own health, my only living relative. I have no child and since John was my life I have never been at pains to make friends. Everyone," she spoke with emphasis, "will think it perfectly usual for Cassie to remain, if you can spare her."

Once again he had an uneasy sense of her power. She might seem plain, insignificant even compared with Cassie, yet at the last might she not prove triumphant? A woman with a single track mind and deathless purpose—what power on earth could defeat her?

Cassie, when the plan was unfolded to her, instantly refused.

"I would not consider such a thing," she exclaimed. "Why, I would rather go to Mexico."

"There is, of course, no question of your coming to Mexico."

Cassie was so startled that for the moment she was speechless. "No question . . .?" she panted at last. "But it was all arranged . . ."

"We have had a death since then, a death that, despite the verdict has not been satisfactorily accounted for. Janet is right. It would be wise for you to be with her for a while. Later, of course, you will be free to make your own plans."

His manner could not have been more definitive. Not only did he not propose to take her to Mexico, there was no suggestion of her joining him later, either there or elsewhere. She felt the first cold pang of apprehension, the fabric beginning to crumble, and from that instant of enlightenment she glimpsed the final desolation that however, at this stage, she refused to accept. What if John were dead, the light extinguished, hope withered? She had known loss before, failure, criticism, but always she had triumphed over all three.

"And I can do it again," she assured herself, "but not at Northweton."

Janet, however, appeared to agree with Michael that she had little choice of action.

"But what do you propose to do, since you are neither going abroad with Michael nor remaining here?" demanded she arrogantly.

"I have friends," said Cassie in careless tones.

"Even friends have tongues. Do you suppose there will be no talk about this? Our neighbours ..."

"As I shall not be here, what does it matter to me what the neighbours say?"

"You—you—always yourself," flamed Janet. "I tell you I'm not thinking of you, of either of us, only of John. I could not save him, living, perhaps, but at least he shan't be the butt of ignorant or envious tongues now he's dead."

"You exaggerate," cried Cassie. "Who is likely to gossip?"

"The coroner, for one. You heard for yourself how reluctant he was to bring in a verdict of accidental death, and you may be sure half the neighbourhood will follow suit."

"What are you suggesting? How could it be anything but an accident?" But she had turned very pale and her hands shook.

"I think others besides Dr. Martin may find it hard to believe that John fell on his own stairs, knowing how dangerous they were and being, normally, a careful man. That is one strange thing. Another is that in a house full of people there wasn't a single light."

"There was Michael's lamp."

"Which went out at the crucial moment. It's not like Michael to drop a lamp for no good reason."

"Do you suggest that it was deliberate?" Cassie's voice sounded bewildered almost to idiocy.

"Perhaps someone jolted him. No, Cassie, I ask no questions. It has been officially decided that John died by accident. But you should realise how fortunate we were in our verdict."

Cassie lifted her ravaged face. "I can see no fortune anywhere in the whole miserable business. But of course it was

an accident. Why, what reason . . . you cannot surely think that I, that I—why, you fool, I loved him. I loved him. Did you never guess that?"

"Yes," said Janet and her voice reminded Cassie of that still overheated air that heralds thunder, "you loved him and he was my husband and he was wedded to his work. He'd never have let that go, and if he had he'd no longer have been John, just a poor husk of a man. You knew that, didn't you? You knew where he belonged. And then he died quite suddenly, and no-one can be sure what happened because we were all in the dark, looking for a fire that wasn't kindled."

Cassie put out imperative hands and thrust Janet back. "You are not yourself. This tragedy has gone to your head. You don't know what you are saying. John slipped in the dark and broke his neck. That's all."

"You think you loved him," said Janet, steadfastly, "but you'd sooner have destroyed him than lose him. You're a jealous woman, Cassie, and you never hesitated to snatch what you wanted. You said once we had nothing in common. You're wrong. We have a link now as strong as life itself. And if you want to silence wagging tongues, for they are wagging already, you will do as I say and stay at North-weston until the talk has died down."

When Richard Gladstone heard of the plan he said, "Don't do it, Janet. It will prove fatal, it will tie you perpetually to the past. Naturally you are very much distressed now, but life stands still for no-one. You have the future."

"There can be no future for me, since John was my whole life. Mine stops when his does. But I should like to have Cassie here. No, don't try to dissuade me. I have a fancy I'd like to have her under my eye."

"You will destroy yourself," he warned her. "Before it's too late preserve what's left of your life. It's arrogant to assume it's worthless. Let the house go."

"Sooner than let strangers live in it I would burn it to the ground with my own hands," she told him. Then she smiled, "I shall do very well, never fear. Cassie will stay a long time."

When Cassie agreed with a poor grace to remain for a short visit after Michael's departure she intended to be gone at the month's end at latest, and when the month was accomplished she packed her bags and departed for London. She had had no word from Michael, and understood that she need expect none, but she had friends and acquaintances in profusion and she intended to build up a new life on the ashes of the old. Janet, however, had for once proved the more perspicacious of the two. Cassie perhaps made a mistake in returning to her own world so soon after the tragedy and while it was still a subject of discussion. For all their discretion, she and John had been seen together more than once, and from these frail seeds of suspicion speculation leaped like a beanstalk.

To her amazement the majority took it for granted that she would shortly be returning to Northweston.

"That dead-alive place?" cried Cassie. "I should wither like a plant in a cellar. Already I am half-suffocated."

"But your sister—does she not want you?"

"My sister lives in a kind of dream world inhabited by herself and the ghost of her dead husband. It is impossible for an ordinary person to breathe in it."

She seemed as handsome, as well-dressed, as spirited as ever; it was difficult to perceive that life had dealt her a mortal blow. But its consequences were soon made obvious to her. She found secrecy where she was used to candour, hesitation where she anticipated rapturous welcome.

Her situation was by no means an enviable one. During the last century a married woman living apart from her husband, for whatever reason, was expected to remain in obscurity. It was particularly unfortunate that the split with Michael should coincide with John's death, since the suspicious saw here a case of cause and effect. Nor could Cassie pretend that she would be joining her husband later on. How the story had spread she was never certain, possibly Michael himself had been the informant, but it was tacitly accepted that that marriage was broken.

"They behave as though I had thrown John downstairs with my own hands," she cried bitterly to her friend, Renee, whom she was visiting for a few days.

"And you suspect which of them? Your husband . . .?"

"It was an accident," cried Cassie, fiercely.

She had hoped to remain with Renee while she set her life in order, but Renee had married again, and was now the most respectable of matrons.

"Take my advice, get your own establishment," she counselled Cassie. "If your husband is not returning, well, there are other men, but the fatal thing for women of our age to do is to drift. You would be better living with your sister than that. A background for a married woman is essential."

Cassie recognised the wisdom of this. She knew her world well enough to appreciate that the collapse of a marriage is as ostracising as a major crime. The most brutal husband was not held to be sufficient excuse for an open breach. Wise women maintained appearances and kept their private lives a secret. If they openly left their husbands they must not expect to be invited out in society any more. They became solitary females, under greater disadvantages than the unmarried. Marriage was a sacrament ordained of God or at least a social contract that could only be broken at a price. As for divorce, this was countenanced by the law but not by society. A woman who wanted her freedom must be prepared to forfeit her place in the world.

There was one other alternative open to her. She might have remained in Paris and lived quietly under the protection of some gentleman who required relaxation from the bonds of family life. Sometimes these relationships continued for years, occasionally for life. But such women lived inevitably in a half-world, and besides, since her relations with John, Cassie had lost all taste for intrigue and for once was blind to her own interests.

Gossip has a tongue as long as an ant-eater, and devours reputations as that strange creature devours its pet insects. Cassie had stood up to a good deal of gossip in her time, but this story proved too strong for her. After

visiting here and there for some weeks she returned to **North-weston**.

Kate was pleased to see her. "Mrs. Hardwick was wondering how much longer you'd be away."

"Did she anticipate that I should return?"

Kate looked surprised. "Of course, Miss Cassie. As she says, what other home have you got now?"

Cassie retired to her room in a state of turmoil. She had, of course, no money and she was unfitted to earn her own living, though, three months later, terrified of the only future that seemed opening before her, she made her second essay for freedom. By now, she thought, the story would have lost the savour of novelty, and so, indeed, it had. But in dismissing the mystery, without accepting the official verdict as being necessarily the truth, people tended also to dismiss Cassie herself. A woman without means could not establish herself in London or anywhere else, a woman parted from her husband and with no prospect of rejoining him, was doubly handicapped. Her small fortune had passed into her husband's hands and together they had run through it during the first year of their marriage. As for employment, what qualifications had she? The women's professions in those days were mainly the slave professions—governessing, companionships, the care of the aged, the imbecile or the semi-invalid daughter of wealthy parents, domestic work—it was absurd to suppose she could accomplish any of these, and even if she had been willing to offer herself for any such vacancies her anomalous position would have prevented her being selected. Even the position of some man's mistress now seemed out of reach. John's death had extinguished in her that fire that had warmed so many men, even stripped her of the beauty that had been like a flag or a pointer for so many years. Janet might declare that, with her husband's death, her own life was over, but at least the capacity to hate remained. Only Richard Gladstone and, to a lesser degree, her step-mother, Cora Amberley, had ever appreciated her capacity for emotion and now that it was all turned into one channel and came foaming down to engulf Cassie, even Richard, who had never been a victim to her beauty, could pity the unfortunate

creature. It was after the return from her second flight that he began those regular visits that were to continue to the day of Cassie's death.

That was the story lying behind nearly forty years of the strange bitter intimacy of the two women who had loved John Hardwick to the death. Presently the people of Northweston became used to seeing the sisters perpetually together, almost forgot the time when the Old House had belonged to John Hardwick. Speculation died of inanition after a while. Of course, it was strange that Michael Sorley never came back for his wife. Indubitably he was still alive, since his work continued to be bought, mostly by foreign Governments, for art collections and by connoisseurs. The whisper that perhaps he had known more about John Hardwick's death than was ever proved died down quite soon, and the queer aloof household, with its one solitary visitor—for after John died no-one but Richard Gladstone ever went to the house—became accepted as part of the Northweston community. Sunday by Sunday the faithful sang the familiar words:

*Time like an ever-rolling stream
Bears all its sons away.
They fly forgotten as a dream
Dies at the opening day.*

and time proved their truth.

A generation grew up to whom John Hardwick was only a name. His widow was just an odd woman—presently an odd, old woman—living in the gaunt house where he had brought her on her marriage fifteen, twenty, presently thirty years ago. The legend of Cassie Sorley's beauty died early. They were known less by their own names than as The Sisters.

"I saw the Sisters to-day," a man would remark cheerfully to his wife.

The children played odd games round the gate, pretending that unspeakable dangers lurked in the house itself, and screaming with assumed terror if one or other of the old faces appeared at the window.

Willie Marston copied out the chant of the Three Weird Sisters from Macbeth for the benefit of his school-fellows.

*Fillet of a fenny snake
In the cauldron boil and bake:
Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog.
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting
Lizard's leg and owlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.*

"I can't think what the one who is left will do when the other is taken," a wife would occasionally murmur to her neighbour, seeing the carriage go by and the two familiar figures within, one still upright, a mere carcase of skin-covered bone but with life still flashing in the dark eyes, the hands folded on the black-clad lap, the other small, shrunken, meek.

"Was she ever as beautiful as they say?" the girls wondered.

"If I'd been as lovely as *that* I wouldn't have shut myself up in Castle Despair."

And inevitably they came to their elders, "Mother—Father—what's the truth about the Sisters? Why do they never see anyone, go anywhere?"

Only Richard Gladstone kept up their contact with the outside world.

"What do you suppose they talk about when he goes there?"

"Old times, I suppose."

"Can you talk about old times for thirty years?"

There was no satisfactory answer to these questions. Even the servants who had been in the house at the time of John Hardwick's death could do nothing to allay local curiosity. They had seen nothing, they had heard the cry and the fall and had come huddling from their quarters only to be told there had been a shocking accident and they were to go back to their rooms. Only Kate Winter stayed on. The other girls found themselves fresh situations. Mrs. Whitaker didn't remain long, either. She said she did not care for a house without a gentleman in it. Questioned, she remarked acidly

that Mrs. Hardwick had all the proper feelings for her husband, and Mrs. Sorley had the proper feelings for a sister. Of course she would join her husband later on . . . But she never did and presently the gossip died down, only to burst out now and again when a man, bringing his wife to Northweston, would be met by her curious question, "Arthur—or Richard—or Guy—who are those two extraordinary old women living on the Hill? I saw them go past in their carriage to-day, looking like part of a pageant of death."

The children, like young Willie Marston, the son of the schoolmaster, perpetually revived interest in The Sisters. "Mother, are they witches? I thought witches were burnt." "Hush, Willie. Mrs. Hardwick's husband died in a dreadful accident." But when Willie—or Susan—or Joseph—clamoured for details these were always disappointing.

"Mother, was the house really on fire? Wasn't it perhaps struck by lightning?"

And if a father happened to be present he would say, "If it had been struck by lightning it would have been burnt, wouldn't it? No, of course it wasn't. Mrs. Hardwick had a nightmare . . ."

But presently even these few details became blurred. Mrs. Hardwick was a woman who had lost her husband tragically, but no-one seemed quite to know how. Since she held herself aloof there could be no corroboration. A succession of Vicars called at the house but made no impression. Each Sunday the sisters, dressed in black, drove to Church for morning service. Service over, they would be joined in the porch by Richard Gladstone, who would drive back with them for Sunday dinner. Kate, who might perhaps have given information, went about like a mummy, said the irreverent townsfolk. Did she know anything? have anything to do with it? But where there is no fuel the flame dies down.

So time passed them by, history passed them by. For both time was focused on a single instant when they had heard a man cry "Janet!" in a voice of loud terror, and after that cry the fall and an eternal silence.

Twenty, thirty, almost forty years passed and then Cassie Sorley died. For a moment interest in the survivor flickered

up anew. But there was nothing mysterious about this death. Cassie Sorley was an old woman. Soon now her sister would join her and the old-fashioned house, in which no modern adaptation had ever taken place, would come on the market, and some young couple would look over it, shudder at the long flight of steps down which John Hardwick had fallen to his death, 'stare at the tall, cold rooms and hurry out from that atmosphere of chill and decay in search of something more cosy. If it stood empty long enough it might get a reputation for being haunted, haunted by the ghosts of two old women and an old man.

Both husbands passed into legend. More people presently remembered John Hardwick because he had died in mysterious circumstances than for his unending fight for justice for the oppressed. As for Michael Sorley, the English are not an artistic race, and after John's death he never came back to Northwcston.

And at last even the whispers died a.d only the two old ghosts lived on.

EPILOGUE 1912

IN the dark room a coal fell, a tongue of flame leaped up the chimney; a pale reflection was caught in the sides of the china cups and the painted vases on the mantelpiece, but the remainder of the room was in shadow. Richard Gladstone leaned forward and held out his hands to that flickering tongue.

"Janet," he said slowly, "what made you do it? Cut your life in half, I mean? Were you mad? For it wasn't only John Hardwick you sent to his death that night, it was yourself as well."

He did not dare look at her as he posed his question, but he could feel the quality of her silence. A smaller woman would have hedged, evaded, shown a furious astonishment, but after that first moment of stunned silence, he heard a long sigh that seemed as though it must rend the brittle body in sunder.

" "I wondered how much you knew or guessed," said this incalculable woman. "What a model of discretion you have been all these years, Richard. The perfect lawyer."

Now he turned and faced her steadily. "I never believed John Hardwick fell by accident on his own stairs, looking for a fire that had never been kindled. Any more than I believed Michael Sorley dropped a lighted lamp at a critical moment, unless someone intended him to."

The fierce dark eyes still full of vitality, though the rest of the body seemed settling into decay, met his undaunted.

"Did you know the rest of the story?"

"About John and Cassie? Yes."

There was the old flash he remembered in the past in voice and eyes. "Did *he* tell you?"

"Did you imagine he would? No. But when I saw how desperately he tried to prevent your sister coming here, then I was sure."

"While I never dreamed. They say women in love are blind. They're conceited, too. I didn't think anything like that could happen to John without my feeling the difference. I still can't understand . . ."

"I suppose one can never understand when people do things that seem completely out of character." He stopped, curious. He could hear his own voice saying just the same thing years and years ago—to whom? To John on the day Janet nearly died. "Your sister was a very attractive woman . . ."

"A thief," said Janet, pitilessly. "A cheat. That's all. And because she was beautiful she thought nothing else mattered. Not being wicked, or cruel, and she was both. That's one of the mistakes men make, even clever men like John. They forget that beautiful women are not necessarily kind. There was Circe. And Medea. Men forget them when they are infatuated with a lovely face. I tell you, Cassie would have destroyed John without a scruple to keep that little part in him that was hers. The rest of him, the true John, what did she care for that?"

"So you are telling me that, because you thought she would wreck his life, you resolved to take it out of her hand?" Even after forty years he was bewildered, incredulous.

"To save it in the only way I could."

He said impatiently, "That's a woman's argument. I suppose the fact is, you were out of your mind. Why, it was mad as well as wicked. Suppose you had failed? How could you be sure he would not be merely crippled, live on for years a deformity or an idiot?"

But she refused to yield an inch of ground. "I knew I should succeed, because I must. I had to. Richard, if you saw someone you loved, as years and years ago I saw my mother, dying by inches of a cruel disease, and you knew that one dangerous act would put an end to all the deterioration, the misery, the anguish, would you hesitate? You would be a poor lover if you did. Sixty years ago I'd have put my mother out of her pain, if I had had the means. Well, with John, I found it. I had heard him say again and again that if anyone—one of the servants—fell on those stairs, they would break their backs. He was always warning them. If he had had his way they

would never have been used, but of course we couldn't have the servants on the front stairs."

"It was a pretty grim piece of irony that the only person who should come to grief on them should be John himself. So that's why you gave the alarm from those stairs?"

Instead of answering his question, she offered him another. "Were you sure from the beginning that it was I? Why not Michael? John had wronged him, too."

"Michael had no adequate motive. All he ever cared about was his work. He would never have taken that insane risk for any human creature. I doubt whether even Cassie was very important to him by then."

"That's what Cassie never understood," chimed in Janet fiercely. "About John, I mean. There's more than one kind of artist. John's work was his life, too. Not Cassie, not me. We were only incidental. I knew that from the beginning. When I married him I promised myself I'd always take second place to his work. Do you suppose Cassie would ever have done that? She would have wrecked everything he had lived for for twenty years as carelessly as you might tread on a wild flower. Forty years ago a scandal like that would have made him an outcast..."

"It would make him an outcast to-day," interrupted Richard, drily.

"And do you think I could have endured that for him? Cassie may have believed she loved him, but it wouldn't have lasted long. Then he would have had nothing."

He shivered and drew closer to the fire. "I always wondered how you found out. I suppose John betrayed himself in some way."

"No, it was Cassie. I was in the library that evening waiting for John. I knew there was going to be a storm, I always knew the signs. I wanted him, he gave me strength. I heard him cross the hall and open the door. Before he spoke, I knew who it was. If I lay in my grave and he walked past I'd know his step out of the whole world. And then she came. She said "John" and instantly I knew. I'd loved too long not to recognise love when I heard it. The rest was just corroboration, detailed corroboration. Two years, Richard, that was

what she had stolen from John. Two years of his noble, honourable life, two years of his happiness, because, though he might be unable to resist her, do you suppose he was happy, deceiving me, knowing every time they met his future shook in the balance?"

"You mean, you had no notion till that night? Why, Janet, now I know you must have been insane. You gave yourself no time to think."

She said harshly, "There was no time. If I'd hesitated—do you suppose it was easy, what I did? No, I knew I must act quickly."

He exclaimed in despair, "You never had any patience, you had no use for second thoughts."

"I tell you, I had no choice. You speak of time. There was no time left. She and Michael went the next day. It had to be that night. You see, she meant to get him back, she wouldn't have scrupled to use any weapon. If his work had to go, she'd have thrown it in the gutter. And I had to act then, in that little time while he was free. She'd enslaved him for two years, then he fought for his liberty. I tell you, I heard them that night. She meant to have him back and she'd have won. That's a bitter confession for me to make, Richard. I could make it to no-one but you. When I understood that I knew there was only one way to save him."

"From her?"

"From corruption, a slow dying, like a cancer, like the cancer that killed my mother. Oh, I thought of everything. It was fortunate that there was a storm that night. If I seemed strange in my manner it would be put down to the atmosphere. Everyone knew how I hated storms."

"I always knew," said Richard, slowly, "that your conception of love might make an angel tremble. But afterwards . . ."

She put up a hand to her withered cheek as though to screen it from the flame. *

"Afterwards? But for me time has never moved on from that night. John had strange notions about time. He said people invented clocks to harness it, as you harness water or electricity. It was their way of trying to defeat eternity. But

they didn't fool time. The only people they fooled were themselves. Dividing up a year into so many weeks and months doesn't change eternity. There are minutes as long as a day and hours as long as forty years. For me that instant when I heard him fall and knew what I had done is still with me. The clock hasn't moved any further. It'll never move until I die, because you were right. That was the end of my life, though one's body goes on functioning like any other machine once set in motion, until it finally runs down."

He thought it was a tribute to her as a person that he could believe her. Of no other woman could he say so much. Mad jealousy, revenge, black hate springing from cheated love, these were the motives that would have prompted another woman to that dreadful deed, but in her he found that spartan courage that could not only declare Death before Dishonour, but could, if need be, for Honour's sake, encompass that death. And John had discarded such a devotion for the light love of a light woman. . . . But here he stopped the torrent of his thoughts. He had never cared for Cassie, but he admitted that her love for John had become the mainspring of her life. If she did not regard him with Janet's single-minded passion, her attitude was the more human. Yet, when all was said and done, Janet was right. Cassie would have condemned her lover to an existence rotted from the roots. Who could doubt that John, peaceful in death these forty years, had been preserved from the long process of self-scorn that must ultimately have destroyed him?

Yet there was a flaw in her argument. Man, it is said, must work out his own salvation, but she had compelled his redemption. With a gentleness that sat oddly on the thin cynical features, he said, "You were wrong, Janet, whatever your motive you were wrong. You can't buy liberty for other people. That's something a man must achieve for himself."

Once again her Voice flashed out like a sword. "That's not true, Richard. If it were, why must Christ die on the cross to win us Heaven?"

"Janet!" He regarded her, appalled, but she swept on in a torrent of speech that left him breathless.

"He was made sin for us, out of love. No, I am not guilty of blasphemy, I make no conceivable comparison, but I tell you this. If I did wrong that night, as you believe, I did it out of love. If, because of what I did, I must spend eternity in hell, even there I shall continue to love my husband. And if God is truly love, as I was taught to believe, then the one thing impossible to Him is to destroy love. So, if the Kingdom of God is indeed the Kingdom of Love, I am sure of my place there. You remember the martyrs, who loved not their lives unto the death? Mine has been worth nothing these forty years, except as the instrument that saved John. After I met him, I had no life but his; when his heart died, mine died with it, and if I had to die eternally, then he must die too, because so long as he lives anywhere, then I live in him. And when you remember how he spent his days serving the unfortunate and the dispossessed, can you believe divine love will ultimately let him go?"

There was a long pause. Richard felt as exhausted as though he had struggled through the snow, not from next door but from half a world away. Janet also was quiet, the flame dying out as swiftly as it had leaped into being. At last Richard spoke. "You don't change, Janet. You always insisted on the last word."

There was a knock at the door and Kate came in, carrying the tea-tray.

"You never rang, Madam," she said, with an air of reproach. "I thought perhaps you had forgotten the time."

Richard found himself thinking, "How much does she know? What does she guess? Ah, but she'd never tell. She has an ideal of loyalty, too." And it seemed to him that if men understood the nature of women few of them would dare marry, give themselves into the hands of a sex as gentle as tigresses.

Janet was answering Kate's question. "What does time matter now? We've nothing to do but wait."

The servant set down the silver tray, lavishly decorated with ears of corn in a complicated design. The silver teapot had a fat silver rose to lift the lid, and more roses sprawled on its plump shining sides. Cream-jug, sugar-bowl, milk-jug, all

were rose-encrusted. Even the cups were printed with an old-fashioned rose design.

Kate sighed and looked across to Richard. Their brief conversation this afternoon seemed to have established a secret intimacy between them. "It seems queer not setting a cup for Miss Cassie," she ventured.

Up came Janet's grim grey head; her sharp eyes darted over the tray, focused themselves on the sugar-basin, always brought in for Cassie's benefit. Really, thought Richard, during those last years her food had been her main interest. Sweet biscuits, jam puddings, iced cakes, even lumps of sugar, he had seen her hand come out to nip up some coveted sweetmeat, and then she would sit silent in her corner, leaving Janet to dominate the conversation, like a little rosy mouse. Nibble, nibble, bright eyes peeping. Another lump, another of Kate's little sugar buns. He could almost believe she was sitting there with them. Then Janet did a dreadful thing. Putting out her thin old woman's hand, the hand, he recollected, that had sent John to his death, she lifted the sugar-basin from the tray, held it out to the waiting maid.

"We shan't need this again, Kate," she said. "Remember that in future. It can be put away for good."

Over the shining tea equipage, the gold-edged china, the plates of food on their frilly paper mats, her eyes met Richard's. The passionate, devastated woman of a few minutes ago was back in her cell, continuing her life sentence. Probably she'd never get out again.

"That's the end of Cassie," said Cassie's sister coolly, cruelly, and, lifting the silver teapot, she began to pour out the tea.

