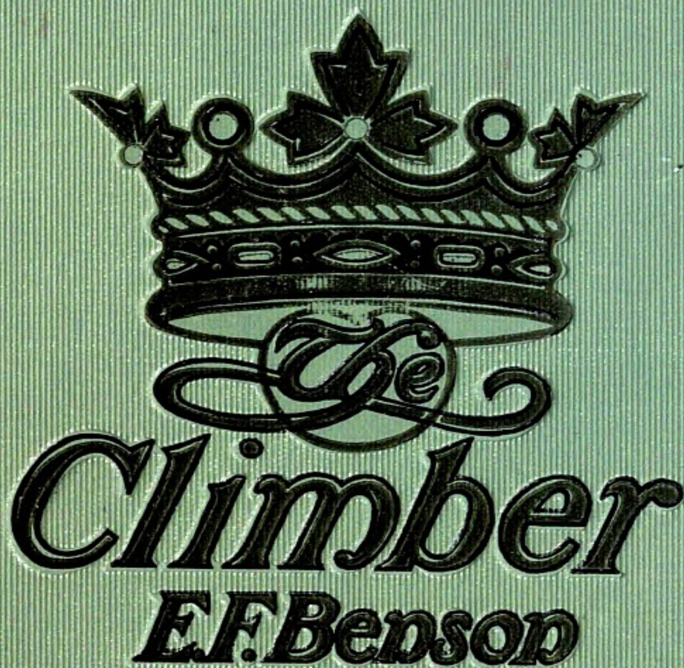
The
Climber
E.F. Benson

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LUCIA GRIMSON

THE CLIMBER

By
E. F. BENSON

With Frontispiece

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The Climber

CHAPTER I

It was a warm still night early in May, and the electric light over the cabstand at the end of the square cast on to the pavement and dusty surface of the dry roadway the elbowed and angular shadows of the still leafless plane-trees, in unwavering lines, as if they were made of some dark marble cunningly inlaid into a grey ground. The dried seed-balls of last year still hung there, and the air was only sufficient to stir them, so that they oscillated gently to and fro, swinging from side to side in the light breeze that was not strong enough to agitate the twigs and branches that bore them. But in other respects, apart from the merely atmospheric, the square was full enough of movement; two houses at least had evening parties going on, and at the end of the square opposite the cabstand there was a dance, and rows of carriages and motors were employed, in endless procession, in unloading their occupants opposite the strip of red carpet that ran across from the curbstone of the pavement to the step of the house. Lights blazed from the windows, sedulous footmen were busy with carriage doors and, a little farther within, with pins and numbered tickets, while from the windows of the first floor, open and screened with awning, the white stripes of which showed luminously in the dark, came the enchanting lilt and rhythm of dance music. Round the other side of the square were lines of ordered carriages and expectant cabs, and from one house or another there constantly sounded the shrill whistles to summon the latter, two whistles for two wheels, and one for four, and the fineness of the night made hansoms the more popular conveyance.

The drawing-room windows of Number 36, next door to the fortunate house with the carriages and the red carpet, were open, and in the window seat were two girls, leaning out through the screen of red geranium, yellow calceolaria and lobelia with which the window boxes had been lately filled, and sipping cocoa intermittently as a medium for the conveyance of sandwiches. They had been to the theatre together, but Mrs. Eddis, mistress of the house and their chaperon, had gone to bed, on their return, while Maud Eddis and her friend had lingered to talk “things” over and in especial to watch the arrivals next door. Black and blond, they were kneeling in the window-seat, looking out on to the stream of carriages and the shadows of the plane-trees. At length, about half-past eleven, there was a slackening in the arrivals,

for the season was still young, and guests went to dances comparatively early, and they withdrew their attention from outside affairs and devoted themselves with more zeal to sandwiches and conversation.

Lucia Grimson began by giving a great sigh.

"Oh dear, oh dear, Maud, how happy you ought to be," she said. "Everything is spread out for you like lunch at a picnic, when you can simply descend and grab what you like. And you are a darling, you have given me such nice grabs all this last week. And now my picnic is over. At least it will be to-morrow."

Maud, with precision, finished her sandwich and swallowed it all before she spoke. Lucia, it may be remarked, spoke with her mouth full.

"But do stay another week," she said. "Mother would be delighted and I—well, I could put up with you. There's a dance to-morrow, you know, and it's mother's opera night on Wednesday, and——" Lucia waved her hands violently.

"Oh, stop, stop," she said. "I shall get perfectly green with envy if you go on, and it would not be becoming. I've got to go to-morrow; when you come down and stay with us in August you will quite understand why. You can't at present; you have never lived in a country town with two aunts who were daughters of a defunct Dean. You can't understand the rules, you lucky person. If one has settled to go home on Wednesday, on Wednesday home you go, and nothing short of an earthquake may stop you. And the earthquake would have to be a bad one. Oh, Maud, we are alone, aren't we! If so 'Damn,' but not otherwise."

Lucia got up, and took the last sandwich.

"One used always to be told to leave the last for Mr. Manners," she observed, "but I think the parlour-maid usually ate it; here Don Whiskers would. So why shouldn't I? How good! And how good the play was! And people yawned, and people went out before the end! What idiots! Weren't they?"

"I thought the last act was rather dull," said Maud.

"Then you're just as bad. You are *blasée*, darling: I think most people are *blasés*. That I can't understand. Nobody who has a plan should be *blasé*. And as long as one has any interest in life one has a plan. I have several."

Maud moved from the window-seat and lit the two bedroom candles that had been brought in.

"Let's go up to your room," she said, "and have a hair-brush talk. Or shall we go to my room?"

Lucia made a little impatient movement.

"Oh, let's stop here," she said. "I hate talking in bedrooms. My plans are not bedroom plans. They are much more connected with drawing-rooms and balls and

life and movement. I'm not domestic, you know. At least I want my domestic arrangements to be on a particularly large scale. Yes, I daresay I sound as if I was a little intoxicated. Well, so I am; this delightful whirl of a week up in town has gone to my head. However, you need not be alarmed for me. It isn't going to become a habit. You see to-morrow I go home, back to the cold-water cure. Dear me, the very thought of it sobers me at once."

An elderly and discreet man-servant, Don Whiskers, to whom allusion has been made, came into the room, with the evident intention of putting out the lights before himself going to bed. A shade of reserved disapproval crossed his face when he saw it was still occupied, and he withdrew again, not, however, quite closing the door, as if to convey a subtle hint that it was really not worth while to do so at this time of the night. The hint was not lost on Maud.

"That's the third time Parker has come in," she said to Lucia. "Perhaps we had better go upstairs, if you don't mind. Mother doesn't like the servants being kept up late."

Lucia got up at once, stifling an impatient little sigh. What were servants for, except to serve you? Instead of which, Mrs. Eddis's plan seemed to her to be one long effort of arranging the day to please them, and so order her movements that they should be put to no inconvenience of any kind, and in particular do nothing that they could think strange or irregular. An instance in point was that the two girls had just supped on cocoa and sandwiches, though the night was hot, because it was thought in the kitchen that cocoa and sandwiches were the proper refreshments to take after a theatre. Mrs. Flagstaff, the cook, who had been with Mrs. Eddis for fifteen years, was accustomed to send up cocoa and sandwiches on these occasions; she would have thought it strange to be asked for anything else. These arrangements were of the Mede and Persian order—the human mind (as exhibited in the case of Mrs. Eddis) was incapable of conceiving a different order of things.

But Lucia had a genius for appearing rapturously contented with the ways and manners of other people; at any rate, while she was with them. She had already been complimentary on the subject of the sandwiches, and now she lit her bedroom candle at once.

"Yes, let's go upstairs," she said, "but I warn you that the first step toward going to bed is probably widely removed from the last. I've got heaps to say, simply heaps, and I shan't have another opportunity of saying it for ages. That is one of the penalties of the cold-water cure; nobody, not a soul, down at Brixham understands one single thing!"

Maud laughed.

“How do you manage to communicate, then?” she asked.

“Oh, I have learned their language, you see, though they haven’t learned mine. It’s quite different. So I talk about their things, which I understand perfectly. There is no misunderstanding possible. What it amounts to is: ‘Be good, sweet maid, and in course of time you will become stupid and ugly.’ They have, most of them, become it.”

Maud took up her candle and followed her friend upstairs. Devoted as she was to Lucia, she often wished that Lucia would not talk like this. She did not believe that the real Lucia was reflected in remarks of this nature, and she concluded therefore that they were insincere, a pose, an affectation, an outcome of surface irritability. She herself was as little a prey to irritability as she was given to poses of affectations, and for a moment it rather hurt her that Lucia should say that the juster name for serious people was stupid people. And it hurt her because, though she did not believe that such a speech, as has been said, represented the real Lucia, she was aware that the real Lucia was slightly intolerant of the qualities which may be called serious. And at this point in her reflections, as she followed her up the rather narrow staircase of this house in Warwick Square, she, as usual, cut them short with a swift application of the loyal knife, and thrilled again with the thought that this wonderful Lucia was her friend.

The two had started an acquaintance that very soon ripened into intimacy at Girton College. Maud, at first sight almost, had fallen in love with this tall, laughing, golden-haired girl, while Lucia, from an attitude of tacit tolerance toward her admiration, had soon come to lean upon it, and to give in exchange the affection of which she was capable. If she felt unwell or depressed, it was always a solid comfort to have Maud in whom to confide her aches or cloudiness of spirit, and Maud’s quiet and imperturbable serenity was better than smelling salts or phenacetin. Or if (depression being rare with her) exuberance, like a hose, demanded something to squirt at, Maud’s glow of sympathetic delight in her ecstatic vitality was equally satisfying. And thus the fact of the mutual attraction of unlikes was illustrated; the two girls, by the very fact of their polar dissimilitude, were closer friends than any similarity of nature would have caused them to be. Between them they completed the spirit of girlhood; fused into one, they would have formed the incarnation of womanhood. But Nature, in her inscrutable ways, is wont to pluck her incarnation in two; she gives the complement of certain adorable qualities to another person. The two halves of the ideal, however, usually find a certain consolation in these imperfections, and in the present instance a friendship almost ideal resulted from them. For the selfishness of the one was healed by the self-abandonment of the

other, and what Lucia would have called the seriousness of Maud was lit by her own vivacity.

Maud arrived quickly at the hair-brushing stage of undressing, and went to her friend's room. But Lucia had been, as was her custom, the quicker of the two, and was standing in front of her glass playing conjuring tricks, as was Maud's phrase for these operations, with her hair. For it seemed part and parcel of her lambent vitality that her very hair should be full not only of the pale gold flames of its colouring, but that authentic fire should burn in it. And now, as she stood before her glass, lightly brushing it, it stood out from her head in soft billows of gold, each hair asserting itself, not lying close with the rest, but alive and individual. Her small, pale, oval face, still strangely sexless in spite of her twenty years, and more like the face of some young boy than of a girl on the threshold of womanhood, lay like a flushed jewel in the casket of its gold, a jewel to ravish the eyes and trouble the soul of the sanest. She had put on a dressing-gown of grey silk, with short arms reaching barely to her elbows, and the neutrality of its colour heightened by contrast her pale, brilliant colouring.

Maud took the hair-brush out of her hand.

"Oh, let me," she said. "I love to do it for you, Lucia. May I put the candles out and see it sparkle? I am sure it would give flashes to-night."

"Yes, but not now; before going to bed," she said. "I've got a cargo of talk on board, and I must get it landed. And I want a cigarette more than I can possibly say. Oh, it's no use frowning. I know quite well that you wish I wouldn't smoke. But you also know quite well, darling, that I don't mind the least about that."

This was perfectly true, and Maud made no further remonstrance. Indeed, she was incapable of radical disapproval with regard to anything Lucia did, for all her actions came to her through the golden haze, so to speak, of her personality. Maud could no more really judge them than the dazzled eye can judge of colour.

"Yes, cargoes of talk," she said, "all disconnected, all nonsensical, I daresay, but all me. Because if one is really absurd as I am one is most ridiculous when one is most oneself. Most people are ridiculous, but they won't say so, and talk about politics instead, or something which is possibly not ridiculous. And afterwards you may talk about yourself for a little. Well, the real point is that I'm growing up. I've begun to realize that I am I. I didn't really know it before, and I'm only just beginning to know it now. Maud, I'm a very awful person, really. If anybody else was like me I should be shocked at her. But because it's me, I'm not. I wonder if you'll be shocked."

"Try," said Maud.

“I’m not sure that it’s wise. You might get up with a Day of Judgment face in the middle, and stalk out of the room.”

Maud was naturally very reserved and reticent, and it was here again that the utter dissimilarity of the two drew them closer together. If Lucia felt a thing deeply, that thing exploded in all directions in floods of talk, while the same fact in Maud’s case was sufficient to tie and seal her tongue in a manner almost hermetical. If her nature was moved below its surface, the words by which it would naturally find utterance congealed, so that to the mere superficial observer, who judges only by surface, the more deeply she felt the more wooden and set (to put it inimically) she became. And if she envied Lucia anything (which, indeed, she scarcely did, since her love for her told her how meet and right it was that she should be endowed with these brilliances), she sighed for this gift of spontaneous expression—expression as spontaneous as the waving of a dog’s tail to express pleasure, or the involuntary quickening of the heart-beat in anticipation or suspense.

“Go on and try,” she said. “I want you, Lucia—oh, dear! I wish I could express myself—I want you to show me all yourself, to let me see you from all points just as —oh, just as one revolves slowly before the dressmaker when one is trying on.”

Lucia nodded appreciatively at Maud.

“Ah, that’s good,” she said, “that expresses what you mean, anyhow, and that is what I find it so hard to do. All those dear—well, eight-day clocks down at Brixham say I always say more than I mean, and think to themselves ‘Oh, it’s *only* Lucia.’ Yes; they are eight-day clocks—seven-day, rather—and they strike with absolute regularity, are wound up for the week at the cathedral service at half-past ten on Sunday morning. The cathedral service is the spring and centre of our life at Brixham: we draw life and inspiration from it. My grandpapa, the Dean, said that in a volume of brown sermons which I read to Aunt Cathie and Aunt Elizabeth on Sunday evening. There! You are beginning to look Judgment Day, but I don’t care.”

Lucia sat down on the floor at Maud’s feet, pushing her knees apart with little burrowy movements of her shoulders, so that she sat hemmed in by her with her back against the front of the sofa where Maud sat. Her preparation for hair-brushing had been more complete than Maud’s and she had taken off her stockings and evening shoes, substituting for them red morocco slippers. These, too, as she talked, she had slipped off, and was pushing her bare feet into the long white wool of the sheepskin rug that lay in front of her dressing-table. All these attitudes and movements were very characteristic of her; she loved “getting close to things, like a cat,” as she once expressed it, taking a somewhat sensuous, purring pleasure in the touch of things that were soft and warm. It was all done, too, with a cat’s insinuating

gracefulness.

“There, that makes me quite comfortable,” she said “Aren’t you glad? I hate being not quite comfortable, and if somebody has to be, I would sooner it wasn’t me, because I know I hate it more than most people. Yes; they are wound up by cathedral service, and it isn’t in the least profane of me to say so. Ding, dong. Pom, pom, pom. They strike quite regularly and punctually all the week, and never fail to do their duty. How Aunt Cathie can reconcile it with her conscience to say the General Confession I don’t know. She never does what she ought not, or doesn’t what she ought. And it does make people so dull to have no failings! It does, doesn’t it? And everyone at Brixham is so old; I wonder they don’t send them all to the British Museum, and put them in the new wing. It would hold them nicely.”

Maud’s disapproval was rapidly melting. It was shocking, of course, to speak of your aunts like this, but somehow Lucia’s frankness disarmed censure. Maud realized that had she been in Lucia’s place she would almost certainly have thought these things, though her thoughts would not have been cast quite in Lucia’s humorous mould, and her inimitable friend only said what she herself would have been unable to find words for. But she made one faint attempt to indicate a more proper attitude.

“Oh, Lucia, but they are so kind to you,” she said. “You have often told me so.”

“Yes, the darlings, but theirs is the true kindness, you know, which seeks to improve one. Of course it is very right that one should be improved, but it is nicer, you know, to be allowed to enjoy yourself. Besides—this is one of the things I have just begun to see—I am not really capable of improvement. I’m not wound up by cathedral service; what winds me up is theatres and operas and dances, and all the movements of life and its gaieties. They make me most myself, just as Aunt Cathie is most herself after early service.”

Maud made a decided movement at this.

“Oh, don’t, Lucia,” she said. “We can all make the best of ourselves or the worst of ourselves. We can all laugh at what we know to be sacred——”

Lucia interrupted.

“Oh, my dear, that is exactly where you are wrong,” she said. “You can’t, for instance; you couldn’t do it, because you are good. Well, I’m not good. I’m a beast. But whether we are good or beasts, we all want to enjoy ourselves; we want to be happy. And we all make plans to be happy. Aunt Cathie and Aunt Elizabeth both make heaps of plans. They go to all the church congresses and hospitals, and homes for forcing people to be reclaimed, which I think is such a liberty to take with anyone. Fancy being reclaimed when you didn’t want to! That is quite an unwarrantable thing to do.”

Maud again stiffened.

"Oh, Lucia, you are talking nonsense," she said. "Do stop and let me brush your hair."

Lucia suddenly pulled her feet out of the rug and clasped her hands round her knees.

"But it isn't nonsense," she said. "It is interfering with a person's liberty to try to make him better, if he wants to be worse. He has got a right to be worse if he likes. Everybody is himself and especially herself, if you see what I mean."

"I don't quite," said Maud.

"Then it's very stupid of you. What I mean is that women know more about themselves, and assert their natures more than men do. Look at the undergraduates at Cambridge. They are all exactly alike. They all smoke pipes, and flirt if they have a chance, and wear the same clothes, and play games. I don't think I like men. But they like me."

That was so frightfully true that Maud could not deny it. But in the barest justice it is due to Lucia to say that she made this statement without complacency, but with complete unconcern. The immediate sequence of her discourse explained this.

"But among all the bad things which I assuredly am," she continued, "I am not a flirt. I suppose I should be if it amused me. It doesn't. I think—I think I might like a kind old man most awfully, and be willing to kiss him and—and do all that sort of thing. But I don't like young men. Oh, Maud, I am turning round like a person who is being tried on! But I want to go back a bit. It isn't the left side—that's where the heart is supposed to be, isn't it—that I want you to look at. It's my hat you must look at—my head, my brain. Darling, it isn't a nice one. There's—what shall I say—too much feather in it."

Maud felt a sudden impulse of loyalty to her friend, though it was Lucia who was depreciating herself.

"There isn't," she said. "Not a scrap. It's just right; it is perfect. It's you."

"That's true anyhow," said Lucia. "It's me. And that's what I have been finding out all this week. I always used to think I hadn't got anything of my own except one hundred pounds a year and a sense of the ridiculous. But I find I have: I've got myself. Not nice, but myself."

Lucia suddenly abandoned the cat-like attitude, and jumped up.

"I want, I want," she cried, "like those little people in the Blake drawing, putting the ladder up to the moon. But I don't want the moon at all, thank you. I want horses and carriages and motor cars and dances and theatres and money. I used always to enjoy those things when they came in my way, but now I find they are

what I want. It's a sad revelation, isn't it! It means I am worldly and material, and all the rest of the unedifying things on which our affections shouldn't be set, but there it is. I have been nobody before; now I am beginning to be myself. Not a nice self, oh, not nice at all, but it is so much better to be oneself than to be nobody."

Maud's natural reticence became intensely embarrassing to her, so embarrassing as to make her very self-conscious for the moment. She felt herself desiring to "take a line" with Lucia, instead of taking it. But it was Lucia's sudden and perplexing consciousness of herself that induced it, though that self-consciousness was so different in form from hers that it seemed to be but ironical to call it by the same name. Then Lucia's attack of this distressing symptom left her, and she became cruelly critical instead.

"I love you, Maud," she said. "You are all that I ought to want to be. But I don't. You are kind, and good, and sympathetic, and above all you are fond of me. That, after all, is the quality one likes best in others."

"But you said just now you didn't like men who liked you," remarked Maud.

Lucia waved her hands in a sort of impotent despair.

"Well, what if I did! It was inconsistent, I suppose. But what's the good of being inconsistent! It is the dullest possible state to be in. I wish you wouldn't interrupt when the spirit of—anything you like—is upon me."

Maud was obediently silent. It appeared that this attitude did not suit Lucia any better.

"Darling, you are dignifiedly mute," she said. "You adopt a disapproving silence, like Aunt Cathie when she hasn't anything to say. It does irritate me so."

"Well, then, you are talking nonsense," said Maud firmly.

"You said that before."

"Because you talked nonsense before."

Lucia took a turn or two up and down the room before she answered, setting square to each other the candles on her dressing-table, and pulling up the blind a little so that its wooden binder no longer tapped against the edge of the open window. She felt checked, as if some quiet steady force had a hand on her rein, and she instinctively felt the reasonableness of the firm and solid touch.

"Explain then," she said.

"Well, come and sit quietly again, where you sat before," said Maud. "It is no use explaining to a hurricane."

"Hurricane? Me?" asked Lucia.

"Yes, hurricane. But you know I am so bad at explaining; I feel, but I can't tell you what, even when you are patient, which you so seldom are. Whereas, you can

explain a thing without particularly feeling it. I agree with your Aunt Cathie, wasn't it? You say more than you mean."

"I am always patient," said Lucia with emphasis. "But do get on."

"Well, then, I think you have been talking nonsense, and rather dangerous nonsense," said Maud. "I mean it is nonsense that might become sense to you. You tell me, as you have been telling yourself, that you are not nice inside, that you want only the cushions and pillows of life, that you are willing to let a kind old man be kind to you. Oh, Lucia, thank God it is nonsense!"

Maud spoke very slowly, and her utterance was as unlike Lucia's as it is possible to imagine two products of vocal cords to be. Lucia's words flashed and twinkled with the speed and movement of her own mind, her own gestures; Maud's were slow and spaced, and each word seemed to mean what it was supposed to mean by makers of dictionaries. When she said "thank God," for instance, it was perfectly clear that she meant "thank God," but when the same phrase was on Lucia's lips, it meant "I am happy to tell you," neither more nor less. And something of the consciousness of this flashed out in her reply.

"Go on, dear aunt," she said.

Maud did not seem to resent this in the least; indeed, at heart she rather liked it.

"Yes, your aunt will go on," she said; "in fact, she fully means to. Dear niece, you think you have found yourself, that you are conscious of your individuality. You aren't in the least. All you have said is quite characteristic of all you have been as long as I have known you——"

"That may be," said Lucia quickly; "the point is that I am aware of it."

"Well, I'm not," said Maud slowly. "When you tell me what you want from life, I reply that you don't know what you want. If you were becoming a woman—oh, Lucia, I *am* so much older than you really—you would be beginning to be conscious of the want—it sounds so dreadfully indelicate—of one of the men you say you don't like. You would think about—about children, babies, soft helpless things, not motor-cars."

Lucia leaned back her head.

"Maud, you're crying," she said; "don't cry over me. Besides, why are you crying?"

"I'm not," said Maud. "And if I was, I shouldn't tell you why."

"Why? We always tell each other everything."

If she was not crying, she was somewhat perilously near it. But at this, she ceased to deserve the soft imputation.

"I don't think we always do," she said. "We both of us have our private places, I

expect."

"Perhaps you have from me," said Lucia. "But I haven't from you."

To the softer but sterner spirit this was wounding.

"I'm sorry," said Maud. "I really am. I won't have private places from you. I will let you into—the only one. Indeed, indeed, I would have before, Lucia, but I didn't know about it before."

Lucia looked at her in a sort of amazed distrust.

"Do you mean you are in love?" she asked. "With a stupid young man?"

Maud took up pools from Lucia's gold cataract of hair, half burying her face in it.

"Yes, I expect that is what you would call it," she said.

"And who is he?" asked Lucia. "We promised to tell each other."

Maud, still hidden, gave a long sigh, and her voice was muffled.

"I know we did," she said. "And I can't tell you, though I thought I could. When it comes to you, you will know, Lucia. It—it is too private, at first. No doubt I shall tell you before long."

"But why 'at first'?" asked the other.

"I can't say. I only feel that I am not used to the private room myself yet, and that I can't let anybody else in. I would if I could. At least, I would let you in, no one else."

"And all the time he is probably talking about you as an 'awful ripper,'" said Lucia contemptuously.

"I wish I thought he was," said Maud with the utmost sincerity.

There was a pause, and Maud unmuffled her face again and laid cool finger-tips on Lucia's shoulders.

"Oh, what was that?" said she. "Oh, I see. You startled me a little."

Maud was still struggling for utterance.

"Am I a beast, Lucia?" she asked.

"Yes, I think you are."

"But I don't mean to be. You—you may guess if you like."

"I have been trying to guess for the last ten minutes," remarked Lucia. "Is he good-looking?"

"I don't know if you would think so. It doesn't matter much, does it?"

"I suppose it matters more that you are. Is he clever?"

"Yes," said Maud.

"And I know him?"

"You have danced with him!"

"How enlightening! as if I knew all the people I have danced with!"

Lucia suddenly sat up again.

"Don't interrupt," she said. "His name is—is Edgar Comber. Isn't it? Heavens! Oh, Maud, how awfully nice for him! Does he know yet, do you think?"

Maud flushed.

"Oh, Lucia, how can you say such awful things?" she whispered.

"Why are they awful? A man lets a girl see that he is attracted by her fast enough. It is quite silly that a girl shouldn't let a man see that she is attracted by him. I don't think it is quite straightforward not to. It seems rather secretive. If I saw a man I really liked I should run after him as hard as I could and not give him a chance of escaping if I could help. I think it is the sensible thing to do; it is so early-Victorian to bend your head over your fancy work, or avert it with a pink blush as you walk in a grove. What is a grove? It is always coming in in Jane Austen's books, which I find dull. Whatever I am, I am not early-Victorian. Mind, I should only run after a man if I really meant to catch him. I think flirting is silly and not quite fair. A flirt leads a man on, and leads him on, and then suddenly puts her nose in the air as if he was a bad smell, and says 'What do you mean?'"

Maud buried her face again in Lucia's hair.

"Oh, you do say such dreadful things," she almost moaned, "and I never can answer them. At least my answer only is that I am utterly different. Often you say the things that I only think, but sometimes you say things that I couldn't think."

"You mean I have a coarse and indelicate nature?" demanded Lucia.

"Yes, darling, just that; but it's only a tiny wee bit of you, you know."

"There again you are wrong," said Lucia. "I am altogether like that. And altogether, do you know, it is close on one o'clock. Not that it matters; it is so silly to mind what the time is. Watches are a sort of Frankenstein monster; men invented them, and then are haunted and shadowed by them."

But Maud got up.

"Nearly one!" she said, "and I promised mother I would be in bed by twelve."

"You've broken it, then," said Lucia, "so let's go on talking."

"No, we really mustn't. Oh, dear, I wish you weren't going away to-morrow."

"You can't wish it more than I do. Oh, Maud, how strange you are! You think it more important to go to bed at one because you promised to do so at twelve, than to sit up and talk to your poor friend who goes to—well, purgatory by the 11.45 to-morrow! Especially when this violently exciting thing has happened to you, which I want so dreadfully to talk about. Gracious me, if ever I fall in love with anybody, you shan't be allowed to go to bed for a week."

"But I've got nothing to say," said Maud, "it's so strange; I don't know what it

feels like yet; I can only feel."

Lucia looked sternly at her friend.

"I insist on hearing the symptoms," she said, "for future guidance. Do you want to be with him on a moonlight night and write poetry? Is it that sort?"

"No; it sounds delightful but I don't think it's that sort," said Maud.

"Do you want to change hats with him?" asked Lucia inexorably.

Maud laughed.

"Don't be horrid," she said. "Oh, Lucia, your hair! Let me put the candles out and see it sparkle for a minute."

"Do you want to brush *his* hair?" continued Lucia. "Tell me about him anyhow. Is he rich? Is he serious or flippant? Serious, I hope; a flippant husband would never do. Is he witty? Yes, I will allow he is good-looking, and he can dance. Ah, of course he is serious. I remember we talked about the dances of ancient Greece, and I could not understand one word he said. So it must have been serious; I always understand nonsense. Maud, I never saw anyone so reticent as you. What a lucky thing it is for us, that we have got me to do the talking."

Lucia sat down in the chair in front of her looking glass and blew out the candles. The blinds were down over the window and the room was almost absolutely dark, so that Maud had to feel for the silver-handled brush which she had given her friend, for no glimmer of light shone on the dressing-table; and having found it she had to feel with her hand to find the golden billows of Lucia's head. Thick and soft and warm they lay there in untroubled calm at present; soon she would raise in them that mysterious tempest of fiery life that lay in them. Then, in the darkness she began to brush, and immediately almost the hidden vitality began to manifest itself. Strange little cracklings like the breaking of dry twigs were heard, and the great golden mass that lay at first so still and composed under her hands began to rise as the yeast of life worked in it. Each hair grew endued with it, and stiffened itself apart from the others, as if asserting its own individuality, and deep down in it sparks began to light themselves, like remote and momentary stars, that appeared and disappeared. Then that strange conflagration grew more general, from points of lights there were flashes of pale flame, so that, looking in the glass in front, Maud could see lit by that mysterious illumination her friend's face, white and colourless and framed in lambent flashes. It looked like a face scarcely human; it was an abstraction of life, but half-incarnate, appearing and disappearing and glimmering in the reflecting surface with its silver frame.

"Oh, Lucia, it almost frightens me," she said. "How is it that you hold all this fire? Is it the fire in you that I love so, do you think? Where does it come from? How do

you make it. Or does it make you?”

“I think you must be practising the love-duet with your young man,” remarked Lucia.

“Oh, bother my young man,” said Maud.

“Why should you? I shall get one, too, some day, I suppose. I hope they’ll get on nicely together. Otherwise we must divorce them. Now if you’ve quite finished making a match-box of me; let me find the other one and light the candles. I am so sleepy; having my hair brushed always makes me sleepy. Thanks ever so much, darling.”

CHAPTER II

The Misses Grimson were at home from four to seven on alternate Tuesdays in July, beginning with the second one, and July was consequently rather a busy time in Brixham, since the Dean's wife also gave alternate Wednesdays (luckily in different weeks to those marked by the fêtes of the Misses Grimson or the strain might have been too severe); the Bishop's wife might be counted upon for two garden-parties, and there was also a cricket week given by the officers of the regiment stationed there, with tea and a band provided every day. In addition, the usual amount of entertaining went on, but during July the Misses Grimson never went out to dinner, since the evenings had to be kept free. And when July was over, they retired to Sea View Cottage, at Littlestone, in order to rest during the month of August, previous to resuming activities in September.

Their house lay a little outside the town, on a hill commanding a pleasant view over it. It lay a little back from the road, and the front door was approached by a "carriage sweep" which led in at one gate and out at another, and its privacy was further enhanced by a row of laurels which lay between the entrance and the exit, thus screening the lower windows of the house. There was no mistaking which gate was which, because by the railings at one gate was painted the word "In," and though the corrosion of the elements had obliterated the word "out" at the other, leaving only T, it was clear that if one gate was "In," the other must be "Out," so that there was no need to have it repainted. Matters were further facilitated by the fact that a single conveyance filled up nearly the whole of the carriage sweep, so that any intelligent driver, by observing out of which gate the horse's nose was protruding could easily gather that he must make his entrance at the other one, in order to obviate the inconvenience of the earlier arrival going backward when he should have entered, since there was not room for two carriages to pass. Two wheelbarrows might have done so without collision, but no wheeled vehicle of larger size.

Inside, on the ground floor, were three sitting-rooms, drawing-room and dining-room looking out on the carriage sweep, while behind was what was known as the writing-room, where the aunts read the paper. This looked on to the garden, where the lawn was of sufficient size just to hold a tennis-court, with one pole of the net planted at the edge of the flower-border, while the other pole was so near the path that in going round it it was necessary to step on to the gravel. Farther away a privet hedge screened the kitchen garden from view, which stretched a distance of some fifty yards to the foot of the railway embankment, which ran parallel to it. Thus the garden was not overlooked except by the windows of the houses on each side of it,

unless a train happened to be stopped by signal immediately behind—"a thing," as Aunt Cathie remarked once to an inquiring tenant for the month of August, when the family would be at the seaside, "that did not happen once in a Blue Moon." What a Blue Moon might be (the capitals represent the peculiar emphasis that Aunt Cathie put on the words) neither she nor the tenant was exactly aware, but as a train did not stop there once in one, there was no need to establish its precise nature.

Aunt Cathie at this moment was doing two things at once, which she always recommended Lucia never to attempt—she was waiting for Lucia's arrival from town, and she was contemplating the flower-bed with rather magisterial severity, as if she expected flowers to open if she looked at them hard enough. Certainly the garden was very backward; one cold week had succeeded another, and unless the sun did something decent in the next month, there would not be the "blaze of colour" which ought to dazzle their guests when they came for the first alternate Tuesday in July. The "blaze of colour" was not her own phrase; the Bishop had said the garden was a blaze of colour to Elizabeth two years ago, and the very next Sunday after he had preached in the cathedral, drawing a parallel between the gardens of men's houses and the gardens of men's souls, again using that vivid expression, so that it was fair to conclude that this flower-bed had inspired him, which was a very gratifying thought.

Aunt Cathie might have been fifty, but she was not. Instead she was nearly sixty, while Aunt Elizabeth, who might have been sixty, was more nearly the age that Aunt Cathie might have been. In other respects, too, each of the two sisters seemed confusingly like what the other might be expected to be, for Aunt Cathie, with an almost truculent appearance and abrupt demeanour, was of an extraordinarily tender heart, while Aunt Elizabeth, who appeared soft and aged and effete, was gifted with a nature of almost incredible obstinacy, and, to put the matter quite frankly, was as hard as nails.

It was over Elizabeth's hardness that Cathie was pondering as she looked at the garden-bed. They had had some discussion about it earlier in the morning, considering it in its relation to the tennis court.

"Of course, the garden is your affair, Catherine," Elizabeth had said (Catherine was a word used by her only in ultimatums and on other disapproving occasions); "and if you like to have it looking like the desert of Sahara and the Dead Sea when our guests come here in July it is a matter that concerns you. I hope I never intrude my advice when it is not wanted, but there are occasions when it becomes a duty to say what is in one's mind."

Elizabeth always spoke very slowly and distinctly, and in a die-away voice, as if

she had scarcely strength left for the mere enunciation. But her voice never quite died away until she had completely finished what she wished to say. She would then usually intimate, with a closing of the eyes and a slight shiver, that the subject might be considered as ended. She invariably, however, returned to it herself a little later, and said her say over again.

"What do you advise then, Elizabeth?" asked Cathie.

"Dismiss Johnson at once and get somebody who will condescend to garden."

"But he's so old, dear," said Catherine, "and so extremely incompetent. He would never get another place. I don't think I can dismiss him. You see, I pay his wages."

"That is a quibble, Catherine. I pay Jane's, and I hope you find your room perfectly cleaned. Otherwise pray mention it, and if fault must be found, I will find it."

"No, Jane is a good girl," said Cathie, "but short of dismissing Johnson, can't you suggest anything?"

"Well, it is absurd to let the lawn be used for a tennis-court in these few weeks before our parties. Lucia can play tennis all the year round from September till May ——"

"I never heard of anybody playing lawn tennis from September till May," interpolated Catherine.

"There is no reason why it should not be played," said Elizabeth, "in the frosts. I was saying, when you interrupted me, that unless you prefer to have the lawn looking like an abandoned cabbage patch in an allotment, when we entertain our friends, it would be better not to have it continually trampled down and run about on just before. Not to mention the decimation of such flowers as there are by the search for balls, and the loss of balls even when they are searched for. That is another point: you bought Lucia a set of new balls last year, and I see you have bought her another set to-day."

"They are a birthday present, Elizabeth," said Cathie.

"Indeed. May I ask what they cost?"

"Twelve shillings. It isn't extravagant. They last longer than the cheap ones."

Elizabeth took up her paper again with a little shiver.

"The kettle-holder you gave me on my last birthday is most useful to me, Catherine," she observed in a faltering voice.

These were the things that Catherine thought over as she looked at the unpromising flower-bed, and the lawn which beyond all denying showed traces of trampled usage. But it was chiefly Elizabeth's unkindness that occupied her, and the worst thing about Elizabeth's unkindness was that it always sprang from solid facts.

She never imagined grievances, she took the bare bones of existence and held them up before you in their mere crude hardness of outline. It was perfectly true, for instance, that Johnson was a most incompetent gardener, besides being of almost patriarchal age; it was also true that Catherine's present to Elizabeth on her last birthday had been a kettle-holder, and a remarkably cheap one, too; it was true also that she had given Lucia a set of lawn-tennis balls that cost twelve shillings. But somehow when Elizabeth did no more than state these facts without comment of any kind, it was not only Elizabeth who seemed unkind, but Cathie's own conduct that seemed unkind likewise.

"And I'm not unkind," she said to herself, in truculent bass undertones.

To have looked at her, to have talked with her, except under favourable circumstances to have even lived in the house with her, would not have convinced any of quite average intelligence that Catherine was of gentle heart, and so to speak, of a defenceless nature. She looked, as Elizabeth was, as hard as nails, and even those who most habitually visited their house at Brixham, would have said that Catherine was the dominant spirit, and that the gentle Elizabeth groaned under her yoke. She was tall, a little gaunt in face and hard of feature, and a gruff masculinity of voice and an abrupt address confirmed the impression made by her appearance. Her very acts of kindness were obscured by the uncompromising character of her manners, and it is doubtful whether Johnson himself would not have said that of the two sisters Miss Cathie represented justice and Miss Elizabeth mercy. She was reticent also, and constitutionally incapable of showing her real self to others except in kind deeds so ungraciously performed as to make them of doubtful import, and she seemed ashamed of them, hastening to cover them up with gruff speeches.

It was a tragedy of elderly spinsterhood, in fact, that was daily played by her. Hypocrite she could not be called, since it was not in her power, as far as she was aware, to put into her outward appearance and manners the kindliness that was hers, though if to be a hypocrite is to conceal one's real nature, it must be confessed that it is hard to see why she should not fall under the name, unless intentional concealment is a necessary qualification. Hypocrisy, at any rate, was forced on her; she was incapable of showing her best; she habitually kept it out of sight, even as others conceal their worst, and it was this involuntary concealment that all her life had been her tragedy. As something of a hoyden when a girl, she had yearned for the soft joys of womanhood and the hard sweet duties of wifehood, yet all the time she hid herself, and though longing to embrace and welcome the common lot of womankind, she had held herself at arm's length. And as the years went by, they brought no merciful hardening to her nature; outwardly she became a little more grim, a little less

cordial in manner, but the passage of time which stiffened her joints—for she suffered a good deal of silent discomfort from rheumatism—brought no stiffening to her soul. Her heart had remained, indeed, most inconveniently young, its sympathies were all with youth and its fervours, even at an age when the most cordial and expansive are beginning to withdraw into themselves a little and tell themselves, with good sense, that these things are no longer for them, and acquiesce in their limitations. But poor Aunt Catherine did not acquiesce at all; she daily rebelled, and daily, with a dreadful distinctness, showed herself ungracious to the view, but knew that she but parodied her real self.

It was now a little over a year since Lucia had come to live with her aunts, on the death of her father. Tragedy had been at work there also, and from being a respectable and much trusted solicitor, he had ended his own life, when a long course of systematic fraudulence was on the eve of discovery. Mad speculation had lost him both his own moderate fortune and that of his unfortunate clients, and his only daughter had been left with the small marriage portion of her mother, which he had been unable to touch. Terrible as it all was, Catherine had felt even at the time that here, though coming late, and coming tragically, was, so to speak, another chance for her who had missed so much in life—Lucia, it had been settled, was to live with her aunts, and the thought of having the girl in the house had filled her with a longing and yearning joy. But disappointment again waited for her. It had been Elizabeth who said a few choking and faltering words of welcome, while Catherine stood there, knowing herself to be looking like a grenadier, while all the time she was longing to make the girl feel that she was coming to one who welcomed her with a passionate eagerness. Indeed, it was an evening branded into her memory—Lucia had looked so tired, so forlorn, so young to be visited with such hopeless trouble, and yet Catherine could say nothing to build a bridge whereby the girl's sorrow might step into her own heart. She had brought up a chair for her to the fire, ruffling the rug; she had poked the fire and brought down shovel and tongs in disastrous clatter, and had spilt the tea she handed her into the saucer.

Of course, these were trifling things, and the lapse of a few hours would efface the unfortunate impression, but next day it was the same thing over again. She had come down early to welcome the girl at breakfast, and again she could do no more than peck her cheek, and observe in her gruff baritone:

"Hope you slept well. Less tired? No, that's your Aunt Elizabeth's place."

And day had been added to day, till they grew to weeks, and the weeks to months, and still the barrier was between them. Not long after Lucia's arrival, as has been seen, on the occasion of her birthday, her aunt gave her a set of lawn-tennis

balls, and herself helped in the mowing of the lawn, though she sheared her kindness of all graciousness by saying it was the best exercise she knew. Gradually, too, it became perfectly plain to her—as was indeed the case—that Lucia found life in Brixham very little to her taste. Coming fresh from the vivid delights and constant companionship of Girton, she felt lonely in this new place, and, as was but natural, could not make friends of her aunt's elderly acquaintances. It was some weeks before Catherine realized that; it had not occurred to her at first that Lucia could fail to find in living with her two elderly aunts the same rapturous possibilities that one at least of the elderly aunts dreamed of. The realization dawned slowly, for poor Catherine knew well how deeply she was in sympathy with youth, and it was long before she grasped the depressing fact that to be of youthful heart is not in the least the same thing as being young, especially when, as in her case, her sympathy was a thing that she was practically unable to express in any way. Moreover, though age, crabbed or not, is perfectly capable of dwelling with youth in almost ecstatic content, youth is not capable of doing anything of the sort with age. She, at any rate, in the course of a few months saw that, and the fine inherent justice of her nature prevented her from thinking, however remotely, that this was selfish or cruel on the part of youth in general, or of Lucia in particular. Instead she labelled herself cruel, and selfish in not having perceived this sooner, and if, in that point, she did not do justice to herself, severity in our own judgment of ourselves is a far more fruitful and amiable quality than severity in our judgment of others.

This period of disillusionment in regard to what she expected from Lucia's advent was bitter, but it did not infect her with its bitterness, and day by day, though she saw her hopes fade, her silent old-maid love for the girl grew. It was sad that Lucia did not understand her; it was sad that she was quite incapable of explaining herself; but it was saddest of all that Lucia found this life so dreary and tedious. It was not that Lucia ever expressed her discontent, or indeed failed in duty or gratitude to her aunts, but Catherine felt in her very bones how dull it must be for her. Their own circle, as is the way with two elderly ladies, had narrowed so imperceptibly that they had not perceived it, and now, it must be confessed, it was very narrow indeed. They still gave their "at homes" on alternate Tuesdays in July, and the smallness of the lawn made them fail to see how sparsely they were attended. And their guests—this fact Catherine had perceived at the first of the alternate Tuesdays a year ago, soon after Lucia had come to live with them—were all old or elderly, like themselves. Brixham, no doubt, had its boys and girls, its young men and maidens, but these had got shut out of the Misses Grimson's narrowing circle, and when she cast about in her own mind as to whom to ask "more

of an age with Lucia," she found that she really did not know. A few names had occurred to her, and from time to time these had come to play lawn-tennis with the new box of balls in the exceedingly circumscribed court, and they again had asked the girl to parties at other houses. But among these acquaintances there was none that had ripened into anything approaching friendship. Lucia, for all her beauty and brilliance, had in this past year not got near intimacy with anyone. That Aunt Catherine knew; what she did not know was that this was entirely her niece's fault. Lucia found Brixham and the girls whom she came across stuffy. That might or might not be the case; what undoubtedly was the case was that the stuffy girls were not so dense as not to perceive her opinion of them. They survived it, and got on without her. No one could be more charming or amiable than Lucia when she thought it worth while. But she thought that nothing about Brixham was in the least worth while.

It is a popular fallacy, and one shared by Aunt Catherine, that charm, such as Lucia undeniably had, must make friends. It makes, beyond a doubt, many people willing to be friends with its fortunate possessor, but friendship is not a one-sided affair of this kind; it demands a contribution, open-handed and unstinted, from both parties who go to the making of it. And among those who were willing to do their share at Brixham, Lucia was not one. She had nothing to give; there was nobody at any rate, as far as she perceived, who called forth her gift. In a word, then, hitherto she had shut it up, and turned the key on it. Brixham was dull, deadly, and aged. But she could no more hide her charm than she could hide the sun, and while Aunt Catherine was still pondering over the bareness of the lawn and the colourlessness of what had been a blaze of colour the girl came into the garden.

"Dear Aunt Cathie," she said, "here I am, and you didn't hear the cab, which you were about to tell me, because there wasn't one. I walked from the station, and my luggage is coming by a van called C. P., whatever that means. Anyhow C. P. was very polite, so I said 'yes,' and it was only sixpence."

Aunt Catherine bent and kissed her somewhat magisterially.

"Glad to see you, dear," she said. "Are you glad to come back?"

Lucia's face did not fall; she still looked quite charming.

"Well, London was heavenly," she said, "so if that implies that I was glad to get away from London——But the country is nice too," she added.

Catherine waited a moment to see if she would say more. But apparently that subject seemed done with.

"Lucia," she said, "I wonder if you'll mind. Hope not. But lawn-tennis does make the lawn so bare, doesn't it? Supposing you gave it up till after our parties.

Give the grass a chance to grow."

Lucia turned now with an air of slight surprise.

"Oh, certainly, if you like," she said with complete amiability.

"You don't mind, do you?"

"Not in the least. It's hardly possible to play tennis here anyhow. There's scarcely room."

Now six feet of grass had been added last autumn to the end of the lawn, at the sacrifice of a row of lobelias, a row of yellow calceolarias, and a row of scarlet geraniums, in order to make lawn tennis more possible. Lucia had not asked for this: it had been Aunt Catherine's original thought, and she had gruffly explained at the time why it was being done. The lawn, however, even as Lucia had said, hardly admitted of the game being played at all, and she had scarcely played half a dozen times since it had been done. Out of these times, once or twice she had only played with Aunt Catherine, who had herself proposed a game, and had proved almost incapable of sending the ball over the net at all. She had done it in the hope of amusing Lucia, and Lucia had accepted the proposal in the hope of amusing Aunt Catherine, wondering slightly all the time how anybody could find it amusing to throw up the ball for service, and fail to hit it at all. But she had played with perfect good nature, and had allowed Aunt Catherine to serve faults almost indefinitely without counting them.

But before the pause after Lucia's speech had become prolonged, the girl remembered the incident of the lengthening of the lawn, which she had forgotten.

"Though it was delightful of you to add that extra piece, Aunt Cathie," she said.

Somewhere deep down Catherine felt she wanted to explain, but she could not explain. She felt no inclination, even, to say that the proposal of abandoning lawn-tennis originated from her sister, but she wanted somehow to say she was sorry that, in spite of her efforts, the lawn was not big enough. But that again was like an appeal to Lucia, which Lucia would not understand; it would have been a little symbol of so much.

"Very well then," she said, "if you don't mind, we won't play any more tennis till after the parties. Perhaps you would like one game first this afternoon."

Lucia smiled.

"With you?" she asked. "Yes, with pleasure. And isn't it lunch-time, don't you think? I am so hungry."

Aunt Catherine consulted a warming-pan watch which she hauled out from some receptacle in her dress like a bucket from a well.

"Just lunch-time," she said. "Elizabeth ordered cheesecakes. I remembered you

liked them." Then her reserve gave way a little.

"I'm glad you've come home, Lucia," she said, "whether you are sorry to leave London or not." And the moment it was said, she realized how ill-said it was.

There was a new cook at Fairview Cottage, a very godly woman, as Aunt Elizabeth so rightly desired, but her godliness did not lead to any notable results as regarded food, unless inefficiency in a supreme degree can be considered notable. But she said responses so loudly at family prayers in the morning, and followed Aunt Elizabeth's reading in the Bible with so diligent a forefinger, that, as she truly observed, it showed a small spirit to mind about the bacon, and she thought Catherine would have been above it. But to-day the cheesecakes were above Elizabeth as well; the pastry resisted the most determined assaults without showing signs of fracture, and Catherine, in whose mouth mysterious alterations had lately been made, had to conceal hers under the bowl of her spoon, after swallowing with effort and misgiving what she had in her mouth.

This did not escape Elizabeth's eye.

"I am sorry you do not like the cheesecakes that I ordered at your request, Catherine," she said. "Poor Mrs. Inglis, I am sure, did her best but I will tell her you are dissatisfied with her cooking."

"Try one yourself," said Catherine. "See if you can make an impression on it."

"I have already eaten well and sufficiently, Catherine," said she. "It is not my habit to do more than that. No doubt Lucia agrees with you."

"The pastry is rather tough, Aunt Elizabeth," said Lucia.

"I was afraid you would find our poor house very rough and uncomfortable after staying with your grand friends in London," she said, folding her napkin and putting it back into its ring.

Lucia said nothing. It was this sort of thing which she had meant when she told Maud they talked a different language at Brixham. But what was it possible to answer when Aunt Elizabeth spoke of her "grand friends"? And seeing she said nothing, Aunt Elizabeth proceeded to follow up her advantage.

"Though I do my best to make the house comfortable for you," she added tremulously. "If you have finished, Catherine, for what we have received——"

Aunt Elizabeth had managed in the course of years, and by dint of extreme ingenuity in disposing of the hours of the day to the least possible advantage, to make herself feel exceedingly busy. Every morning she had to read the paper and write her letters (or letter as the case might be) and what with ordering dinner, it was no wonder that it was lunch-time before she knew she had breakfasted. In the

afternoon there was always some reason for going into the town, a distance of a mile, where, every day, she either ordered twopennyworth of worsted, or a needle, or counter-ordered something she had ordered the day before, or complained that something else had not come. Indeed, it seldom happened that she had not to go into Brixham between lunch and tea, so that the working day was already brimful. In addition she had often got to pay a call, which, by dint of much contrivance, had to be somehow wedged in, and on these occasions she was sometimes as much as a quarter of an hour late for tea, which again curtailed the hours between tea and dinner, which were dedicated to her worsted work, and this curtailment gave her the sense of being "driven." Charity in her case began at home with regard to her work, and her crochet-needle was more often than not employed in mending the voluminous wool-work with which her needle had already endowed Fair View Cottage. There were antimacassars (head-mats she called them) over every chair, there was a woollen mat under every ornament, and over every footstool and under every lamp and candle in the place. The mats in fact were quite ubiquitous—pots of plants stood on them, books were disposed on them; whatever found place in Fair View Cottage had a mat to put it on. Thus it was usually nearly seven before she could get time to work at the shawls which at long intervals she gave to the old women of the workhouse, and since she dined at a quarter to eight their shawls got on very slowly. After dinner again, in the first hour of relaxation she had enjoyed since she got up, she permitted herself a game of patience, and since she never cheated, it was often ten o'clock before her game was over, and it was necessary to go to bed. She might be late for tea but there was no trifling with bedtime—"bed" and "ten" were terms practically synonymous and the exception that proved this rule was that when the Misses Grimson dined at the Deanery or at three other houses or went to the Mayor's evening party, on his accession to office, bed was synonymous with eleven. On that occasion breakfast next morning meant nine instead of half-past eight.

To-day Aunt Elizabeth had to go to the draper's, which was at the farther end of the town, to match a particular shade of brown, in the woollen head-rest on the American cloth sofa in the dining-room. Jane had managed to spill a plateful of soup over it, and the last three days had passed for Aunt Elizabeth in a tempest of perplexity as to what had better be done, so copious had been the soup, and so extensive the stain. It had been hung out to dry on the top of the tennis net, and this morning her time for the perusal of the paper had been sadly eaten into by the need for a thorough inspection of it. She found, however, that by cutting away some third

part of it, a patch could be constructed, and it was therefore necessary to get brown wool of a particular shade in large quantities. The original shade, no doubt, could be easily procured, but this head-rest was of some antiquity, and its rich original brown had mellowed to a greyish-yellow tinge, which she felt would be hard to match. It might have been easier, perhaps, to get the draper to send to Fair View Cottage samples of all the bilious browns in his possession, but this was not Aunt Elizabeth's way. Instead she wrapped the mutilated head-rest in whity-brown paper, and set off with it down the sun-baked road. This would certainly take up the hours till tea, and she could begin to work, supposing the right shade was obtainable, immediately afterwards. It was extremely tiresome and wearing to have this extra burden thrown on her in all the rush and bustle of July, and it seemed to her that this spilling of the soup was equivalent to a robbery of a week of her life. She had told Jane so, and Cathie's offer to repair it herself was a ridiculous proposal, since her wool-work was no more than a fortuitous collection of running knots. No doubt Catherine knew when she made the offer that it would be declined.

Lucia, meantime, managed to find the famous tennis-balls, which, as a matter of fact, were rather past their prime, and went out with Aunt Catherine to play lawn-tennis. The afternoon was broiling hot, for summer, long delayed, had come with a vengeance, and the high brick walls at the sides of the garden and the house at one end, and the railway embankment at the other, effectually prevented any breath of wind reaching the players. But the whitewash lines of the court were still faintly visible, and there were not many holes at the top of the net, so that a game was easily practicable. Aunt Cathie had put on a sun-bonnet decorated with a large black bow, and on her feet she wore that species of covering known as sand-shoes—black canvas, with shiny toes, such as she wore on the beach at Littlestone—and accustomed though Lucia was to the truculence of her aspect, it struck her anew as, cool and fresh herself, she stepped out into the blinding sunshine and found her aunt waiting for her.

The net first required adjustment, and on Aunt Cathie's winding up the winch with too zealous a hand, the wire broke, and the net collapsed. A temporary repair was soon executed, and Aunt Cathie began to serve the slack, discoloured balls. The first two or three, being out of practice, she threw high in the air but failed to hit altogether and then, by a fortuitous conjunction of circumstances, she struck one so violently that it pitched among the cabbages, and had to be instantly recovered before they forgot where it had gone to. Then Aunt Cathie scored several faults of different descriptions; one hit the ground at her feet, one went into the net, a third

knocked off the head of one of the few geraniums and spilled its scarlet petals as by a deed of blood. But after this, having got her hand in, she served several to the required place, and Lucia returned them as gently as she knew how. But Aunt Cathie's bolt, so to speak, was shot when she had delivered a correct service, and she was incapable of more, though with extraordinary gallantry she rushed swiftly and erratically to the places where Lucia's returns had been only a second or two before. And rarely—so rarely—did she ever send a ball into her opponent's court.

Slowly, as this parody of a game continued, Lucia's forehead gathered itself into little puckers, and the corners of her mouth got rather firm and hard, for neither did her sense of humour nor, which was much worse, did any sense of compassion or tenderness come to her aid. She only knew that it was all most tiresome and ridiculous. Humour might possibly have left her kindly, and had she smiled or even laughed at the figure of Aunt Cathie, unspeakably attired, hurrying with her large flat feet and flapping sun-bonnet to where a ball had been a few moments before, and striking wildly at the innocent and empty air, her impatience and intolerance might have evaporated. But the sight did not amuse her; she was vexed and bored. And still further from her than amusement was any feeling of tenderness. To her mind there was no pathos in the fact that Aunt Cathie should skip about like this in the sun. She knew nothing of the secret tragedy, of the lonely elderly heart that still ached for and yearned toward the youth it had never really known. Yet it was not altogether her fault, for her aunt was an adept at concealing what she longed to express and cloaking what she pined to exhibit.

And so the dreary game went on, typical to the girl of her life here, of its unutterable tedium, of its joyless monotony, of its rare and lugubrious festivities. Tiresome though it was, she scarcely wished it to be ended, because there was nothing coming afterward. She would hold skeins while Aunt Elizabeth wound them, there would follow dinner and afterwards she would observe Aunt Elizabeth vainly wrestling with patience, while Aunt Cathie dozed over a book, until the clock on the chimney-piece chimed a querulous ten, as if contradicting someone who denied the fact. They would all kiss each other and say good-night, and retire with bed-candles, to recover in sleep from the effects of this annihilating day, and get strength for the next, which would be exactly like this.

It all happened as Lucia had foreseen; she only had not an imagination quite vivid enough to realize the details of the monotony. Aunt Elizabeth, for instance, instead of being sour at tea, was bright and agreeable, but when the cause of her unusual sociability was declared, it seemed to Lucia that she was deadlier than ever. For it

had happened that she had found exactly the bilious shade necessary for the repair of the head-rest, and the spilt soup would therefore not stain the honour of the family for ever, as had once seemed probable. But this ray of brightness again had been firmly extinguished when it came to her ears that Catherine and Lucia had been playing lawn-tennis.

"After your frivolous afternoon, Lucia," she said, "I suppose you would find it intolerable to hold my skein. I shall be able to manage perfectly well with two chairs, if you want to amuse yourself again."

So the lawn-tennis was officially amusing! Lucia felt that irony had said its last word. The infinitesimal quality of it all crushed her; she almost besought to be allowed to hold the dreadful skein. And, as a favour, she was permitted to do so.

Again after dinner the patience "went out" by 9.23 P.M., which encouraged Aunt Elizabeth to tempt the laws of chance again. So engrossed was she that for the first time in Lucia's memory she did not hear the clock strike ten, while Aunt Cathie, tired with her unusual exertions, had fallen into a deeper doze than usual. So it was a momentous evening and far more full of incident than usual.

CHAPTER III

Lucia's room was a big attic at the top of the house which she had got possession of not without debate. It seemed very odd to both her aunts that she should prefer this isolated room among the roofs to the spare room on the first floor with its thick carpet, its ubiquitous woollen mats, its impenetrable curtains across the pitch-pine windows, and the solid suitability of the walnut suite of mid-Victorian date. But Lucia had urged, not without reason (though her real reasons were others), that she could not occupy the best spare bedroom if there was another guest in the house but would have to transfer her goods on those occasions to the dressing-room adjoining. But if she might have the big attic, she would feel it was her own room in a way that the best spare bedroom could never be. This point of etiquette about the best spare bedroom, though there was practically never a guest in the house (during the last year a cousin of the aunts had spent a night there, because she missed a train), appealed to them, though Lucia's preference seemed to them unusual, and they had certain vague qualms as to whether it was proper for a girl to be cut off like this. A closer examination of these scruples showed them to be somewhat phantasmal, since the impropriety of Lucia's sleeping there, with the cook and the housemaid immediately below, and themselves on the floor below that, could not exactly be defined when the girl pressed for a definition. Aunt Elizabeth began several sentences with—"But what would you do if——" but her imagination was not equal to framing a contingency which should embody her objections.

Lucia's real reason for preferring the attic was simple enough. She wanted first of all a greater sense of privacy than could be obtained on the first floor, and she felt also she would be stifled in the heavy solemnities of the best bedroom. She had air and light upstairs, and a small sum of money which was left over after the re-investment of her mother's property, sufficed to furnish it according to her tastes. The furniture was simple enough, but it was characteristically vivid. The walls were white; there was a crimson drugget on the floor, a plain apple-green writing-table in the window, two big basket chairs with green cushions, and a red-lacquer wardrobe. These things, with the barest apparatus for sleeping and dressing, left the room fairly empty; it was light, full of colour, airy, and private.

It was here that she went to-night with a certain eagerness to be alone at the unusual hour of half-past ten. The process of self-realization which she had spoken of to Maud the night before was like fermenting wine in her brain, and she and this stranger, who was yet herself, were going to be alone together and make their plans. She slipped off her dress, and let her hair make cataracts down her back, and then,

setting the window looking over the garden wide open, she lit all the candles she had in the room. That was purely instinctive; she scarcely knew she was doing it, conscious only that she wanted air and light. Then, still instinctively expressing herself, she put on a Japanese kimono of old gold and scarlet and threw open the door to this engrossing stranger, herself, whom she was beginning to know. Then suddenly her own image in the glass, brilliant, vivid, gloriously youthful, struck her, and, candle in hand, she went close up to it, looking at her face slightly flushed, the liquid fire of her eyes, the golden fire of her hair. It was no motive of vanity that dictated this, for vanity, even the most deep-seated, is but a shallow emotion; it was the most intense and eager interest in herself. She looked long and gravely, enthralled at what she saw just because it was herself. Then she said out loud:

"Yes, that's me."

She wanted, she wanted passionately. She wanted to have everything—wealth, position, rank, to have the world at her feet, to be gazed at, admired, envied, and had Mephistopheles, or his feminine counterpart, come in at the moment, the bargain would have been struck the moment he proposed it. As for love, she was quite willing to take it; more than that, she even wanted to be loved with the same passionateness that she wanted everything else; but as for feeling it, or for giving it, she was truly not aware whether it was in her power to do any such thing. Marriage, of course, was necessary for the accomplishment of her desire, and no doubt that she should have children would add to the fulfilment of her avarice, but she wanted neither husband nor babies in themselves. They, too, like dancing and diamonds, were to be part of her parure, not part of herself.

Nor was her scheme to lack its intellectual triumphs. She must have wit, so that the world hung on her words as it must hang upon her beauty, and she must make *la pluie et le beau temps* in the world of art, by her approval or censure, just as she must set the fashions by her gowns. It would be musicians whom she would ask to her opera-box, who came with her for love of music, just as in the theatre she would be the centre of those of critical and dramatic acumen. In the intoxication of ambition that was on her at the moment she felt herself despising the ordinary women of the world, to whom a quantity of smart gowns worn at a quantity of smart parties is sufficient to make a success of a season, those who went from party to party with nothing in their heads but what they were going to do next. She would be kind, too, philanthropic, ready to place herself and her time at the service of suffering, since it was undeniably in the fashion to work hard and to be charitable. Besides, she felt that if she really had all she wanted, she would be kind in nature, not only for show. Happiness, the gratification of ambition, the gaining what one wants, she was

convinced, was a great softener of the heart.

Then for a moment a shadow fell across the projected path—what afterwards? What when she had got all she desired, when age began to tarnish the gold of her youth, when the leanness of accomplished ambitions began to wrinkle her soul? But the doubt was no more than the shade cast by a passing cloud on a day of windy spring, and it had gone almost before she knew it was there. It would be early enough to think of that at the end of fifty years; it was sheer waste of time to consider it now. Besides, she felt she would pay any price for what she meant to have, provided only the bill was sent in afterwards, presented to her at the end of life, as the waiter brings the account at the end of dinner. She would have dined, that was all that mattered, and in whatever form the waiter came, and whatever astounding indebtedness he brought with him, it could not but be cheap. Only let her have everything, and she would pay whatever was demanded.

But for a moment more the shadow gave her pause, and she thought more closely to see whether in her heart of hearts she reserved anything, or whether, like Faust, she would sign her very self away. But she found nothing which really seemed to her to weigh as heavily as what she wanted, her success, her happiness. She was not cruel, yet if it was necessary that the unhappiness of others was the coin by which she purchased her own, she would pay it. She would not like sacrificing others—she would hate it—but if someone had to suffer to enable her to enjoy, she knew that she would not forego her chance. If Aunt Catherine or Aunt Elizabeth, for instance, had, by some mysterious bargain, to pay for her pleasures . . . well, they had had their lives, they had had their chances too, at the best there were but a few grey years remaining for them; and they were not very happy, probably, even as it was. . . . Or if, in the same way, her own gain had to be anybody else's loss, she knew really what her choice would be, even if the loss was to one she really was devoted to—even if it were Maud's loss, for instance? Then she swept these thoughts away; they were but figments of imagination. Yet, in spite of that, she knew that morally, potentially, she had chosen. Her thoughts, it may be, had been talking nonsense to her: asking her child-questions—"What would you do if——" and then putting some outrageous contingency before her; but for the moment, at any rate, she had taken these child-questions seriously, and answered them to the best of her ability.

A light wind blew in from the garden bearing with it the warm scent of night-smelling flowers from some garden that had prospered better than that of Fair View, and she paused by the window looking out on to the darkness. At first, her eyes,

accustomed to the illumination in her room and its white reflecting walls, could see nothing but the large empty darkness; but soon forms of things defined themselves and took shape and a little colour. Above in the velvet vault the stars burned hot and close in the warm air, below the long railway embankment made a sharp black line across the sky. On each side stretched parallel brick walls; enclosing strips of garden belonging to neighbouring houses, all just alike, all narrow and confined. But of them all the one immediately below seemed to her most intolerably tedious. She knew every inch of it, and it was all dull and unlovely. The flower-bed under the wall was black, the lawn was black, but across it in a curve stretched the white line at the top of the tennis net, and the post showed black across the gray of the gravel walk. From the house itself there shone a pale glimmer of light from Aunt Elizabeth's window, and even as she looked it was extinguished. Aunt Elizabeth had gone to bed. And in the morning Aunt Elizabeth would get up, and do her worsted work, and live over again the triumph over the Demon. In a month's time there would be the unparalleled excitement of alternate Tuesdays, and then they would go to Littlestone. And in a few years' time everybody would be dead.

The rattling on of an approaching train, getting rapidly louder, caught her ear, and next moment with a shriek, the engine belching fire, followed by its train of illuminated carriages, tore past along the embankment, swift and alive, carrying its fortunate freight at top speed by the sleepy town. That was the contrast Lucia wanted; even though the tennis net drooped in the garden, and Aunt Elizabeth had gone to bed, out in the world there was life and movement day and night.

Though it was late before she went to bed, she woke next morning very early, and found that her mind flew back like an uncoiled spring to the train of thought and that study of herself which had so occupied her the night before. Already, by that strange assimilative process of the mind which goes on in sleep, that which had been almost revelation to her the night before was familiar now, and part of her, and those flashes of consciousness of herself and her own nature had passed into the very tissues of her brain. The feverish excitement of her discoveries was over, and in the cool pearliness of dawn she thought of it all quietly, and turned her mind to the practical considerations which it suggested. And the first practical consideration was this:

Opportunities, occasions of being able to realize one's desires, she saw, certainly came from without, but she had hitherto neglected to be at home, so to speak, to opportunities. Narrow and tedious as she felt her life here to be, she had herself assisted in adding to the tediousness at which she so rebelled, by making the worst

of it, not only in mental attitude, but in her practical aloofness from such humdrum life as there was. She must change all that, for she, whose determination now was to get from life all that life had to offer, had up till now been doing the very opposite down in Brixham, and, having assumed that it offered nothing at all, it was not surprising that she found nothing there. She had not troubled to look and search in this room, simply because she had believed it to be quite dark. She had been so occupied in wondering at the futilities in which Aunt Elizabeth's days were passed that her own had been just as futile. That was bad practice for one who was going to press the last ounce of pleasure out of life. Besides—though it appeared wildly improbable—little opportunities which might lead to the big opportunities might be floating about even here; she must be on the look-out for everything, snatch everything—no, that was not the word, put out her hand to everything very gently and then catch hold of it very tight.

Lucia smiled to herself as she made this verbal alteration in her thought, and got out of bed, for she was too wide-awake to care to go through drowsy processes to make her sleepy again, and tip-toed downstairs to her bath, putting her sponge at the bottom below the tap, so that the noise of the water splashing in should not rouse the aunts. Yet it was not quite kindness or the desire not to break their rest that dictated the consideration of this; she wanted the sense that nobody else was awake.

She dressed quickly and went out, feeling a thrill of delight in the fact of being alone and awake in this translucent dawn, while the sleepy town still dozed abed, and her quickened perception of herself seemed to have vivified her all through, so that it was with an unsealed and kindled eye that she saw the familiar places at which she had looked a hundred times without seeing them. She turned her back on the town, and struck upward across a couple of fields that led to the great hump of down that overlooked the city. Here in the meadows the grass was still covered with the seed-pearls of the dew, though the sun was risen, and as she walked there was thrown round the shadow of her head a pale iridescence that accompanied her as she moved. Buttercups spread their gold on the green velvet of the fields, and in the hedges the leaves of the hawthorn were varnished with the dew, and cascades of starry blossom, vigorous and refreshed by the night, were spilled and sprayed over them. Then still mounting, she came to the down, all carpeted with thyme and cushions of rockrose, and stiff and springy to the feet with its short close-growing grasses. Harebells trembled on wire-like stalks, and over all had been thrown the magic shuttle of the gossamer webs. Then turning round, Lucia looked over the hollow that held the town itself. Night-mists and the lighting of early fires half shrouded it in skeins of bluish vapour, but the taller houses and spires pricked

through this covering and stood gilded with the early sunlight. Even as she looked the veils of vapour got gradually more and more suffused with the Eastern fire until they were withdrawn, and vanished in the glory of the mounting sun.

The same awakened perceptions which had shown her herself made her more alert to see these things. During this last year her mind had dozed, partly from laziness, partly from the conviction that everything here was grey and unprofitable, partly, perhaps, her spirit had been like one enjoying the last minutes of sleep and knowing, though instinctively and unconsciously, that the hour of awakening is close at hand. Alert and alive now she certainly was, and she judged and condemned herself for this somnolent year. To make herself complete, to be ready for the fulfilment of her desires, she saw now that this torpor would never do. She had dropped all her Girton studies, she had let herself grow rusty in languages, she had scarcely touched the piano in all these months. And worse than all, she had largely lost interest in people; she had labelled Brixham as a town full of "Empties" without really ever troubling to look inside it and see. Very likely she was right, very likely they had all turned into cabbages in this Sleepy Hollow, but what she had not reckoned with was the risk of turning into a cabbage too.

Lucia had, in addition to the wonderful charm and beauty of bodily presence, a mental gift which is second to none in the securing of a person's aims; she knew her own mind with precision, and had a quiet obstinacy that wore down opposition and obstacles by its unwearying pertinacity. It was not a quality that she wore on her sleeve for all the world to see; on the contrary, she concealed it, showing on the surface only her vivid vitality, her exuberance of spirit which had so charmed Maud, and indeed charmed any to whom she chose to exhibit it. But the unwearying obstinacy was there below it, never asserting itself, never being violent, but being always quite hard and firm, like the stone of some soft plum with smooth bloom on its skin and golden ripeness within. It was only when you bit to the centre, so to speak, that you found it at all. And this morning, standing hatless on the dewy down, in the dawn of the day and the dawn of her womanhood, she bit deep into herself, and found it there, hard and cool.

She brought back with her long sprays of the flowering hawthorn, and, before the aunts came down, had put them in water in the two large cut-glass vases that stood in the hall, and would certainly have been described by an auctioneer as "very handsome." This, however, was not a very happy inspiration, for Aunt Elizabeth was instantly seized with such a violent access of hay-fever that the banisters of the stairs as she came down shook under the tempest of her sneezing, and Lucia, guessing the cause, took the handsome vases out into the garden, and came back with smelling

salts and apologies. Aunt Elizabeth, however, was not sufficiently herself to read prayers, which Cathie did instead, declaiming a particularly unchristian psalm which called down many curses on her enemies, in her impressive voice, while Elizabeth by degrees grew quieter. By breakfast time she was so far recovered as to be able to say what she thought in choked and quavering utterance.

"It isn't much that you have to remember, Lucia," she said, "nor are there many duties that fall upon your shoulders. But if you could manage to recollect that hawthorn is poison to me, I should be grateful. And unless our eggs are going to be like eggs in salad, you might be so kind as to put the spirit-lamp out."

She unfolded the *Daily Telegraph*.

"And I felt so happy and well this morning," she added, "what with getting that shade of wool, and Demon coming out last night. But no one considers me, and I'm sure I ought to have got used to it by this time."

A sudden resolve to shake off her reticence seized Aunt Cathie. She was sorry for Lucia, and tried to express it, so as she came back from the side-table with the probably-salad eggs, she made a fierce kind of dab at her, the intention being to lay a sympathetic hand on her arm. Two of the eggs were broken on the floor, and they were not of the necessary consistency for salad. Aunt Elizabeth rose, though she had not begun breakfast.

"I will go and lie down," she said. "Catherine, please order what you like for lunch, if you are not too busy to see Mrs. Inglis. And the carpet was laid down only last winter."

Lucia meantime had been making matters worse on the floor.

"Oh, Aunt Elizabeth, I am so sorry!" she said, "but Aunt Cath—but something jogged my arm. It was most careless of me, and please let me have the carpet cleaned with my money."

Providence had bestowed the gift of irony on Aunt Elizabeth.

"It would be a new use for the coin of the realm to clean the carpet with it," she said brokenly. "If it is not too much, Lucia, might I ask you not to stamp above my head as you did all last night, keeping me awake? Thank you, dear; I shall try to get a little rest."

Lucia and Aunt Cathie were left alone, and when the door had closed the latter spoke.

"Eat the other egg, Lucia," she observed, "and don't mind Elizabeth. My belief is she slept like a top. Heard her snoring myself. And she doesn't mean anything; cheer up! It was my fault, too. Stupid old goose! Not you, me!"

Aunt Catherine's teeth were troublesome, and she dipped her toast in her tea.

"Poor Elizabeth!" she added. "You never can tell. Besides, egg comes out. I've spilled egg often, and not a trace of it. What happens to napkins, eh?"

And all the time the poor soul was yearning to say tender, womanly things. But she did not know how. That knowledge was one that had not come to her with years, but the longing for it had not lessened with the increase of them.

But Lucia this morning perceived something new about Aunt Cathie. She saw, and that for the first time, that Aunt Cathie wanted to say things, whereas hitherto she had only known that she did not do so. That dab on her arm which had occasioned the catastrophe with the eggs she suddenly perceived had been an effort, however unsuccessful, to say something, or if not to say, to express a feeling. She cracked the remaining egg, then stopped.

"Aunt Cathie, do eat this," she said. "I don't want it a bit. Or I could ring the bell and get another."

"Better not," said Aunt Cathie. "Elizabeth would ring to find out what you had rung for. Eat it up. You've been for a walk, I suppose, else where did you get that unfortunate hawthorn? I haven't."

"Yes. I am rather hungry," said Lucia.

"Well, eat, then. Growing girl."

Really, Aunt Catherine was so brusque that it was almost impossible to conduct conversation. But Lucia felt both expansive and interested this morning.

"Tell me, Aunt Cathie," she said, "what did you want to say when you jogged my arm? You can say it aloud now, you see, as Aunt Elizabeth has gone. At least, I suppose that it was because she was here that you didn't say it, but did it instead."

That was an unfortunate phrase; it stung, though Lucia did not mean it to, instead of caressing, and Aunt Cathie's shy, timorous tentacles withdrew instead of advancing.

"Don't know what we are talking about," she said. "Pass me the paper, Lucia. Nothing ever happens, though, does it?"

But though Aunt Cathie was easily scared off the slightest advance towards confidence, for the very reason that she so nervously yearned to show herself to Lucia, the girl found not the slightest difficulty in giving her aunt certain of the conclusions of her morning walk.

"I had a good long think this morning, Aunt Cathie," she said, "and I should like to tell you about it. I found out that I was an idle, lazy little brute, and that I had been wasting my time most abominably during this last year. Now I'm going to behave differently. I suppose you don't talk French, do you?"

Aunt Cathie dropped her paper at this very surprising question.

"Bless me, no! Haven't looked at a French book since I was a girl," she said. "It's hard enough to say what you want in English, without bothering about other tongues. Besides, what good could French be to me? We had a French governess once at home, but she was sent away for picking out the marks from your grandmamma's linen and putting in her own. Your grandmamma often said she wouldn't wonder if she was a spy."

These almost international complications had led Aunt Cathie away from the original question, and she returned abruptly.

"About French?" she asked.

"Oh, it was only that French was one of the things I was going to work at," said Lucia, "and I thought, if you knew French, we might make a vow only to talk French to each other three days a week or something. But if you don't know it, conversation would be limited."

There was no gainsaying this, but Aunt Cathie wanted to learn now.

"And what else?" she asked. "Sketching, now? I used to sketch. We might go sketching. Your Aunt Elizabeth and I both belonged to a sketching club, and learned touches for trees."

"Touches for trees?" asked Lucia.

"Yes, different-shaped pencil marks indicating the foliage of various trees. Elizabeth learned seven touches, but I never mastered more than five. So I could never draw plane-trees, of which there were a quantity at home. And singing, too—had you thought about singing? I might help you there. I had what is called a veiled contralto."

Aunt Cathie was getting less brusque and more accessible every moment, but, becoming suddenly conscious of it herself, she withdrew altogether. She must not seem to be forcing herself on Lucia. But she made one more advance before she retired.

"I'll get the piano tuned," she said. "Let me glance through the paper. Hum! Death of Lord Brayton. Serve him right. Drink and smoke."

"Did he die young?" asked Lucia. "And who was he?"

"Seems to have been eighty-three. Lived at Brayton, three miles away. Immense property for somebody. Hadn't got children."

Aunt Cathie was one of those newspaper readers who must be numerous considering the care and plentifulness with which they are catered for, who are intensely interested in the doings of people they have never seen, and indeed never heard of except through the medium of the daily press. Her trenchant comment on Lord Brayton's death, indeed, was founded on more than this, for she had once seen

his lordship standing in the window of the County Club with a glass of what was probably brandy and soda in one hand, and an unmistakable cigar in the other. But she was equally interested in mere names, and before leaving the table read through various lists of guests at different dinner-parties in town, and observed that there was a great deal going on. But with Elizabeth lying down upstairs, the duty of ordering dinner and making the daily inspection of the larder fell upon her, and since this had to be done immediately after breakfast, before the tradesmen called, she had little time to spare for the paper. Indeed she did but glance at the Court Circular.

"Edgar Comber," she observed as she got up. "Never heard of him."

"What about him?" asked Lucia quietly.

"Succeeds Lord Brayton. Second cousin twice removed. Elizabeth and I used to go to the garden-parties at Brayton, when Lady Brayton was alive. Sweet woman. Gored by a mad bull."

Lucia sat for a minute longer after Aunt Cathie had announced the tragic end of the late Lady Brayton with such dramatic suddenness; but it was not that which occupied her mind, nor yet the question of French, or of Aunt Cathie's veiled contralto. How odd it was that this name should again be brought before her! Since Maud had spoken of him two days ago, in that intimate midnight talk, she had often thought of him, had recalled his appearance, his manner, his conversation with growing distinctness. And again now, as if a light had suddenly been turned up, his image became more vivid. Really Maud had chosen very well, an immense property, so Aunt Cathie had said, and a peerage, both exceedingly good things in themselves, and quite admirably suited the one to the other. She wondered if Maud had known all along that he would be possessed of such desirable adjuncts. It was almost impossible that she should not: in London everybody knew everything about other people. Maud would be wealthy too: she was the only child of very rich parents, and —yes, Lucia was delighted that so fair a prospect opened for her friend. True, there was not the slightest reason, so far as she knew, to suppose that this fortunate young man was in the least degree tenderly disposed toward this attractive young woman, but Maud was just the sort of girl whom that kind of man liked. He talked a good deal about slightly improving subjects, and Maud listened so well. She listened as well as he talked. And for herself—well, she had determined to polish up her French, and make the most of herself and other things. But what luck other people had! What short cuts to all that made life pleasant!

Aunt Cathie meantime ordered lunch and dinner, and went into the writing-room to finish reading her paper. After that she had certainly one, and probably two letters

to write, so that she would barely get through her work before it was necessary to go into the garden at twelve and walk round with Johnson. This was done every day, Aunt Cathie going in front, and Johnson tottering behind her, to take her orders. On most days, it was true, nothing particular passed, for when strawberries were clearly green on Tuesday it was impossible that there would be much to say about them on Wednesday. Except to remark that they were green still. Also, as she had alluded to the bareness of the famous border every day for the last fortnight, and he had said that it was the cold spring that made it so backward, but that a few hot days would do wonders with it, nothing much remained for discussion. To-day, however, she had the news that the lawn-tennis court would not be used for tennis again till after the alternate Tuesdays in July, and there would be the question of sowing a little grass seed on the barest places. Johnson was sure to discourage this, as he always did when increased exertions on his part were incident to any scheme, and would probably say that he never knew of any good coming from sowing grass at the end of May, and that the price of it this year spelled ruin. In fact, in view of the disputation likely to occur this morning, it would be well to get out by a quarter to twelve, since he went to his dinner at half past, and Aunt Cathie put down on her memorandum slate "Johnson 11.45," and underlined it.

The first letter was to the ironmonger's about the mowing machine. It had never cut well, and the blades had been resharpened so frequently as to have made it economical by now to have got a new one long ago. This letter was designed to have a sharp edge to it, and began, "My gardener informs me that. . . ."

Aunt Cathie's attention tended to wander before she got any further than this, and she began, in association with her conversation with Lucia, to draw "touches" on a half-sheet of paper, to see if she remembered them. The pine-tree touch was easy, and tremendously effective, but she got confused between the elm-tree touch and the oak-tree touch. But after all Lucia had not shown any great interest in the touches; if anything she seemed a little amused at the idea.

Aunt Cathie left her letter and got up. In the bookcase opposite her, on the shelf above the dictionary of the Bible and the published sermons of her father, was a dingy line of school books, with their backs in the condition that would seem to show that they had been much used for the acquiring of knowledge, and it was necessary for the most part to open them in order to find out what they were. The first was a book of physical geography, and it came upon her with the sense of a long forgotten memory that the Amazon was four thousand miles long, while the Thames (the longest river in the British Isles) was only two hundred and thirty-five miles. Indeed, the physical geography seemed to be written in order to belittle the

English nation. Ah—London was the largest town in the world; that was better.

But it was not the physical geography that she was looking for, nor yet the Shorter History of England, nor the Old Testament Maclear, but she found what she sought at last, a thin book with a brown cover, that reminded her of the French governess who was probably a spy. Definite articles *le*, *la*, *les*, indefinite article *un*, *une* (no plural). "The article agrees with the noun in gender and number." She remembered that too, now she read it again. Then further on, "The verb agrees with the subject in number and person"; further on again something terribly difficult about the verbs which conjugate not with *avoir* but with *être*—e.g., "Il est parti pour Paris." She had got certainly as far as that, for she remembered it now.

Aunt Cathie sat down again, with a little flush of excitement, and pushed her letter, with its projected acerbity of tone, aside. What fun it would be to work away quietly at French for a week or two, polishing up and recollecting what no doubt would come back quite easily to her, and then at the end astounding Lucia by the profundity of her knowledge. It must be secretly done, though; the whole point of it would be to let it all burst upon Lucia. Really, there were few days (except on those immediately preceding the alternate Tuesdays) in which she could not snatch half an hour or so from her other occupations and devote them to French. There were only forty-two lessons in Gasc: she could manage one a day, so that before they went to Littlestone she would be firmly grounded in Gasc. Indeed, on many days she might be able to manage more than half an hour: to-day, for instance, she could quite well write that stiff letter to the ironmonger after lunch, when she usually rested, and devote all the time till 11.45 to making the earlier lessons her own again. But Gasc appeared to be in smaller and less legible print than it used to be, and she put on her spectacles.

"Astonish Lucia," she said out loud in her gruffest voice, before plunging into these forgotten intricacies.

Upstairs in the meantime Elizabeth, after lying down on her sofa for half an hour, began to get restless and also hungry, since she had had no breakfast. Moreover she had not read the paper, and she was also burning with practically untamable curiosity to see whether Catherine and Lucia had tried to clear up that fatal fricassee of egg on the dining-room carpet, or had let it dry, to be taken out with ammonia afterward. It would be just like them to scrape it off while still wet, and so make matters really serious. Resting, in fact, soon became impossible, and she stole downstairs without feeling she was running any foolhardy risk of detection, since Catherine would certainly have gone to the writing-room by now, and Lucia would be either in her own room or out in the garden. Also she must have bread and butter at the very

least; what she wanted was an egg beaten up with milk. That was harder of access: bread and butter and milk she could still get from the dining-room. The tea, however, would have been standing too long.

She reached the dining-room undetected, and flew to the egg-stain. She might have guessed it; it was already driven into the carpet by the ill-directed efforts of a zealous hand. The energy with which it had been done seemed to point to Lucia; the clumsiness to Catherine. But bread and butter were still there, milk was still there, and with these she could stay the pangs of her hunger, and appear at lunch in the martyr-guise of one who had not breakfasted. But delay was dangerous, and she left the room again with a cup of milk, and a sufficiency of bread and butter, hoping to regain the privacy of her room without discovery.

Aunt Elizabeth was somewhat near-sighted, and as she crossed the hall again after her predatory visit to the dining-room, she did not observe that at this particular moment Lucia was just about to enter through the glass-door leading from the garden. Indeed, the poor lady was otherwise occupied, for some malignant wandering sprite from the hawthorn which her niece had brought in from her morning's walk suddenly assailed her nose, and she had barely time to set down her cup of milk on the stairs and stifle her face in her handkerchief before she was again shaken by those odious convulsions, and as for the piece of bread and butter she had taken with her, it flew from its plate with incredible violence and pitched (luckily butter upwards) on the landing six stairs higher. Then indeed she glanced hastily at the garden-door and at the door of the writing-room, and she still seemed to be unobserved. Lucia, in fact, had swiftly retreated into the garden again, and had her aunt known, was biting her handkerchief in an agony of suppressed laughter, for the parabola described by the bread and butter was of a legitimately humorous character. Also, she expected developments at lunch.

Elizabeth felt better after her milk and bread and butter, but still very much ill-used. She had had two spasms of hay-fever, egg had been plastered into the dining-room carpet, and Catherine no doubt had taken the morning paper to the writing-room, so that unless she abandoned her rôle of fasting invalid, she would be without employment till lunch, since she had no book of any description in her bedroom. But to her the fact of appearing ill-used was more vital than the inconvenience of feeling so, and since she no longer felt the inclination to close her eyes, she looked out of the window, discreetly hidden behind the fringe of her blind, which she had drawn down. Lucia was in the garden, walking up and down the gravel path, and reading some book. Before long Catherine joined her, with the paper, which Elizabeth so much wanted, in her hand. This she laid down on a garden seat and the two held

consultation over the flower-beds. There was a breeze even in the brick confines that morning, and presently the paper began to stir and flutter. Soon a leaf of it fell on to the lawn.

This was too much; she rang the bell, and lay down on her sofa.

"Jane," she said faintly, when it was answered, "please ask Miss Catherine if she and Miss Lucia have quite finished with the morning paper. If they have quite finished —quite—ask them to be so good as to let you bring it up to me."

"Yes'm," said Jane, "and shall I take the cup and plate away?"

Elizabeth was disconcerted only for a moment.

"Yes," she said. "You should have taken them away at breakfast-time when you did the room. Do not tell me you did not see them; you would, of course, have removed them if you had."

That was adroit; it was really adroit. Also it made her feel as if Jane had indeed forgotten to take them away earlier in the morning and that she herself had magnanimously refrained from finding fault.

She spent a pleasant hour over the paper, and by lunch-time had quite got to feel that she had not breakfasted at all. And she went downstairs, putting one foot and then the other on to each step, weak and tried it is true, but full to the brim of Christian forbearance.

There was hash for lunch, and the weather being very warm, the hash, like the worm that has never yet come under the observation of naturalists, had turned a little. Elizabeth put it from her.

"No doubt one is best without meat in this hot weather," she said faintly, "but with no breakfast either—Catherine, remind me to speak to the butcher. Lucia, love, you would be wise not to attempt the hash. There should be some cold meat in the house."

"There isn't," said Cathie. "Besides, the hash is all right. Stuff and nonsense, Elizabeth."

"You are luckier in the selection of pieces for yourself than in pieces for me," observed Elizabeth. "It is no matter at all. But not having eaten to-day, I looked forward to my lunch."

Lucia looked up at Aunt Cathie. Her face wore an expression of hard indifference, which it was her habit to assume involuntarily, when she was distressed. Aunt Elizabeth's martyred sigh completed Lucia's resolution.

"But I saw you going upstairs about eleven with a cup of milk and some bread and butter, Aunt Elizabeth," she said.

Aunt Elizabeth was exposed and she knew it. She became wonderfully dignified.

“I make no complaints,” she said. “A little pudding, if there is some, and a little bread and cheese are amply sufficient, and will make a meal of which many poor people would be glad.”

CHAPTER IV

It was a very hot afternoon in the beginning of July, rather more than a month later, and Brayton Hall in general appeared to be having a very suitable siesta. All along the south front of the house, which looked towards the garden, the blinds were down, and the veranda, which stretched the whole length of the ground-floor, and was screened from the glare of the day by Indian curtains, contained two very lazy-looking figures. In front of the veranda was a broad walk made of old paving-stones—an adorable material—from between the joints of which sprang tight little cushions of velvety moss, and minute spires of flowering stonecrops. Iceland poppies had been planted there, too, but the heat of the last few weeks had been too much for them, and they looked somewhat pale and anæmic. Beyond, on the same level, was an assembly of small formal flower-beds, with narrow paved paths in between, having for the centre of their system a grey stone fountain, where a somewhat rococo nymph, very suitably clad for this hot weather, poured water from a high-held jug into the basin below. Beyond, again, ran a low balustrade of columns, and a flight of half a dozen steps opposite the fountain led down to the lawn and less formal part of the garden. Just below the terrace the ground had been artificially levelled to give room for a couple of tennis courts, but beyond it fell away towards a lake, an acre or so in extent, half covered with the broad leaves and golden flowers of water-lilies, while on each side it rose upward in gentle undulations, between shrubs and big flower-beds that looked as if they had been allowed to do as they chose for a considerable period, and was gradually brought to a green end in shrubberies. The whole place, as could be seen at the most cursory glance, had been laid out with skill and care, but not less evident were the signs of subsequent neglect. Below the lake the ground again declined rapidly, and in the V-shaped gap between the down on each side could be seen, reeling in the heat mist, the houses and towers of Brixham.

As has been said, an air of suspended animation hung over the place, but soon a big mowing-machine emerged from the trees at the far end of the lawn, and the renewed sound of life in its clicking journeyings roused one of the figures on the veranda, and he rose and put down his coffee-cup with the air of one who means to make a move.

"Well, of course, you shall do as you choose, Charlie," he said, "but I must go in to Brixham. They have had three days of the cricket week already, and I haven't been, and there are calls I must return."

Charlie Lindsay turned a little in his long chair, and yawned quite fully and satisfactorily.

“Clearly, then, you are going only from a sense of duty,” he said, “which does not appeal to me. I have no duties toward Brixham, but as Brixham is your neighbour, I realize that you have. Go forth, then, to conquer and be conquered.”

“What do you mean?”

“You will make a triumphant entry on to the cricket-ground with a terrific back-fire from your motor to call attention to you, and perhaps a tire will burst. The assembled mothers and daughters of Brixham will say to each other: ‘Lord Brayton—how young and how interesting, and wealthy!’ That will be your conquering. Then you will turn from the proud beauties of Brixham and observe, sitting rather apart, a girl of pensive aspect, dressed in blue, with an earnest expression and a folio copy of the Divine Comedy in her hand, which she reads instead of looking at the cricket. You will ask her name, and find she is the daughter of the Dean. So you will be conquered, and that will be another divine comedy. I can’t go on; it’s too hot.”

Lord Brayton seemed neither amused nor ruffled, and stood looking out over the garden. He was scarcely twenty-five years of age, but looked at least five years older, and a guess might be safely hazarded that in mind he was at least thirty, so mature, though in no bald or obese or wrinkled sense, did his face appear. Good-looking he certainly was, but in a rather formal manner: his features were all of the fine, well-finished type which is usually associated—as it was in his case—with a tall well set-up frame. But he looked as if he had quite made up his mind about most things, and would probably be willing to give you the result of his researches. As his cousin spoke he took a cigarette out of a silver box that stood on the table, but next moment put it back without lighting it.

“I think I had one with my coffee,” he remarked.

Charlie laughed.

“There we are again at what we were talking of last night,” he said. “What does it matter if you smoke two cigarettes?”

“It matters in that I should have done what I did not intend to do. I believe it matters almost less whether what you intend to do is a good thing or an indifferent one than not to do it when you have intended it. The latter is a failure in character.”

Charlie Lindsay sat up in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. His quick, excitable voice, that jumped about from note to note, might have led the hearer to expect that alert and youthful face, pleasant and attractive to look at, and vivid but notably unstable. His blue eyes looked quickly here and there, never dwelling long in one place, and his hands had movements as restless as his eyes.

“Well, it would be a failure in character,” he said, “if I ever did what I intended. The key of my character is to do something quite different to what I meant. You get

most fun that way. I mean, for instance—chuck me a cigarette—not to smoke. So I enjoy quantities of stolen pleasures, which are the nicest sort."

Edgar put straight with his toe the corner of the rug which Charlie had ruffled when he sat up. That also was characteristic of them both.

"My dear fellow," he said, "pray don't think I condemn you, when I say that I should condemn myself for doing that sort of thing. I am aware there are many different sorts of people in the world."

"You don't really mean that?" interpolated the other.

"Yes, and it seems to you priggish, does it not? Not that I mind. I was saying that there are many different people in the world, and since character is one of the most unchangeable things there are, one must allow them to act in ways in which one would not think of acting oneself. I should never condemn other people, I think, whatever they did."

"You would if it injured you," said Charlie, "or injured someone you were fond of."

"I am speaking in the abstract, about the principle."

Charlie got up.

"Oh, but that's an impossible way of regarding the world," he said. "The world's material, and though there may be abstract principles behind it, yet they are dealing with Tom, Dick, and Harry, and how our application of a principle affects them. Your principle, for instance, of never condemning other people breaks down as soon as their actions begin to affect you."

Edgar was silent a moment.

"The real difference between us," he said, "is, as you said just now, that by your plan you get most fun. I should hardly have called it a plan at all. You have no settled object in life."

"I don't think one is meant to have a settled object in life till one is forty," said the other. "Till then one ought to experimentalize—try everything."

"With a view to seeing which is the most fun?"

"Exactly, and of doing it ever afterwards. I think it an extremely sound plan. What's yours? No, I needn't ask, I know it already. It is to do your duty and cultivate your mind. Also to cultivate other people's, you know, which I think is rather a liberty. You have no more right to interfere with other people's minds than you have to cut their hair."

Edgar smiled again in a slightly superior manner. In point of fact, he had every right to do so, since he was a little superior.

"There are always two ways in which to put a thing," he said, "the appreciative

and the depreciatory. When you tell me that my object is to do my duty and cultivate my mind, you describe my object quite correctly, but use a phraseology that makes it appear priggish. Personally I do not think it priggish to do one's duty, though it no doubt savours of priggishness to say so like that."

"Sorry; I didn't mean to be offensive."

"You weren't; at least, if you did, it was quite unsuccessful. I never take offence, you see."

Charlie got up with a stifled note of impatience.

"No; I wish you did sometimes. You—you wear armour, you know. I wish you would take it off and pawn it. Yes, that's what's the matter with you. You aren't greedy; you aren't a liar, or lazy, or a drunkard; you don't lose your temper. I don't think you ever want to behave yourself unseemly. Really, when one comes to think of it, I don't know why I like you so much."

Edgar Brayton had quite unconsciously taken a cigarette again, and as unconsciously, while this list of his virtues was being recited, had lit it. His cousin, with secret glee, had observed this, and continued talking volubly in order to keep Edgar's mind occupied till it was finished.

"Perhaps it is because you are so extremely efficient," he said. "You lead such a neat life. Things happen as you intend. Yet I don't believe you get any really keen satisfaction out of any of them. You always get all you want without wanting it very badly, whereas, though most people, on the whole, get what they want, they have to want it very badly first. Finally, I observe with extreme satisfaction that you are half way through your second cigarette after lunch. Thank God you have done what you didn't intend and I needn't go on feverishly jawing any more. I was only keeping your mind occupied."

Brayton did the most consistent thing possible, and threw the rest of it away.

"Brute!" he said without annoyance; "and as you won't come in to Brixham I shall go without you. I shall be back by six, and we can put in an hour's fishing before dinner. I've been here a fortnight, and I haven't been to the river yet. But I really think that I've got through all the business now. It is so much better to do what one has to do first, and what one likes afterwards."

This was a somewhat sententious close, but it appeared to him to be rather liberal than otherwise, and, to save trouble, he walked down the terrace to go to the stables, rather than ring the bell to have the motor sent round. The servants, like himself, had been somewhat overworked during this last fortnight, for, with the sound maxim that it is better to see things done than to give absent orders about them, he had come down a fortnight before to a spidery and disordered house rather than

command the dissolution of spider and the restoration of order from a distance. There had been a great deal to do; and it was creditable that so much had already been done. The house, at any rate, was habitable again after a period of prolonged neglect, during which only a room or two had been used, while the rest had been left for a large staff of servants, spoiled by the want of supervision, to deal with as they chose. They had chosen to deal with it very badly, and Charlie's advice "Sack the lot," had been, on the whole, complied with, though differently phrased. Brayton had, in fact, sacked the lot, but he had sacked them severely, after conviction. Though a clean sweep had been made, the cleaning, so to speak, had been done in bits, and the new household had been worked to the limits of their capacity in restoring the neglect of the old. The garden, however, was still an untackled problem, except in so far as a mowing-machine, as has been seen, had begun to operate upon it. The garden would take another fortnight more in the planning of what should be done, but, the house being finished, Brayton felt that a pause in life was justified.

Brixham, however, remained. He owned a considerable part of what is called the "residential quarter," though, since in a town which boasts no manufacturing industries people reside in every quarter, it is hard to see why one quarter should be more markedly residential than another. Indeed, to look into the matter more closely, the residential quarter is generally that quarter in which fewest people reside, since the houses and gardens there are bigger than elsewhere. In any case it was this quarter he owned, and so, since during this week the garrison was entertaining the residential inhabitants to cricket, tea, and a band, it was incumbent on him, as he said to Charlie, to show himself. In his heart of hearts he was not at all sorry to do so, since the rôle of the young lord in a provincial town was by no means an uninteresting one. He felt the part too; there was no doubt he would do it admirably.

Proprietorship, besides, was a very real and responsible thing to him. Had his worldly possessions consisted only of a canary, he would have done his best, so long as the stress of want did not compel him to sell it, to provide it with suitable food and a clean cage. He would also, without doubt, have striven to make himself known to and appreciated by the yellow bird. But Providence having granted him a larger ownership, he felt it was his duty to behave likewise on the larger scale, and though he did not own the inhabitants of those excellent cages on the hill at Brixham, and had not got to supply them with butcher's meat, he still felt a responsibility toward them. He wanted, in fact, to be an excellent landlord, not only because a good landlord is more likely to have his houses full than an indifferent one, but also since this was one of his duties; and, as his agent had already found out, questions of

drainage and roof-repair were matters with which he desired direct acquaintance. Nor were his projects limited to these material considerations; he wished to know with more than pasteboard civility the more substantial of his tenants, who in their turn, to judge by the acres of calling cards that he had already received, were equally desirous of knowing him. The Firs and the Granges, and the Laburnums and the Hollies, and the Views and the Prospects, had already come in their forests to pay their respects; and in this swift motor-car of his an hour's card-leaving, since without doubt everyone would be at the cricket ground, would pave the way for further interchange. The practice of leaving cards without asking whether the mistress of the house was at home he strongly deprecated, but it was cheering, since he had so many calls to make, to know that it was probable that not anybody would be in.

He drove himself, and though the car was a powerful one, and the three miles of white, straight road between him and Brixham was empty alike of passengers and vehicles, he always checked the throbbing engines when the dial showed by its vibrating finger that he was travelling at the outside of the legal limit; for, since there was a regulation that no car should go faster than that, it was binding on drivers not to exceed such a speed, whether anybody saw them or not. The fact that one was unobserved did not relax the obligation; it would have been as consistent to call oneself an honest citizen because one only stole when nobody happened to be looking.

The breeze made by the movement was pleasant on so hot a day, and pleasant were the thoughts with which his mind entertained itself as he bowled along the straight, empty road. He was full of schemes for a useful and busy future in the large sphere into which he had lately come, and though the responsibilities which to his mind were implied by his wealth and position were immense, the burden, so far from oppressing him, was the cause of a rich and sober exhilaration. Responsibilities really spelled opportunities, duty spelled privilege; and it was with the eagerness of youth, combined with the strength of manhood, that he planned an ever-widening influence. He did not in the least want to preach to those who squandered opportunity and melted wealth into mere excitement and sensuous gratification and so far as that went, the dreadful monosyllable "prig" was no label for him. But though without the desire to preach, he had almost a passion for the practice, which was the outcome of what his sermons would have been, and in so far as that went, since his desire was self-conscious, the label was correct. The couple of years he had spent in the Guards filled him now with regret for wasted time, and though he was too consistent to waste more in regretting them, the regret was a constant spur to him. Not that he had any intention of giving up London and the business of socialities which acts both

as intoxicant and soporific to his mind, stimulating it on the one hand to activity of thought and impression, and drugging it on the other into inactivity of action, but he intended to use its stimulus and discard the drug. He was intensely English in the way that he took such relaxation seriously, even as he played games and hunted seriously for the sake not only of the pleasure they gave him, but of their admirable digestive aids; but he was not insular, and believed that even in Paris there was such a thing as intellectual activity. Nor did he propose, though he was determined to set aside for charitable purposes a quite considerable portion of his wealth, to live an ascetic and penurious life. Beautiful things, objects which educated the senses, giving acumen to the eye and discrimination to the ear, were as real to him as his opportunities and his privileges, and were a right stimulus to the intellectual and artistic activity. It was the card-table, the race-course, the scandalous sofa only that he meant to avoid, both in London and here, where he should pass many months of the year; he would collect round him eager, strenuous people, who longed, like himself, to live a full, fine life, not narrow, not bigoted, but with hands of welcome to all that was worthy. Then for a moment he turned to the practical side of his ideal, as he began to pass between rows of detached houses. How was he to make a beginning? A Shakespeare Society was all that immediately occurred to him, and this somehow was rather an anticlimax. There were, however, more pressingly practical things to do, and for the next half hour he was occupied in taking rather sharp corners into rather narrow carriage drives, and inquiring of neat maid-servants if their mistresses were in. As he had expected, their mistresses were, without exception, out, and his packet of calling cards melted like summer snow.

But one tiny question of etiquette a little perplexed him; among the cards which had been left on him was one inscribed:

THE MISSES GRIMSON.
MISS LUCIA GRIMSON.

Fair View.

He had gone so far as to consult Charlie as to whether it was customary for unmarried ladies to initiate a call on an unmarried man. Charlie had held that they were probably pushing and middle-class, and had advised no notice to be taken, but Brayton had inclined to the view that perhaps this proceeding was provincially correct. Also he thought he remembered the name, though he could attach no distinct association to it, and now the sight of the Misses Grimsons' gate with "In" very clear on the doorpost and "Fair View" in white letters along the top bar, decided him. What if the Misses Grimsons' proceedings were correct or not? It was

a kindly thing of them to have called; it would be a churlish thing on his part not to return their civility. Besides, it was fairly certain that they would be out.

The bell which his chauffeur had rung tinkled itself away into silence again; bees buzzed drowsily from the strip of flower-bed below the windows, on the sill of one of which lay a girlish-looking hat, and from somewhere overhead, in a higher key, came the sound of whistling, clear, soft, but piercing notes, which arrested his attention. The whistler, whoever it was, was whistling the melody from the first movement of Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, and in its way it was a remarkable performance, for both the tone of the notes was of that lazy, flute-like quality which is so exquisite in itself, and, an even rarer merit, the notes were perfectly and absolutely in time. Then the door was opened, and to his inquiry whether Miss Grimson was at home, it appeared that Miss Lucia was.

He was shown into the drawing-room, that temple of worsted work, and while Miss Lucia was being "told," he looked round. It surprised him a little to find how strange a mixture of objects met his eye: heavy early-Victorian furniture was decorated with unspeakable ornaments, all standing on woollen mats; a shiny sofa of American cloth had a long covering of worsted laid over it like a bedspread; a kettle-holder was hung on a brass rail by the fireplace, and a Carlo Dolci engraving smirked on the wall above it. These things were all consistent, part of a whole, yet the other part was so intensely inconsistent. The hat on the window sill, with a big bow of scarlet ribbon, was a most foreign object; on the piano was open a copy of the Symphony of which he had just heard a few bars. Omar Khayyám lay on the bedspread of the sofa, and on a table in the corner, where a cut-glass vase might have been looked for, was a coarse green crockery jug with a great bough of pendulous laburnum in it, where calceolaris were probable.

Then there came a light foot in the passage outside, and Lucia entered. Then he remembered. It was at a dance they had met; she was a friend of—that he could not recollect.

But Lucia gave him no pause to consider.

"How are you, Lord Brayton?" she said, "and how good of you to call! My aunts will be so sorry to have missed you. They have gone to the cricket match. It is Dissipation Week, you know. We all have headaches afterward."

It was all said in the handshake, and, trivial as the words were, Lucia had thought them carefully over as she came downstairs. Indeed, it was partly by virtue of their triviality that they were so admirable; but they were friendly and cordial, and by their very lightness admitted him to her private humorous view of the dissipations. Furthermore, the art was concealed; they appeared quite natural, and yet they

thawed the ice of what she expected him to believe was their first meeting, for she made not the very slightest claim on him to remember that they had met before. She was not even sure that she wished him to remember it.

"This is my first stroke of good fortune this afternoon," he said. "I have paid a dozen calls, but everybody is out."

Lucia, for an infinitesimal part of a second, considered whether she should follow this up, and ask him if he was sure he considered it good fortune. But her common sense instantly rejected such a thing. It would not be exactly fishing for a complimentary speech, but it would be alluding to fishing-rods. Instead, with far greater tact, she answered more simply.

"Yes; all the world is broiling in tents at the cricket," she said. "I have broiled for the last three days, but to-day I said the dissipation headaches had begun. It wasn't true, by the way, but it was lying with a moral purpose."

"And what was the moral purpose?" he asked.

"I wanted to practise," she said, looking across to the piano, "and I wanted to read a book. You will have a cup of tea, will you not? Do let us drink it in the garden, where there is a little shade."

The complete naturalness of her manner made it not even occur to him whether Brixham etiquette allowed him to drink alone with this girl. Besides, he could hardly have done otherwise, she had come down to see him when he called, apparently without the slightest hesitation, whereas if the *tête-à-tête* had been irregular, she would, of course, have said she was not in. Even before he replied, too, she had rung the bell—whether he meant to have tea or not, it was clear that she did. Her manner was merely simple and friendly. It was impossible not to return a similar currency.

"The practising concerned Schubert," he said. "I hope the book was on the same level."

She looked at him with a charming look of surprise, then guessed.

"Ah, it was on the piano," she said.

"No. I knew before."

Again she wrinkled her forehead into a soft frown.

"I give it up," she said.

"You were whistling it."

She nodded at him.

"That is highly likely. You see, I can only whistle when my aunts are out. They think it so unladylike. Sometimes I whistle when they have gone to bed, and always if I am walking alone. I'm afraid I must be unladylike at heart. Isn't it a pity? Oh,

there's that awful cat again on the flower-bed! Might I trouble you to throw a small stone at it? It digs up tender plants all day, and sings songs of triumph all night. Thank you very much. It will now go and meditate evilly in the asparagus for half an hour, and make fresh plans."

Lucia was quite aware she was talking nonsense, and carefully observed him the while. He had thrown the stone with precision, because she had asked him to, but he had thrown it with no more gaiety than he would have exhibited had he given her a chair at her request. And she instantly changed her tone.

"But surely one may be forgiven for whistling Schubert," she said. "He is one of the magical things of the world, is he not? There are so few that are really magic. Venice, I think, must be; Omar Khayyám—that was my book by the way—is; great big *la France* roses are——"

This was far better; he was quickened at this.

"Really, I congratulate you on your selection," he said; "those are certainly all magic. And how completely one piece of magic outweighs all that is not magic. I would cheerfully rain fire and brimstone on to Paris and London and Rome and Florence to save Venice."

Lucia shrugged her shoulders, and spread out her hands with a charming little desolate gesture.

"And I have never seen it," she said. "Isn't it maddening to think that Venice is going on all the time, and that when it is sunset in Venice to-day I shall be looking at that stupid cricket, and hearing that ridiculous band play Strauss waltzes? Tea for you? Sugar? Milk? I am so hungry. And after tea I can anyhow show you a magic *la France*. After all, between Schubert, Omar Khayyám, and the rose, I shall have had a very nice afternoon."

Edgar Brayton did not usually take tea, any more than he smoked two cigarettes after lunch, but he found himself breaking his rule without any sense of fracture, while Lucia entertained him. It was entertainment, too, to watch her, with that fresh, eager face, that charm of vivid girlhood, that entire absence of self-consciousness. There was also something very attractive in her friendliness, her frank avowals of her tastes and pleasures; she showed herself to him with the frankness of a boy showing his room and his books to some new acquaintance. He had till to-day seen nothing of those who would be his neighbours at Brixham, and it struck him (though he was not in the least superstitious) as a good omen that he should open acquaintance with them so pleasantly. Then a train shrieked its way by on the embankment at the bottom of the garden, and interrupted conversation for a moment. But Lucia sat up and looked at it with a smile.

“Ah! and I love that too,” she said. “Isn’t it nice to think of all those carriages full of people, all going to fresh places? *I do* hope they will enjoy themselves. Don’t you?”

This was almost the nonsense-mood again, but it contained more of Lucia than had been given him at first. He thought about his answer before replying.

“I don’t think I do,” he said. “At least, restlessness doesn’t seem to me to be a virtue. Of course, eagerness is, but isn’t it rather shallow that your eagerness should demand fresh places? Why not stop where you are and be eager over a fresh book?”

Lucia leaned forward.

“Oh, go on!” she said. “Tell me all about that. That’s a gospel I long to hear preached.”

Insensibly this flattered him.

“I wish, then, I was a preacher,” he said; “but I am afraid I am not. Only it seems to me that people talk about what they would do if their circumstances were different, and think that altered circumstances would expand and develop them, whereas the expansion and development come from within. People really make themselves; circumstances have very little to do with their making. For instance ——”

He paused a moment, finding himself already committed to a sort of intimacy. He did not find fault with the intimacy; he only wondered what had caused it. Then, with complete honesty, he told himself that two simple people were talking to each other.

“For instance——” suggested Lucia.

“Well, just this. People think that their circumstances make them, that their circumstances bound them. I don’t believe that is true. Brixham, so the Londoner might say, is provincial. That would be because he is provincial himself. But—here am I coming to call, and find Schubert’s Unfinished on the piano and Omar Khayyám on the sofa, and you, Miss Grimson, who find magic in the air and in your roses, and romances in an express train.”

Suddenly he recollected that he was seeing this girl for the first time, and caught and bottled up, so to speak, the natural instinct that dictated his last speech, and became conventional instead. Yet, perhaps, it was almost more natural for him to be conventional than to be natural. That is the case of many people.

“In fact, it is completely true,” he said, “that we find in a place just what we bring to it.”

Lucia observed the distinction between his former manner and this. He had brushed his hair and put on his coat again. She was wise enough to follow his lead,

not wrench him back again. She got up, laughing.

"So that if one feels dull or bored," she said, "one may know that there is a dull or boring person present, and make a very good guess as to who that person is. Do come and see my rose. Aunt Cathie said it was dying a month ago, which roused it. That is so natural, is it not? I am sure when the family doctor tells me I am dying, I shall feel I must show him that he is mistaken. By the way, have you seen Maud Eddis again? She is my greatest friend."

This took the conversation back to Maud, and closely as Lucia had applied herself to it before, she listened even more intently now. Though at the moment of meeting her he had not recollected the connection in which he had seen her before, his memory of Maud was vivid.

"But there is a splendid example of what we were saying," he said. "I never knew anyone with so individual an atmosphere. Can you imagine living in the provinces would ever make her provincial, or living in town would make her worldly?"

"Ah! that is interesting," said Lucia. "And what is her atmosphere?"

"Surely, you who know her so well must know. It is all kindliness: it is all serenity."

Lucia turned to him with enthusiasm.

"Ah! thank you, thank you," she said. "Praise of a friend is like a gift to one, is it not? Of course, I knew what Maud's atmosphere was; I wanted to know if it struck you, too. But those are qualities of character, are they not? I think provincialism affects the intellect more than the soul. Sometimes I wonder whether if Maud was stuck down here—— No, even that is a disloyalty. And here is my *la France*. Is it not superb?"

Lucia had let it be understood that she was going to see the cricket later on, but when Lord Brayton took his departure she refused, with perfectly spontaneous laughter, his offer to take her down to the field in his car.

"Why, Brixham would turn faint and pale," she said, "and my aunts would have a fit each. But it was kind of you to suggest it."

"You must introduce me to them," he said. "Will you be so kind?"

"But charmed," said Lucia. "Good-bye, Lord Brayton; *au revoir*, rather."

She saw him off at the door, professing an interest, not feigned, in the motor, and turned back into the house again.

"As it is, Brixham will turn green," she observed to herself.

CHAPTER V

During this last month Aunt Cathie had been all that is connoted by that immense word "happy." When Lucia had come to live with her aunts a year ago, Aunt Catherine began to want, though never to get, but during this last month she had continued to want and had reaped a wonderful harvest. Lucia, of course, had been the sun and wheat of her harvesting, and the crop, as Aunt Cathie reaped it, had never ceased to grow and ripen, fresh shoots rising continually from the ground over which her sickle had passed, rising and growing tall and swelling with grain in a sort of celestial profusion unknown to naturalists.

Before the beginning of the halcyon month which dated accurately from the night when Lucia had lit all her candles in the room under the eaves, and called herself to account for what she had done, and what she had left undone, Aunt Cathie had grown almost resigned—not quite, because nobody ever gets quite resigned to anything he desires—to the non-fulfilment of her dreams. She had hoped so much for Lucia's arrival, had told herself that with this young girl in the house some aftermath of youth, anyhow, would gild its grey fields; that, as in a glass at least, she would enjoy the reflection of sunlit pictures even though the actual sun had long ago set for her. Then followed a year of disenchantment; it was as if some curse had been on them, so that instead of the house and the elderly sisters growing young, Lucia had grown old, had lost her spring, her pleasure, her elasticity. But a month ago all had changed.

Lucia became sunny, became young, became busy—such, at least, was the natural inference. Aunt Cathie, led by her, became so busy also that she had literally no time to think how busy she was, else she would surely have felt giddy, and perhaps taken sal-volatile. Always before she had felt (especially in July) that she was being driven, and that if she was not going out to tea to-day, she was sure to be doing so the day after to-morrow, and had no time to herself. But now, not only, in spite of the menacing imminence of the alternate Tuesdays, did girls come in after lunch, and stayed to tea, and talked French or sketched or played duets, but Aunt Cathie herself took part in these delirious entertainments. She had on hand at the present day a majestic water-colour sketch of the railway embankment seen over the pear-trees, with a perfect sunset of colour on the right to portray the blaze of the flower-bed, and hardly, so to speak, had she sat down to put in more of the pear-tree touch, than Miss Wilson arrived from the Close, to talk French with Lucia. Aunt Cathie herself rarely ventured on a vocal exhibition of that elusive tongue, but she understood quite three-quarters of what the two girls said, and sometimes put in a

parfaitement in quite the right place. Then almost before she had recovered from the shock of understanding so much French, Miss Majendie would arrive for duets, and here Aunt Cathie was again in request, and stood beside the piano, beating time with a paper knife, since Lucia and Miss Majendie did not always agree as to the beginnings of bars. They were learning Tschaikowsky's "Pathetique" for four hands, and here Aunt Cathie had a much-needed rest in the middle, since, when Mr. Tschaikowsky chose (as no doubt he had a perfect right to do) to compose music with five crotchets in the bar, it was really impossible to follow him, not to say conduct him; and as Cathie sometimes beat six, but oftener four, it had been arranged that the five-four time should be unbeaten since it was unbeatable.

Faint signs of returning animation could also be seen by the careful observer in the conduct of Aunt Elizabeth. She had learned a new stitch, and she was learning a new patience. Otherwise, she was much the same, and still extremely difficult.

Lucia had followed Lord Brayton on foot to the cricket ground, and so busy were her thoughts that she noticed neither the heat of the day nor the dust of the road. A month ago she had made some careful plans, and the careful plans were, and had been, rewarded in a manner that it was profane not to consider providential. She had had only to bestir herself and beckon, and lo, as in the vision of Ezekiel, the dry bones of Brixham began to rattle and come together, and if it was not an exceeding great army that stood up, certainly the officers in the garrison, and the houses in the Close, and the inhabitants of the Hollies and the Laburnums and the Cedars and the Fig-trees, instantly showed that they were not thistles. She met Miss Wilson at a garden party, and instead of putting her nose in the air and talking about her fortnight in London, put her nose down and talked about the coming month at Brixham. They were, if not friends, French acquaintances, and determined to meet once a week and talk no English at all. The effect was that Marjory Wilson fell in love with Lucia, and if, on a particular Wednesday they were not talking French at Fair View, it was because they were talking English at The Deanery. Similarly, Nellie Majendie, the daughter of the colonel of the regiment, took Lucia to her musical bosom, and wondered how it were possible that Lucia had been in the town for a whole year without their making friends. Then again Lucia had sent to intimate to Helen Vereker that all she really cared about was flowers, the names of which, by the aid of an old gardening manual, she learned with extraordinary speed, and morning by morning Miss Vereker used to arrive with a small basket of plants, which had homes made for them in the flower-beds before the sun came on to them, or Miss Wilson arrived to talk French. On such occasions Aunt Cathie took her part,

and stood by like a grenadier with a watering pot in her hand, until Miss Vereker said, "Now, please, Miss Grimson, will you pour it freely and then stamp it down, and then pour on a little more, while Lucia and I put in this salvia. Lucia, darling, you must plant that yourself. It is simply beautiful, not red, like the ordinary autumn salvia, but golden, just the colour of your hair!"

And then the two girls would move on to the next vacant space in the flower-bed, and bend over it with trowel and shrinking from worms, and secret whispers would pass, which poor Aunt Cathie longed to hear. But for her it was exciting just to "water freely," and tread down with her large firm feet, and be ready for further orders.

Like all girls, Lucia's friendships at this period of her life were with girls. That they talked over the youngest officers of the garrison, and the sons of the Laburnums, and the Fig-trees, and a remarkably interesting curate of St. Faith's, who wore a rope round his chest for purposes of mortification of his flesh, was not to be denied. Miss Wilson's brother had been to bathe with him, and had seen him take it off, before entering the water with a loud, flat splash, and the strands of it made red marks on his skin. He had put it on again after leaving the water, and had gone straight to a tennis party at the Hollies, where he had played with extraordinary skill, and had said a number of tender things to Miss Wilson between the sets. Her brother had already told her about this sensational fact of the rope, and it showed that he must be thinking a good deal about her if he could be so detached from himself while privately suffering agonies. She thought he meant something, but she wasn't sure, and what would Lucia do? He was the younger son of a baronet, but the elder brother was unmarried, and he really had the most delightful eyes. Also, he made smashes at the net which were extraordinary considering the rope. Or did he make it more slack before tennis parties? Archie thought not.

But Archie and Tommy and Dicky and Harry had interested Lucia very little. She had no use for them, and she cared not at all for what was useless. At the same time, she kept everything, so to speak, until its uselessness was proved. It was possible, by means of the girls with whom she played duets and talked French and planted salvias, that something might come her way. But their brothers were perfectly futile; the only thing that might come her way, *via* them, was marriage with them, and for that she had no mind. The younger son of an impecunious baronet—she looked him up in Debrett—was the best of the bunch, but it really could not even be called a bunch. As far as she was concerned it was a concourse of fortuitous atoms. But from her point of view, though she neglected, or rather never thought of neglecting, the brothers, she made friends with the sisters. With an acuteness that did her credit,

or at any rate did justifiable discredit to the world, she saw that the lower rungs of the ladder by which a climber means to mount are made of the sex of the climber.

Up to a certain age girls will help the climbing girl, in a way that young men cannot unless among them is contained the young man she wishes to marry. And throughout the length and breadth of Brixham she had till to-day seen no young man whom she ever so faintly contemplated in this light. She felt certain that if she was to make herself, to emerge, she must first make friends with the girls round her. She might, perhaps, "climb out" on them. Now who could "climb out" anywhere on the shoulders of the younger son of a baronet, or on Claude Wilson's shoulders, who hoped some time to be a partner in a solicitor's office, or on the shoulders of Harry Majendie, who, if all went well, and since he had interest, might be an Archdeacon before he died?

But the climber cannot have too many friends of her own sex. Something may happen to them; they may emerge into a bigger life, where the men of a country-town cannot emerge. Also, being a friend of a girl, she could get asked to what is known as the "county." Very likely Harry Majendie knew the son of someone who was county. But he could not sue for an invitation for Lucia. But Nellie Majendie could (and would) certainly ask the daughter of the county that her dear friend Lucia might come to the fireworks. And fireworks would lead to lunch. There was the avenue. But males at present were no kind of use to her. At least she had not, up till now, come across the male who could be. And Lucia was extremely practical.

It was the consciousness of which these thoughts formed background and groundwork that made her walk to the cricket-ground seem short. She could not long resist the impulse of her imagination to leap forward, but before permitting that she wished to think over, and perhaps look down on, the rungs of the ladder which she had already traversed. Yes; it had been successfully done, and decidedly she had enjoyed herself more in this past month, and had become of greater importance in this microscopic world than ever before. So little effort had really been needed, and it quite pleased her to think that others as well as herself had been the happier for her exertions. And the greatest beneficiary was Aunt Cathie, on whom Lucia almost looked with tenderness sometimes. The old dear required so little; to be allowed to beat time, to show her new stippling touches, to put in a occasionally gruff *parfaitement*, meant so much to her, while to have Aunt Cathie in this mood reacted again, and meant something to Lucia. Fair View, even when they were quite alone, had been so much less boring. After dinner, for instance, instead of Aunt Cathie nodding in a chair, while Lucia herself watched with suppressed yawns the hopeless efforts made by Aunt Elizabeth to defeat Demon, and made perfunctory replies to

her occasional asperities, Aunt Cathie had her "Gasc" or her "Fou Yégof" open before her, and was not disturbed by Lucia's practising of difficult passages in view of to-morrow's music. Sometimes she even helped Aunt Elizabeth with her dreary employment, but, to be frank, she did not receive much encouragement in this regard, and so did not often come to the rescue. Her efforts and exertions in any case were productive of greater happiness to others as well as herself, and she did not in the least grudge it them. Indeed, she began dimly to see that it "paid" to put people in a good humour, and since every paying concern had her sympathy, she continued to invest her time and her efforts in doing so. The effect, too, was to add to the estimate of her own charm and amiability.

So the retrospect of the last month being satisfactory, and showing a handsome profit, to use a financial term which very well expressed Lucia's view, she let go, so to speak, of the past, and just laid before her mind the new factor. It had come like some sudden unconjectured comet into her horizon, and at present she knew nothing of its orbit, but it was large and bright, and seemed, during the survey she had had of it, to be getting quickly nearer. She did not in the least credit Edgar Brayton with the discernment and good sense necessary to fall in love with her at first sight, but she knew quite well that he had felt her to be attractive. On the other hand, what he had said about Maud clearly showed that he had a great admiration for her, while Lucia knew what her friend thought about him. That was the bald statement of the case.

Lucia had come to the path which led by a short cut to the cricket field, and she left the hot, dusty road to stroll quietly down this, while she thought with great intentness. She knew that she must act in one way or in another way, and she had to choose.

If she decided one way she would firmly and unerringly, though with all the tact in her possession, chase him, run him down, grab him, or do her best in that line (and she rightly felt capable of a good deal). On the other hand, Maud was her greatest friend, and Maud had confided that she was in love with him. And she stood quite still for about three seconds.

From the next field came the sunny sounds of the band, and through the railings she could see the many-coloured crowd. From behind her came the clip-clop of horses' hoofs on the road she had left, and the whirring buzz of motors. The sun was westerly, and spread a golden haze over the brownish-green of the scorched fields where swallows were flying low. All this she saw with photographic distinctness, and it seemed to her that during those three seconds her mind was empty. It was not

really so, it was only that her mind had dived deep, leaving the surface of itself automatically conscious. Then out of her apparently empty mind there suddenly came a couple of thoughts that had the distinctness of spoken words. Indeed, she repeated them aloud.

"It is not in my hands. If he falls in love with me, it will be a thing outside my power. Besides, Maud would not wish to stand in my way. It would be selfish of her, and I am wronging her to think that she could be that; she means her friendship to help and not hinder me."

And Lucia went on again with her quick springy tread, looking her very best. But she had taken a step, and knew it. The knowledge perhaps helped her toward looking her best.

The field was full, for, as Mrs. Wilson remarked more than once to Margery after a magisterial survey of the occupants of the two rows of chairs that stretched completely round the ground, "all Brixham seems to be here." It was at the moment that she made this discovery for the fourth time that Edgar Brayton entered by the carriage road, and it might have been observed that Mrs. Wilson, Mrs. Vereker, and Mrs. Majendie all got up with a glance at their respective daughters, who followed them like lambs to the pasture rather than the slaughter, and made their way to the refreshment tent, which was so near to the place at which motors drew up that the ices tasted faintly but unmistakably of petrol.

There the three lambs, led by their respective mothers, met and entered into intimate converse together, while the mothers kept, so to speak, a weather-eye on the tent door by which it was hoped that Lord Brayton would presently enter to have tea. Little did they know where and with whom he had already had it.

Mrs. Wilson had remarkably good sight, and was noted for having quite lately written out the Lord's Prayer on a piece of paper that was the size of a three-penny bit. It was no wonder, then, that it was she who, through the open tent door, perceived Lord Brayton on the other side of the ground, and knew that for the present all three, or all six of them, had been foiled and baffled. She had excellent manners, and though naturally eager to be off again, listened without the slightest show of impatience to Mrs. Majendie's account of the Handel Festival, to which she had taken Nellie, and of which she had to describe "the gloriousness" at length. Not till Mrs. Majendie had quite finished (or till Mrs. Wilson really thought she had) did she tell Margery that they were missing all the cricket, and had better go back to their seats again. Whether Mrs. Majendie and Mrs. Vereker suspected something, and were determined not to lose sight of her, or whether on their own account they felt that it was hopeless to linger longer among the petrol-ices, is uncertain—their

motives were probably mixed—but they both exclaimed that they too felt that they were missing all the cricket, and accompanied Mrs. Wilson.

Lord Brayton had soon become visible to them all, and they quickened their pace a little. He had found an empty seat behind the Colonel's wife, to whom he was talking, while only two chairs removed from him were the elder Misses Grimson. It was natural that the Colonel's wife should introduce him, and he moved up next to Miss Cathie. This looked very like invidiousness (a quality which Mrs. Wilson particularly detested) on Miss Cathie's part, though the absence of Margery's friend, that far too attractive niece, made the invidiousness less black than it would otherwise have been.

The circuit of the cricket-field was large, the day was hot, and very soon the mothers were hot too. But maternal duty impelled them to go round to the other side of the ground, where, as Mrs. Vereker said, you get so much better a view of the play, and the procession went briskly on, the mothers walking before, the daughters following after; Mrs. Vereker continued her account of the performance of "Israel in Egypt" to a distracted audience, while the three daughters talked about the subject of their walk.

"He is laughing at something Miss Cathie has said," remarked Margery. "I wonder where Lucia is; she has met him before, you know."

"And didn't he fall in love with her at once?" said the loyal Nellie.

"Lucia didn't mention it!"

Mrs. Majendie turned round and pointed with her bangled arm to the pitch.

"Look, what a beautiful cut, Nellie!" she said, "or was it a pull? It's four runs, anyhow. No, it isn't. How quickly they pick it up and throw it!"

"Yes, mother," said Nellie. "Oh, Helen, I do hope Lord Brayton will fall in love with her. I think he must."

Margery put in her word.

"Lucia is so unselfish," she said. "She probably hasn't come this afternoon because she is making a hat for Miss Elizabeth. She is too sweet to both her aunts. I should be simply fiendish if I had to live all alone with them."

This, again, was the fruit of Lucia's thoroughness. Her month's effort had been perfectly done: she gave the impression of entire sweetness and amiability. But the panegyric was cut short.

"There she is," said Helen Vereker.

Lucia had a favourable moment for her entrance. The ball after that which had produced the beautiful cut had taken a wicket, and in the pause people looked about them. At that moment she came into the field from the footpath, looked brilliantly

about her, and caught sight of her aunts. She gave a little smile of recognition to Lord Brayton, and with brazen impudence sat down in the vacant chair beside him. The baffled procession paused for a moment, then went bravely on and took the nearest seats they could find. But they were three whole rows off. Luckily, however, the innings would probably soon come to an end, when there would be a general resorting of seats, and Mrs. Majendie tried to remember if there were eleven a side or fifteen. The same doubt had occurred to Mrs. Vereker, and they had a little argument about it.

Lucia, meantime, was unconscious of the enormity of her crime in taking the chair next Lord Brayton, for though it was difficult to see how a party of six could have sat on it, all three mothers considered that they and theirs had been positively defrauded. But her quick, lucid brain was somewhat acutely occupied with a little difficulty in which she had possibly landed herself. For it had been she who had taken the original step of calling on Lord Brayton, or, to be more completely accurate, had thrust the card engraved with her aunts' names and her own into the hands of a footman, and had instantly retreated again on her bicycle. She had known at the time the irregularity of such a proceeding, and had done it quite deliberately, simply because she wished and intended to renew her acquaintance with Lord Brayton. Her plan, however, as she saw now, had not been sufficiently thought out, for she had anticipated only that he would ask them to garden parties or something of the kind, and had quite overlooked the fact that he would most probably return the call. And now that she found him sitting by her aunts, he would probably—if, indeed, he had not already done so—mention to them that he had taken tea at their house. After that a little consideration would certainly make Aunt Elizabeth wonder at the unusualness of a man newly come to the place calling on three maiden ladies, who, as far as she was aware, had not called on him. Aunt Elizabeth might not see that at once, but in a day or two she was almost certain to do so, for it was eminently characteristic of her, so Lucia thought, to make disagreeable discoveries after a little interval, during which others imagined she had forgotten all about the occurrence. But even while she glanced quickly through these possibilities, the blow fell in a smarter and more unexpected manner than she had anticipated.

"I was so sorry," said Lord Brayton to Aunt Cathie, "that I was out when you called. But I have been so very busy this last fortnight that I have seen nobody but my agent."

Luckily, Aunt Elizabeth was the other side of Aunt Cathie, and though she would indignantly have denied the imputation, the fact was that she was a little deaf. Aunt

Cathie, however, turned to Lord Brayton in scarcely concealed surprise, when she saw Lucia looking at her with entreaty, and nodding gently at her. Aunt Cathie was not remarkably quick at taking hints, but there was no mistaking Lucia's look.

"You must have been driven," she said. "But what a good thing Lucia was in to-day! We are lucky to have such fine weather, are we not?"

That certainly was a safer topic; Aunt Cathie had changed the subject with a wrench, it might be, but changed it she had, and Lucia was grateful, for the greater danger of Aunt Elizabeth knowing was for the time averted. But after what had happened it was clear she must make Aunt Cathie her confidante. She thought that she could see her way through that.

Her opportunity occurred after they got back from the match. Elizabeth instantly went upstairs to lie down after the excitement, but the other two went out into the garden to see how things were looking "against," as Aunt Cathie put it, "the first alternate Tuesday." She also was bursting to know what Lucia's signal had meant, but as soon as they were alone Lucia opened the subject herself, knowing well that an unasked confidence is more highly prized than one that is asked for. Aunt Cathie, she felt sure, would ask about it, unless she herself took the initiative. Nor did she intend to fall into the further mistake of inventing palliatives for what she had done. She wanted help, and knew quite well that help is given most readily to those who are abject. She prepared to be abject. She guessed, too, very well how tenderly (and how queerly) Aunt Cathie loved her, and how eager she was for intimacy. So she meant to make the most of that.

"Aunt Cathie," she said, "I've done something quite awful and disgraceful, and I want to tell you about it. May I?"

Cathie's heart gave a little leap, and a sudden colour came into her cheeks. She almost hoped that what Lucia had to tell her was very bad indeed: it would add preciousness to her confidence. Her emotion made her more than usually brusque.

"Well, get on then," she said.

"I tell you, Aunt Cathie," said Lucia, "because I believe you are my friend, and would like to help me."

The pathetic old face grew more eager, and Aunt Cathie laid her hand on Lucia's arm.

"Yes, dear," she said.

"Well, look away: I can't look you in the face. What I have done is this. I went to Brayton Hall, without telling either you or Aunt Elizabeth, and left your cards. I did it because I wanted us to know Lord Brayton. I like that sort of house: I want to be asked to it. I didn't mean to tell you, and I only do so because I was in a

difficulty, as you saw, to-day, and was afraid that you would say something awful to Lord Brayton. Oh, and I thank you very much for getting me out of that difficulty. It was dear of you."

The speech did not fall short of perfection. There was an entire frankness about it, an absence of concealment, which went straight to Aunt Cathie's heart. It was so well planned that it seemed almost brutally natural, and the confession that Lucia would not have told her had it not been for fear of worse consequences was the most subtle part of it. It was wounding, but of the nature of a surgical wound that implies restoration. And the speech was completely successful.

Cathie's first and almost overwhelming impulse was to kiss Lucia. But there was an even kinder thing to do than that. She did it.

"Don't know London," she said, "but perhaps in London it's usual for a lady to call."

Again Lucia's instinct served her.

"No, dear Aunt Cathie," she said, "it would be quite as unheard of there as here."

Then the first impulse became quite overwhelming. Aunt Cathie drew Lucia's head down, and kissed her firmly.

"Tell me anything next time," she said, "before you're in a mess. Worse it is the better I shall like it. You don't know what it means to me. I'm an old fool, I suppose. Now what's to be done? Elizabeth will wonder why he called; about Saturday. You and I must make a plan. Just you and I. Our secret."

"You dear," said Lucia softly.

Aunt Cathie gave a loud sniff, and stepped on an earwig.

"Well, make a plan, Lucia," she said in a voice that trembled. "I can't do all the thinking. Let's talk it out. To-day is Thursday, is it not?—Elizabeth will say it's so odd he called about Saturday. Then she'll suspect that I left cards on him first, because she has often told me I'm pushing. Ha, we've got it now. I shall tell her I have called."

"Oh, Aunt Cathie, that is good of you," said Lucia. "But won't you mind?"

"Mind what? Telling a fib? Not a bit."

She put up her glasses and gazed severely at a passing train.

"I shall like it, Lucia," she said harshly, "if it pleases you. Now let's have no more of it. Look, the sweet-peas are really beginning to come out."

"But you're a dear," said Lucia again.

"Stuff and nonsense," said Aunt Cathie firmly.

Two days later, confirming the accuracy of Catherine's conjecture, Elizabeth

began to wonder audibly. She was employed on the new patience at the time, which gave her an adventitious aid in dialogue, since she could be absorbed in the game whenever she did not wish to answer, and make her own remarks whenever she thought of them. It is only fair, however, to add that the crisis was precipitated by Catherine. She shut up "Le Fou Yégof" with a snap, having got to the end of a chapter.

"I'm thinking of sending a card for our Tuesday to Lord Brayton, Elizabeth," she said.

"Red ten or black knave," said Elizabeth, trying to think of something sarcastic. Then she was brilliant, pausing with the red ten in her hand.

"The King is to be at the cattle-show that day," she said. "You will no doubt send him an invitation too. And black nine."

"Must be civil," said Aunt Cathie. "He called here, and had tea."

Lucia shut up the piano, but in closing it the lid slipped from her fingers and fell with a crash that set all the strings jarring. Aunt Elizabeth put her hand to her head, and drew in her breath in a hissing manner.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Lucia.

"Never mind," said Aunt Elizabeth faintly. "You couldn't have told my head was so bad, dear, as I have made no complaint. Red eight; but I can't get at it."

There was a long silence, broken by an occasional sigh from Aunt Elizabeth. Then she spoke again.

"No doubt times are changed," she said, "but it is not so long ago when if a young man, be he plain Mr. Smith or a Duke, came and had tea alone with a girl in a garden, we shouldn't have liked to express our opinion about it. So I express no opinion now. But I suppose I have a right as to my feelings on the subject, though I keep them to myself."

"Stuff," said Aunt Catherine in a low voice, really not meaning Elizabeth to hear. But perhaps the shock to the aural nerve caused by the crash of the piano-lid had stimulated it, and she did hear.

"It may or may not be stuff," she said in almost a whisper, "though I am not aware to what stuff you allude, but I repeat that as long as I do not give vent to my feelings they concern nobody but myself. And with regard to sending Lord Brayton a card, I am aware that you intend to do so, Catherine, if you have not already done so, and I merely wish to say that if people go about calling us pushing and forward, I will take my share of the scandal, as if it had been I who urged you to invite him. Whatever you do, Catherine, you may remember that you have got a sister who would never turn her back upon you. And the red eight comes down."

This tender assurance served only to exasperate Aunt Catherine. She had heard that sort of thing before and knew what it meant, for it always portended some attack on Elizabeth's part.

"But we always send cards to all our calling list," she said. "And as he has called, he is on our calling list."

"Then if murderers and forgers left their cards, should we have the pleasure of seeing them on our Tuesdays?" asked Elizabeth.

"But Lord Brayton isn't a murderer or a forger," said Catherine.

Elizabeth gathered up the cards with a trembling hand, for it was clear that no further progress could be made.

"I cannot play my game if you insist on arguing with me," she said, "but it is not of the slightest importance, though the situation was interesting. Even if Lord Brayton is not a murderer or a forger, I do not know that he is the sort of young man whom our mother, Catherine, would have liked to have in the house. I am aware"—and Elizabeth put her handkerchief to her mouth, and spoke through it—"I am aware that I am old-fashioned, but I do not know that I wish to change the best feelings in my nature, and when a young man deliberately comes and calls and has tea without having been asked or called upon, I feel that he is not the sort of young man to encourage. Such a thing was not done in our mother's day, Catherine, and I do not think our own days are better in that we do those things now. Whether it showed true delicacy in Lucia to give him tea and sit and talk to him is, of course, a matter for her to settle, just as asking him to our Tuesdays is a matter for you to settle, and I am aware that my wishes on the subject will be disregarded."

"Very well, then, I won't ask him," said Catherine.

Elizabeth removed her handkerchief.

"I am, of course, assuming that Lord Brayton made the call on his own initiative," she said. "But from time to time a doubt has crossed my mind which I have steadily put away from me."

"What doubt?" said Catherine.

Elizabeth closed her eyes and folded her hands.

"As to whether he could have done so extraordinary a thing," she said faintly. "I may be wronging you, Catherine, and I hope I am, but you will set my mind at rest if you tell me that you had not previously called on him."

"I called on him last week," said Catherine, with a sudden and stony glance of triumph at Lucia.

Elizabeth pressed her fingers over her closed eyelids, and breathed rather quickly.

“Don’t be foolish, Elizabeth,” said her sister. “We used to go there in the old days, and I should like to go there again. You would like to go there, too, only you won’t say so.”

“I am foolish, no doubt,” said Elizabeth with sudden asperity, “and I am content to be so. I wish to ask if Lucia accompanied you on this unmaidenly expedition. Poor Lord Brayton, I pity him, if he is to be at the beck and call of all the pestering people in Brixham.”

Lucia had a sudden impulse of kindness. She almost said that it was she who had been, and not Aunt Catherine. But her common sense came to her aid; to do that would only fix falsehoods on Aunt Catherine.

“Lucia knew nothing about it,” said Cathie, rather appalled to find how finely and easily she lied.

Aunt Elizabeth rose and tottered to the door.

“It is past my bedtime,” she said. “Do not wish me a good-night, Catherine, nor you, Lucia. It would be but a hollow mockery.”

Aunt Cathie sat silent a moment or two. Then suddenly she mopped her eyes.

“Poor old Elizabeth!” she said. “She doesn’t mean half what she says, Lucia, so don’t—don’t be distressed. And she knows she doesn’t mean it, poor Elizabeth. It’s awful when you feel you can’t help acting in a way you don’t really want to. It’s the matter with lots of old maids. Get a touch of it myself. Change the subject.”

Ah, but how strong a touch of it she hid in those words! The desire of her soul was vastly different to the message of her voice, for she longed, longed that Lucia should just come across to her, and kiss her, or hold her hand, or even only pointedly change the subject, so that Aunt Cathie could see that she changed it in accordance with her wish. Instead Lucia changed the subject with perfect naturalness, and said she would go to bed also, as it was past ten.

CHAPTER VI

The annual visit to Littlestone had been postponed this year, for there was an eminently desirable tenant who wished to take Fair View for the month of September. It was therefore only reasonable to go to Littlestone in September, while Fair View would be occupied, and spend August in Brixham, though August was a month when Brixham was not at its best, since it resembled nothing so much as a hot-house in which were grown plants that smelled of dust. But Lucia had quietly got her own way on this point, so quietly, indeed, that both Aunt Cathie and Aunt Elizabeth thought that they were the originators of the scheme, though the scheme implied a total upset of all the habits of years. For longer than either of them chose to remember, August had been spent at Sea View Cottage, and to spend September there instead seemed subversive of phenomena as established as the fact that the sun rose in the morning. But by the middle of August they both claimed the authorship of the new scheme, and wondered how Lucia could ever have thought that they were going to Littlestone in August, since they had a desirable tenant for the house in September, while, as a matter of fact, Lucia had thought of it all, and quietly brought it to pass.

She had excellent reasons for her plan, apart from this question of tenancy, which was sufficient for her aunts. For Lord Brayton was going to be at home all August, and was going to Scotland in September, while Maud Eddis was engaged all August, but wanted to come and stay with Lucia during the later month. She had further ascertained that there was a spare bedroom at Sea View, and that Maud would be a welcome guest. These considerations, however, were not submitted to her aunts, and the question was decided on the grounds of the tenant, about which Lucia cared very little, and thus, though the plan seemed simple and sensible enough, it was not for its superficial sensibleness that she had brought it to pass, but for private reasons of her own. For Brixham would be very empty during August, and she wanted Edgar Brayton to feel dull. Following out his own plan, he had been extremely neighbourly with his county town, and she wished him to find few with whom it was possible to be neighbourly for a few weeks. He had come to both the alternate Tuesdays in July, and had continued to be growingly attentive to her. She wanted to give him the opportunity of making up his mind during a month when he would have few distractions. And in particular she did not want him, after what he had said, to have the distraction of Maud. She wished for his undivided attention.

At the present moment, at any rate, she was getting it. He had come to lunch, since she had ascertained that he had business in Brixham that would occupy him till

a quarter to two, and she had received him with a charming "frolic welcome."

"Aunt Elizabeth isn't in," she had said; "but there is cold lamb and Aunt Cathie and me. Or is it I? And I bought a box of cigarettes and you should have seen the tobacconist in the High Street stare at me, as if I had committed some unspeakable crime in asking for them. I suppose he thought I was going to smoke them myself. Oh, and thank you so much for the first edition of Omar you lent me. Lots of the lines are different in the later edition, and I don't think they are improvements generally, do you? No, don't put your hat down on the gong, please. Have you ever had lunch in so small a house?"

Lunch had been more than successful. Lucia had broken up the lettuce for the salad with her hands, explaining that to touch it with a knife made it taste steely, and had made coffee for him afterward in the Turkish fashion. There had been no pudding, for she distrusted, from experience, the pastry of the godly Mrs. Inglis, but he had eaten eggs in aspic, cold lamb and salad, biscuits and cheese, and some late cherries gathered from the garden, followed by coffee. Lucia, in fact, had gauged him with a supreme accuracy; she knew that the food was simple and excellent, and knew that he would be pleased at its excellence, and pride himself on his own appreciation of the spirit that directed its simplicity. He would lunch well, and be delighted at his own good taste in liking the absence of parade. For he had lunched, as Lucia knew, being a guest, with Mrs. Wilson, who had covered many dishes with brown sauce; and he had lunched, as Lucia knew, being a guest, with Mrs. Vereker, where there was corked champagne disguised as "cup" in a thick sort of stew of strawberries and angelica, but corked to all eternity; and he had lunched with Mrs. Majendie on flabby salmon and advanced quail. She had been a guest there, too, and saw how obvious it was that the maid-servants were not accustomed to handling dishes that were ordinarily dispensed from the table. But here Aunt Cathie gave him an excellent egg, and Lucia gave him a piece of cold lamb, having made the salad during egg-time, and he helped himself to cheese from the sideboard, and put his cherry stones on to his other plate. It was all simple and calculated, instead of being pompous and unusual. How pompous and unusual, also, had been the conversation at those other depressing banquets! Mrs. Wilson had clung to the Court Circular as to a lifebuoy, and had shown an amazing knowledge of the movements of the Royal Family; Mrs. Vereker had at her fingers' ends the names of those who might be found at Homburg and Marienbad, just as if she had been learning by heart pages of the *World*; while Mrs. Majendie, with higher flight, knowing he was musical, again discussed the Handel Festival and knew facts about Schubert which would have been most reliable if had not got him mixed up with Schumann. Lucia, on the other

hand, profiting by these failures, did quite differently. She talked about the difficulty of growing broad beans in a very small garden, and wondered whether they were of nervous constitution, and were disturbed by the passing trains; praised Canterbury bells for growing anywhere with equanimity, and let out casually, as if by accident, that she had set herself to learn "Hamlet" by heart as a holiday task. She had taken his measure exactly.

Before this date Aunt Catherine had got "an idea." She felt quite sure that beneath her very own eyes, and in her very own house, there was going on what she would have called a courtship. She could see—though, of course, Lucia, dear child! was utterly unconscious of it—how immensely attracted Lord Brayton was by her, and with a heroic sacrifice of her own inclinations, since every word, every look, that passed between the two was a matter of the intensest interest to her, she proceeded after lunch to leave them alone in the veranda, in the most natural manner possible, and go down to the kitchen garden to see about the broad beans which had entered into the conversation at lunch. It was a bad excuse, for she knew that Johnson had "seen about" them last week, and had torn them up by the roots, as they were mere cumberers of the ground. But she trusted that Lucia did not remember that.

For a few minutes after they had gone out he was alone, for Lucia went in to fetch the matches, and he looked round, in strong appreciation of his surroundings, and in perceptible appreciation of himself in appreciating them. Small and simple as was the house and garden, there was a refinement and exquisiteness about it that shone through the woolwork of Aunt Elizabeth, as X rays shine through otherwise opaque substances, and he knew well from whom that emanated. He had lunched in a small villa, only just detached, with a strip of a garden, in an intensely suburban town, but instead of the tedium of forced conversation and pompous display there were culture, humour, naturalness. There was, too, the presence of this girl, a Titian translated into the paler hues of Saxon blood, with golden hair instead of red, but with all the fire and strength of the South. But in this moment's pause, while he was alone, he could not help being gratified at his own perception; where others might only have seen a detached villa and a railway embankment, he saw the courage and the culture that turned them into a house in which he felt at home. With equally fine perceptions also he saw through the rugged brusqueness of Aunt Cathie, divining her devotion for the girl, and not wondering at it. Charlie Lindsay, on the occasion of a garden party of his own, to which Aunt Catherine had come, had summed her up as a "queer old bird," and seen no further. That was like Charlie; to him surface was everything. In the same way he had only seen a damned pretty girl in Lucia, and had clearly wished to make an impression on her. From her aloofness Brayton

concluded, rather to his satisfaction, that the impression he had made was an unfortunate one. Lucia was not like that; she was not the sort of girl who wished to flirt with every presentable young man who presented himself.

He had not much time for these satisfactory reflections, for she was soon back again with the matches and delicately encouraged him to talk about himself. He proceeded to do so, though under the impression that he was talking about other things.

"Yes, I mean to be here a great deal," he said, "for I have no intention of spending my life in London. People say you must be in great towns like London or Paris to keep your intellectual life active, but I do not at all agree. There are pictures, music, theatres in town, of course, but I very much doubt whether most of the effect of those things is not sensuous rather than intellectual."

Lucia leaned forward. She wanted a cigarette, rather badly, but she had heard him express his views about women smoking.

"How do you mean?" she said. "I don't think I quite understand."

"You do though," he said, "because you practise all that I am saying. Music, for instance. In town I can go and hear the Queen's Hall orchestra give a perfect performance of Schubert's Unfinished, but the true musical, intellectual value of it is better known to you, though you only play it on a cottage piano. You make it your own like that; it becomes part of you. It is the same with painting; the man who knows what Velasquez is, into whom Velasquez has entered, needs no more than a mere photograph of Philip the Fourth or that wonderful Admiral, to give him the full intellectual feast."

Lucia laughed.

"That is a comfortable doctrine for those of us who have to live in poky little houses beside railway embankments," she said. "Or rather I think it is an uncomfortable one, because whenever one feels that one is rusty and suburban and narrow, you tell me that it is one's own fault."

"But you do not feel rusty and suburban and narrow," he said.

"Ah, don't I! don't I!" said Lucia. "Of course you wouldn't see it—I don't mean to be paying you a compliment, and there is nothing for you to acknowledge—but of course when I am with you I don't feel rusty, because you bring into this poky little house that atmosphere of the world, of culture, of perception, and naturally that makes one forget the rustiness and the narrowness for a time. I used to be worse than I am. I don't mind telling you that. I used to simply despair at ever getting anything out of life here. Then last May, as lately as that, I turned over a new leaf; I played duets with one girl, I gardened with another, I talked French with a third, and

Aunt Cathie joined us. Wasn't it darling of her? and to hear her talk French is quite the funniest thing in the world, the old dear! But I don't want to talk about myself; I am sure the secret of life is to get away from oneself. Or rather——"

Lucia paused for a moment, letting her eyes grow wide and unfocussed.

"Or rather the secret is to be out all day, is it not?" she said, "and come home to oneself in the evening, so to speak, with flowers gathered in one place and tall grasses in another, and arrange them, make them beautify one's home, and then perhaps pass the evening by oneself with them to bear one company—them and the dreams you weave about them, of the dews they were out with, and the winds that have whispered in them. But, but one does want someone to talk to about them. I assure you, Lord Brayton, you are going to be a perfect godsend to us all. Now tell me more of your plans."

Never perhaps had Edgar Brayton been so stirred out of himself. He was definitely interested in this beautiful, vivid girl, not with regard to how she struck him, but with regard to what she herself was.

"No, tell me my plans yourself," he said; "you will make poems out of them."

Lucia cast him a quick glance, and then looked away again over the garden.

"Well, I will prophesy, then," she said. "You will live in your great beautiful house, and year by year it will get more beautiful. You will have pictures there and marbles, and Eastern carpets and exquisite furniture, and all that as a matter of course, but the atmosphere is what will be getting more beautiful, more full of appreciation and criticism and culture. You will bring great parties of great people down from town, and one day there will be acting, and one day a concert, and one day perhaps you will all sit all day in the gardens, talking, reconstructing Life as it should be. How busy you will be, too, for you will be forever thinking of all those who are dependent on you, and bringing beauty into their lives, for I am sure you will care about them immensely. You will make your house the head, the fountain of a new artistic and intellectual movement; you will teach people to see and hear, you will make them understand that it is wiser to think than to eat, and better to be busy than lazy. Lazy! that is the root fault of so many of us! We won't be stirred. But for heaven's sake, stir us, Lord Brayton! Stir us up like you stir toffee, don't you know, or else it sticks to the side and is burnt and uneatable. Heavens! How lucky you are! What opportunities! What a big life you can make! And now I've quite finished, thank you, and if I have been impertinent, please forget it."

"You have not been impertinent," said he, "but I hope I shall never forget what you have said to me. But I want a little more yet——"

He paused, again leaning forward, again almost absorbed, and more nearly so

than before, in not only the beauty and vitality of this girl, but in the future she sketched. In that he, again, was the most important figure, but just as he was absorbed in her, so he was absorbed in her idea for those who surrounded him, his servants, his tenants, not farmers alone, but the inhabitants of such quiet commodious houses as this, which had proved to hold a pearl. And then he tried to banish the personal interest—how he, that is to say, would figure in this Academic Arcadia which she had "washed in" for him, and he framed his question altruistically.

"You said you were sure that I would care immensely about my dependants," he said. "That is vitally true. But make it more practical, dear Miss Grimson——"

Lucia did not move a muscle, or dim the brilliance of her glance by surprise. The check in his speech, after he had said "dear Miss Grimson," was his own, not suggested by her. Indeed, on the moment, he thought that she had not noticed the epithet (which she had), and felt with a thrill—though a small one—that there was something in her which answered to that in him which had made him say "dear Miss Grimson." But at the moment he was more interested in her scheme for him than he was either in her or in himself. He proceeded:

"Be more practical," he repeated. "You tell me that I will—will, make my aims felt by, and fulfilled in, those who surround me. I will not say dependent on me, for that savours of self-consciousness, does it not?"

(It did.)

Lucia carefully and naturally looked back from the railway embankment to him.

"No, it is a phrase merely," she said; "we mean the same people. Whether we say that they depend, or surround, does not matter. But I chose to say dependants. By them I mean your scullery-maids, and your bootboy, and your farmers, and your friends, and your tenants, we—I mean, who live in your houses."

"And I want to have friends among all those," he said. "You class my friends as separate from my servants and my farmers and my tenants. May I not have friends among them?"

This was an opportunity for a girl a little less clever than Lucia, though quite as determined a flirt, to set a new and more personal scene for the conversational drama. She could easily and naturally have said that he probably already had many friends among the tenants of this residential quarter, which would narrow and shape the field at once, leading it to a point. But she had the wit not to do so.

She laughed, with a little deprecating movement of her arms towards him.

"Oh, be quiet, Lord Brayton," she said, "and don't interrupt your practical prophetess. Dependants, dependants; where were we? Yes, quite so; I mean just that, your scullery-maid, and your bootboy, and your farmers, and so on. You want

and you mean to raise the level, artistically, intellectually. You want everybody about you to care for what is lovely—that is the best word, is it not, for it means so much—and you want to know how to begin, though why you ask me to tell you I can't conjecture. It's no use hanging up Botticelli photographs in the kitchen, or putting a Raphael print in the odd-man's room, or leaving a Shelley in the stables, or whistling the 'Unfinished' below the window of your chauffeur, or starting a Shakespeare society in Brixham, or a literary causerie once a month at—at The Laburnums. Let me think a moment—that is not the way, though perhaps some of those things are part of the way. You may see a big stone in a field, where you want to make a road, and though that stone won't make a road, yet it is only by using stones, and breaking them up, that your road will be made. Wait a moment!"

He was quite willing to wait a moment. Her beauty, her vitality, her enthusiasm, her understanding of his aims were all worth waiting for. Then she leaned forward, clasping her hands together between her knees, and looked at him straight, speaking quite slowly and weighing her words.

"Be yourself," she said—"be yourself in the truest sense. Pamper your passion for all the things that are lovely. Don't take the scullery-maid by the scruff of the neck, and say, 'Admire that Reynolds, or I give you a week's warning!' but work at everybody on their own lines. Ah, that is just it! That was said as I meant it! Be yourself and be detailed; surround yourself first of all with all that your own sure taste tells you is lovely, and you may be certain that the instinct of perfection will spread. But it will spread by perfection in many lines. Your chef—oh, I am sure this is so, and I will tell you why soon—will come to your room for orders (see your servants yourself, by the way), and something of the atmosphere of you will infect him. He will do his very best in his line. The man who cleans the plate will do his best, when he gradually is infected with the atmosphere of the best. Does it sound ridiculous? If so, I will stop."

"Don't dare to stop," he said. "It is the best sense!"

"Well, I believe it is sense. Certainly a careless, slovenly, unappreciative mistress makes her servants like her; it is certain that the converse holds. It will hold, you may be sure, with regard to your farmer-tenants; they will see perfection in all that surrounds you, and they will tend to imitate. For imitation is the most natural and primal instinct of all, though it may happen to be flattery. Even so it is sincere, according to the proverb. So far, of course, it is easy; your servants naturally follow you. And the plate man will clean the plate better, and will look out for other perfections, and the chef will cook better, and find that his concertina—or whatever chefs play—is not up to the mark. That is it again! You want your dependants to feel

that they are not up to the mark. As I say, that is easily done with those who surround you, who come in contact with you."

Lucia was quite genuine in all that she had said, and it would be an injustice to assume that she had said this with a personal purpose. He had taken it, too, in the genuine spirit, though if Aunt Cathie had said exactly the same things in the same words, he might not have cared so much about her enunciations. Then, however, having led the conversation away when she could have made it personal, Lucia brought it swiftly back again. She only wanted a few personal words, and those only distantly personal, but it was necessary to have them now, since the handkerchief which Aunt Cathie had put over her head when she went to look at the broad beans was bobbing nearer.

"Of course, it is more difficult with regard to your dependants here, the tenants in your houses," she said, "since"—and the phrase was intentionally sarcastic—"since you hope to benefit us also——"

He had to put in a disclaimer, which was exactly what Lucia meant him to do. It brought him back to thinking about her and himself.

"Hope to benefit," he exclaimed, "you make me out——" He probably would have used the word "prig," but she interrupted.

"I make you out a benefactor," she said. "That is what you have got to be. You have all, absolutely all, that can make life lovely, and you must use it, not only for your servants, but for us, please—us, the inhabitants of this very, very provincial town. Ah, by the way, I said I would give you a proof of how servants, direct dependants, are influenced. It is just this. There is a parlour-maid here called Jane. She used to sing 'Two Lovely Black Eyes' when she was washing up. But now she sings the melody of the first movement of the 'Unfinished.' It is quite excruciating, but recognizable. That is the principle; multiply it by a hundred thousand for your own case."

He laughed.

"This very provincial town?" he suggested, leading her back, and wishing Aunt Cathie did not walk so quickly up the garden path.

"Yes; we want to be stirred, to be made busy with beautiful things. Set us an example, for, as I said, there is no instinct so strong as the imitative, and—ah, dear Aunt Cathie, how are the beans?"

Lucia rose, as if to join her aunt. Then she turned to him once more, and spoke quickly and low the last private words they would have together just now.

"Show us a man who does not live on the suburban scale," she said, "who is wide and busy. We want—we want radium!"

Edgar went back to Brayton that afternoon with a braced and tingling mind. Lucia had put into words for him all that had been as yet but of the consistency of thought. Her ideal life, it seemed, was just the ideal life which he intended and meant to aim at and to realize, but which hitherto had seemed distant and elusive. She, with her practical grasp, had taken him and led him right up to it, made him look it in the face, made him convince himself that the stuff of which his dreams were made was capable of being materialized. She did not shirk the details or blur the outlines of them; she did not, either, shirk the difficulties, or think that the artistic intellectual life which he wanted to bring within the reach of those round him was to be done by putting Botticellis in the still-room and copies of standard works in the stables. And how right she was throughout! He must create the atmosphere, which should spread like the flooding light of dawn, not manufacture little pilules of culture and give them to other people to eat. How well she understood!

Though he knew that it was he who was to be the centre of this, and though that knowledge intensely gratified him, he scarcely thought of himself as the centre, but of the rest of the circle to its farthest circumference. What if a great renaissance, a return to the love of art, of culture, began to dawn? Mixed with the senseless and selfish expenditure that went on in the world, he believed there to be great quickness of intelligence, great eagerness for new ideas, great love of the beautiful, though that again was largely subject to the dictates of what was called fashion. If only he could help, though ever so lightly, to bring that about, how noble an achievement, and how worthy of utmost and tireless effort.

Then, even in the middle of these reflections, a train of thought more vivid than they drew its shining furrow like a comet across his brain, and it was illumined with the image of her who had made his own aims so dazzingly real to him. She had spoken like one inspired; it was as if the spirit of the culture and loveliness of which she spoke had become incarnate in her. And then he knew that he was thinking no more about what she said, but about the girl who said it.

He was alone in the house that night, though he expected guests next day, and, as was his custom when by himself, dined with frugality on a couple of dishes, intending to spend a long evening among his books. There was a volume of French memoirs of the years preceding the Revolution that he was eager to read, and had just begun, but to-night the splendour of the times seemed dimmed to him. The gold and the carving were there, the sound of its flutes and the measure of its dances, but below in the cellar of the house beautiful were darkness and mildew and rotting foundations. Sounds of crackling and falling mingled with the music of the flutes, and

it was not only with the swift feet of the dancers that the floor shook. The witty, light-hearted pages seemed blistered with some corruption that came from within; the laughter was not sound; the flute-player eyed the dancers with stealthy, hating glances.

He shut the book up quickly. It was not from a rotten, decaying stem that the true flowers sprang, nor from a tainted soil. “Pamper your passion for what is lovely”—those were Lucia’s words, but, “lovely means so much,” she said also. She had understood him so well; here it seemed that he understood her as completely. The loveliness must begin from within; he was sure she meant that.

Radium! She had said that Brixham needed radium. He understood that also; it wanted, and the whole world wanted, those who by their own nature burned and were unconsumed; those whose property was light that came not from the combustion of other things, but from their own illuminating nature. He had seen radium, he thought, in Brixham that day—even her who had spoken of it. And he became aware that he was thinking of her herself again, not what she said, not what she did, except in so far that these things were an expression of her and of her enthusiasm.

The big drawing-room where he sat was lit by electric light that was hidden behind the cornice, and made an illuminated field of the ceiling. There were but half a dozen pictures on the walls—four superb Corots, and a couple of Turners of the second period. Each of these had its own light, and the six glorious canvases were like windows in the dull gold of the walls. From one window there came the faint, dove-coloured light of morning; from another there poured in the blaze of noonday; from the third was seen the crimson splash left behind by the sunken sun; from another there looked in the velvet blue of night. In one Turner the sea rose mountainously to meet a thunder-laden sky, and in the other canvas all Italy sparkled. At the far end of the room the tall French window on to the veranda and the lawn was open, while the drawn brocade curtains just stirred in the night-wind. And when he saw that dark space, Edgar knew it was not the pictured blaze of noonday, nor the riot of southern sun that he needed, nor yet the stillness of the painted night, but night itself, with the real stars burning above him, and the veiled fragrance of dewy flowers. As for the book he had looked forward to reading, it was an unspeakable thing.

He went out, and walked slowly at first, but with increasing speed, as his thoughts drove him down the dewy lawn. The lake in front was dark, for the most part, with the broad leaves of the water-lilies, but between them were bits of

reflected sky, in which the starlight smouldered. Beyond lay the dark grey spaces of the downs, and beyond, again, a brightness as of molten amber suffused the sky above the lights of Brixham. And though to right and left of him the dim dusk was exquisite with the odour of the flower-beds and the smell of the dewy grass, in spite of the magic of the night, it was towards these lights that his eyes were set. Yet unconsciously, the other voices of the earth spoke to him, too; in the utter simplicity and humanness of the love that was beginning to beckon to him, he got more out of himself and into closer touch with Nature than he had ever been, and for once he ceased to think what he felt, but was content to feel. Now and then, from mere force of habit, he tried to register sensations, to remind himself of the beauty of the still night, but he could not actively attend to his own feelings for long, since he was busy feeling. Something from outside was beginning to call to him—no echo of his own voice, no sense of his own appreciation of romantic surroundings, but something apart from him—a star that sang. From the amber of the light in the sky above Brixham it sang.

Love was dawning for him, and in the light of that uprising sun the shining and glow of his other aims, which had so filled his mind to-day, burned like the quenched lights of heaven. Even Lucia's appreciation of them, her understanding of them, her instinct that led her so unerringly to show himself to himself, faded, and it was she who mattered, she of the golden hair and enraptured eye and beautiful soul. Tremblingly he dared to hope, too, that something of this dawn-light was gilding the sky for her; she could scarcely have divined him so surely if he had been indifferent to her. And he did not come to her empty-handed; their aims were one, and on the material plane of rank and riches he could give her what it was idle to despise.

Yet how little all that would be to her—she who with her beautiful noble nature made of that narrow home, that strip of garden, something loyal and splendid. The big scale was hers, and in nothing was that more wonderfully shown than in her dealing with little things. How tiresome, how cramping and paralyzing must that life with the two elderly aunts have been to any with large tastes and fine feelings who had not also courage and character and a great heart! It was a touching and beautiful thing to see her tenderness and affectionate solicitude for Aunt Cathie, who to the general eye, though kindly disposed, appeared to be a very gruff and tough old lady. Lucia had broken off what he felt certain was to her a most absorbing talk, not only without impatience, but with such kindly welcome for her aunt when she returned from the inspection of the broad beans. She had scolded her gently for not putting on her hat when going out into the sunshine, and blamed herself for not having seen that she had done so. Then she dragged up a basket chair for her, took the cushion out

of that in which she had been sitting to make a "soft back" for her aunt, and with gaiety and laughter talked of the hundred trivialities that made up the elder woman's life and interests. She had not allowed herself to be benumbed by what she frankly confessed was a very provincial town; she had kept her light shining, and not suffered it to burn dim or get quenched by the unoxydized atmosphere. That was courage; that was character; wherever she was, whatever station in life she occupied, she would keep herself up to her own mark, not be cramped with other people's limitations, not be dulled with the rust of other minds.

The great clock in the turret above the gate chimed a long mellow hour, and he walked back across the terrace to the lit oblong of the drawing-room window. It was a little dazzling to the eye to come out of the dark into the strong light of the room, and something of the glitter and beauty of the room correspondingly dazzled his mind, chasing from it the thoughts that had been his out in the dark, and substituting for them more material considerations. Indeed, he did not come to her empty-handed; in the vulgar phrase of the world, which came into his mind only to be condemned, he knew that he was a great match, and that the world (again vulgarly) would feel that it had been cheated if he married Lucia. But for that he cared not at all; if anything, indeed, so far as just now he gave it consideration, he was rather gratified at the thought that it should be so. A marriage for love was the only reason for a marriage at all.

And then the thoughts of the dark and of the amber light above Brixham and of her who dwelt there swept all else away again, and he was borne out of himself by the embracing tide that was beginning to flow so strongly about him. He was not quite carried off his feet yet, for, as has been seen, he was one of those who are apt to stand very firmly upon them, but already he rocked to and fro in the stream of the current that came not from within him but from without.

CHAPTER VII

Two mornings after the day on which Lord Brayton had lunched with them, the unexpected and the dreadful happened. The tenant who had intended to take the Misses Grimsons' house for September died suddenly, and since it was extremely unlikely that another occupant would spring up, mushroom-like, Aunt Cathie spoke sound common sense when she said, "We might as well go to Littlestone now as not, instead of grilling like beefsteaks."

It was at breakfast on a singularly hot morning when she made this pronouncement. Aunt Elizabeth really agreed with her—in fact, she intended to go immediately, whatever Catherine said, but she was so constituted that she had to object. She also took the fact of their intended tenant's death as a personal insult to her, levelled at her by a malignant power of some kind. It had hit its mark, too; she was grossly affronted.

"Of course, you will do as you like, Catherine," she said, "but I only beg of you not to lay it up to me if we are all in the workhouse before Christmas. We have taken Sea View Cottage, as it is, for September, and we shall have to pay the rent of it till the end of the month, unless we conveniently die also. If we go now, it will make another fortnight. And more board wages."

Aunt Catherine went through some slow arithmetical processes in her mind, and while she was yet silent the fire kindled in Aunt Elizabeth, and she attacked, as if running amuck, everything within sight. Indeed, she attacked what was not within sight also.

"It is the third morning that Lucia has both missed prayers and not come down yet," she said. "I wonder you can sleep at night, Catherine, in the way you do, for if I heard you snoring once last night, it would be false if I said you didn't wake me up a dozen times, with the thought of how you spoil the girl, filling her head with all sorts of notions of marrying into other stations——"

Aunt Cathie snorted.

"Yes, you may interrupt me, Catherine," said Elizabeth, "and I am sure I make no complaint. But when it comes to having millionaires and peers of the realm to lunch, while you go and look at broad beans without a hat afterwards, it is enough to cover me with blushes for my sister. Pray do not allude to the matter again."

"I didn't," said Cathie.

"You may think you didn't, but let us dismiss the affair, unless you wish to lay the blame on me. Let us talk about Littlestone. As I say, it will mean that we take Sea View Cottage for six weeks, and I'm sure the garden stuff that they let us have there

doesn't pay for the fire we use to cook it with. And as for broiling here like beefsteaks, it will be well if we've got the money to pay for the broiling of one."

"But who talked about going there for six weeks?" cried Cathie, determined to get her word in. "I only meant to telegraph to Mrs. Morris to ask if we could have Sea View from the fifteenth of this month till the fifteenth of next month, instead of having it through September. You speak so hastily, Elizabeth, and tell me that I mean to do all sorts of things that never entered my head."

"Pray telegraph all over the country, then," said Elizabeth.

She rose and took her egg out of the copper egg-boiler and cracked it in silence.

"It was as if he did it to spite us," she said, "though I am sure that I don't wish to speak evil of the dead. But if a man of his age can't walk downstairs without falling on his head at the bottom, they ought to have somebody to look after him. I don't blame him; I blame those who should have seen what his condition was. People with fits should not be allowed to rampage all over the house."

She sniffed doubtfully at her egg, and then put it by.

"It is better economy, Catherine," she said, "to pay three-halfpence for an egg you can eat than a penny for one you can't. Perhaps after this you will allow me to go back to Mr. Tibbit, instead of making me buy eggs and butter from Johnson's wife. I make no complaint."

"Try another," said Cathie.

"I will not," said Elizabeth, rather excitedly. "Though Lucia may choose to come down to breakfast at the time when they ought to be laying for lunch, I do not wish to deprive her of any meal she may be kind enough to appear at. Let us speak of Littlestone. I gather that you have made up your mind to go telegraphing to Mrs. Morris, and find out whether we can take Sea View from—from to-morrow, I think you said."

"Yes; I don't see why we shouldn't go to-morrow," said Catherine.

Elizabeth rose.

"Then, if you will excuse me," she said, "and will make my excuses to Lucia, I will go and make up the household books. Board wages, I understand, are to begin from to-morrow. Is that your wish?"

Lucia entered at this moment.

"Oh, I *am* late," she said, "but I was so sleepy. Good-morning, Aunt Elizabeth; dear Aunt Cathie, do forgive me."

Elizabeth laid out a distant check to Lucia.

"We shall meet at lunch, no doubt," she said, "unless you are going to some fine house in the neighbourhood. Could you make it convenient to let me have a quiet

hour after your breakfast, Lucia, without piano-playing? I have a great deal to do this morning. No doubt Catherine will tell you the plans she has made."

Elizabeth tottered out of the room, closing the door with extreme care, as if it was the entrance to a sick-room.

"Cross as two sticks," observed Aunt Cathie. "Poor old Elizabeth! She'll be better in a few days if we can get Sea View."

Lucia had half poured out her cup of tea, but stopped.

"Is that the plan?" she asked.

"Yes. We'll go to-morrow, if we can get it. I'm sure we can. Mrs. Morris said it was unlet throughout August. Why broil here? 'Tisn't as if it was in Australia."

Aunt Cathie meant a deep significance in that speech—a significance that she could not have expressed in direct words. She was alluding to that which she dared not openly allude to. But whether Lucia saw the allusion or not, she had no idea, for she gave no outward sign.

"Then we stop there till the middle of September, instead of the end?" she asked.

"Hope so. Why?"

"Only that I must write to Maud, and say that she must come early in September, instead of in the middle. I have no doubt she will be able to manage it."

Though Aunt Cathie had joined in the French lessons, and had beaten time (except for the Tschaikowsky) and had shown Lucia many "touches" in the matter of sketching, she felt dumbly and barrenly that there was a part of Lucia that she had never been given admittance to. That sense was with her now. Though Lucia gave an excellent reason for this tiny adjustment of her own affairs, she felt that she was silently making another adjustment, and silently planning something further. But Lucia's silence, which was the main cause of this imaginative effort on Aunt Cathie's part, was soon broken, and, as if with a weight removed, she became herself again.

"Ah! it will be heavenly," she said; "and I love to think of the cool sea and the fresh winds on this sort of morning. I must go into the town after breakfast, and tell them to send my bathing-dress at once. I only said I should want one; now I must have it. And, Aunt Cathie, wouldn't it be nice to have a little tent of our own on the beach? I saw one yesterday in Tompkinson's, quite nice and quite cheap. We might put it up on the lawn here, too, and at your garden parties you might have tea and ices in it. It was only two pounds; do let me give half, and it will be yours and mine. It was quite waterproof, the man said; if it proved not to be, he would take it back. Besides, if we put up our own tent on the beach, it will save a shilling each time we bathe. If we are there a month, do you see, there is thirty shillings off the two pounds

instantly. Fancy getting a waterproof tent for ten shillings: that is what it comes to."

But Lucia revolved many things when she started on her bicycle after breakfast to conclude matters with Mr. Tompkinson. In especial, this premature and pre-dated departure for Littlestone vexed her. She had contemplated another fortnight more of what should be a dull August for Lord Brayton, and she knew she would have behaved differently when he lunched with them, if she had thought that that was to be their last meeting for a month or more. In September he was going to Scotland, and she had certainly meant to bring matters to a crisis, if possible, before he went there. She had conducted the affair of the lunch as if they were going to meet again before long, and though she had done a certain amount of quiet fine work on that occasion, she would, so she felt now, have done more, if she had known that she was making ultimate speeches instead of penultimate. She would have given the impression of even greater perception than she had done; she would have given (or rather have allowed him to give) a more personal tone to the conversation: she would have been even more tenderly solicitous over the top of Aunt Cathie's head than she had been, would have run into the house to get an extra cushion. But her regret was not of a poignant nature; she still believed that she had done pretty well.

Aunt Cathie had given her the telegram to Mrs. Morris of Sea View to send off, prepaying the answer. And as she pedalled slowly along the white dusty road, the expediency of not sending it, so that no answer could be received, occurred to her. But though she knew that she had quite sufficient immoral courage to do this, if it really helped her, she saw at once that there would only be the gain of a day or two at the outside, since Aunt Cathie would telegraph again, and a day or two was of no particular use, since Lord Brayton, as she knew, had a party coming to-day, and was not likely to be bored or dull (which she wished him to be) while they were there. Had she only known to what maturity his thoughts had arrived on the evening when he walked out alone below the stars and looked towards the amber lights of the town, she would have spared herself this trouble and perplexity, and have gone to Littlestone or anywhere else with triumphant confidence. But not knowing that, she had to make the best plans on the data that were hers. Certainly a day or two days more in Brixham would not materially benefit her; she might just as well send that telegram as not. Then suddenly she said "Oh!" quite out loud, broke into an enchanting smile, and exchanged her strolling progression for a much brisker rate. She even passed the tent shop without getting off, and went straight to the office to dispatch the telegram as quickly as possible. A perfectly simple idea, and one that would embody the advantage of another interview, had occurred to her.

Lucia was always transparently honest in her dealings with herself; she never

covered up a piece of her mind and pretended it was not there, though she habitually showed to other people just that which she thought it would be good for them (or for her) to see. She was aware that such an attitude might have been called hypocrisy, but she preferred herself to call it diplomacy. And on returning, after ordering the tent and her bathing-dress, and sending the telegram, she went up to her room, and proceeded to exercise her gift. A rough copy was needful and she wrote on the back of an old French exercise.

"Dear Lord Brayton"—

(Lucia paused for a moment: she must have some perfectly prosaic reason for writing. She soon thought of one)—

> "I am sending you back your copy of Omar, with many thanks. As a matter of fact, I have not really quite finished transferring the alterations into my own copy, and I shall venture to ask you to lend it me again in the autumn. The fact is that both my aunts are feeling rather pulled down with this stuffy weather, and I have persuaded them to pack up at once and go to Littlestone for their holiday, instead of waiting another fortnight here, and I simply dare not take your precious book to seaside lodgings. So many thanks for the loan of it!
>
> "I long sometimes to hear more of your schemes. It all seemed so big and wonderful, and it will all be true, the most beautiful fairy story that ever happened.
>
> "I must go; Aunt Cathie is calling me, who is in the throes of packing. The dear always leaves out what she particularly wants to take, and must be superintended.
>
> "Sincerely yours,
>
> "Lucia Grimson."

The rough copy was after all quite unnecessary. Lucia read it through twice, found nothing to alter, and having made a fair copy of it and a neat parcel of Omar, put the two carefully away until it was certain that they would start to-morrow.

"That ought to produce something if there is anything to produce," she observed frankly. "Now about Maud."

The answer to the telegram had been satisfactory and one morning a few days later Lucia was sitting on the sands just to the east of the single row of houses that

fronts the sea at Littlestone, letting her hair dry in the sun and wind after her bath. The sand, trodden by the wavelet feet of the outgoing tide, was wet and shiny, and covered with little ripples, while beyond stretched the great pearly levels of the sea, basking and vacant. After the confined heat of Brixham, the warm salt breezes and fresh heat of the seaside were unspeakably invigorating, and this morning, while Lucia bathed, Aunt Cathie, in the glow of rejuvenation, had pulled off her boots and stockings, tucked up her skirts, and had magisterially waded nearly up to her large knees, heedless of the scorn of Elizabeth, who warned her of the danger of cold salt water to the aged.

"Most bracing and refreshing," Aunt Cathie had said decisively as she put on her stockings again; "it has done me a world of good, Elizabeth, and I shall paddle every day while we are here. Fancy never having thought of it all these years! What a waste!"

"Then don't blame me if you are a cripple all the winter," said Elizabeth.

Aunt Cathie strained her eyes seaward.

"I will not," she said. "Dear me, I wish Lucia would not swim so far out. There may be currents, and I am told there are some dreadfully deep holes about. But she won't hear if I do call. I shall go up to the house, Elizabeth, and bring down letters and papers. Shall I bring yours?"

"I should sit in the shade of the tent and rest, if I were you," said Elizabeth. "You will send the blood to your head, walking in the sun after paddling, so don't say afterwards that I didn't warn you. It seems to me that all we get out of the tent, which was a great extravagance, is to be permitted to sit outside in the shade of it, as Lucia or her clothes always occupy the interior."

"For one hour a day," said Cathie; "you can sit in it and welcome for the other twenty-three. Then I shall bring your letters, shall I?"

"No, pray do not touch them," said Elizabeth; "as like as not you will drop them, carrying them about. I warn you about your head, Cathie."

So Cathie went off, and soon Lucia came out from the sea, bare-legged and bare-armed, with her bathing dress clinging close to her slim figure, and sat down dripping by Aunt Elizabeth, who instantly closed her eyes.

"Lucia, I beg you to go into the tent at once," she said. "There was a man passed ten minutes ago, and it is likely that he'll soon be back. Though I have no doubt that it is thought quite proper now for a girl to show more arms and legs than I should like to specify, your bathing dress, being wet, clings very closely."

Lucia looked round.

"There is neither man, woman, nor child for miles, dear," she said, "and sitting in

the sun after bathing is about the nicest part of it all. I only wish I could take my bathing dress off. Then it would not cling so closely."

Aunt Elizabeth gave a faint scream, then recovered her nerve.

"Lucia, the tent," she said, as if sternly introducing them to each other.

The girl made a rapid and sketchy toilet, and with her hair down her back was sitting again outside when Aunt Cathie returned.

"Two for you, Lucia," she said.

"I hope you have not brought mine," said Elizabeth.

"Couldn't. There weren't any. There's the paper for you."

Elizabeth sighed.

"I suppose as one gets old it is very natural that people should forget us," she said. "Only it seems strange that there should be two for Lucia and none for me. Let me look at them, Lucia, to see there is no mistake. I remember last year you opened a letter of mine, no doubt by accident, but such accidents are very annoying."

"Miss Lucia Grimson—Miss Lucia Grimson!" said Lucia.

Aunt Elizabeth took them and turned them over, as if expecting to find another address on the back. Then she looked at the postmarks, one of which was Brixham.

"One of your letters has come from Brixham," she said, "It will be pleasant to hear what news there is. Who is your correspondent?"

Elizabeth was notable for her intense curiosity about other people's letters. She would not go so far as to read letters that were left about, but she constantly, by means of questions, direct or indirect, tried to glean their contents. Though she never remembered arriving at any sensational disclosure, she pursued her passion with avidity.

Lucia opened her letter, saw there were four sides of writing, and that it was from Lord Brayton, and instantly put it into its envelope again.

"It is from Lord Brayton," she said; "he acknowledges the safe receipt of a book I sent to him."

But Elizabeth, too, had seen there were four sides of writing.

"He makes a somewhat voluble acknowledgment," she remarked bitterly.

Lucia smiled with perfect good humour.

"Yes, doesn't he?" she said.

She read her other letter, which was from Maud, and communicated the contents. She proposed to come for her visit during the first week of September, if that suited. Then, without the slightest appearance of hurry, Lucia got up.

"I shall go up to the house and get tidy before lunch," she said.

Elizabeth waited till she was out of hearing.

"How long has this clandestine correspondence been going on?" she asked her sister. "There were four sides of writing. I saw them."

Aunt Cathie felt hotly about this.

"Then you've got no business to, Elizabeth," she said, "and I wonder at you. You demean yourself by looking over Lucia's letter."

"I consider it a providential circumstance that I did," said Elizabeth.

"Well, then, I'm not of your way of thinking," said Cathie. "If there's anything that we ought to know, Lucia will tell us. If she does not, it's not our business."

"I shall not rest till I find out the contents of that letter," said Elizabeth firmly. "You have no strength of character, Catherine; you leave everything to me."

"I certainly leave that sort of thing to you," said Cathie, "and I wish you'd leave it alone."

Elizabeth drew a vague diagram of curves and straight lines, signifying nothing, with the point of her sunshade in the sand.

"Lucia has no delicacy," she announced. "In our day, Catherine, if either of us had heard from a strange peer, we should instantly have taken the letter to our mother. At least I should, though I have my doubts about you in the light of this."

"But we never did hear from a strange peer," said Catherine.

"That is quite immaterial. I gather that you will make no efforts to find out what Lord Brayton writes to Lucia about?"

"Of course I will not. If Lucia thinks good, she will tell us."

"Catherine, you have neither strength of character nor sense of duty," said her sister. "Let us get back to lunch, though I am sure it is little appetite I bring to it. I have been much agitated. I should not wonder if this threw me back for a week."

What exactly Aunt Elizabeth was to be thrown back from was not completely clear, and Catherine forbore to ask. She herself was delightfully excited about Lucia's letter, and longed in a different spirit, but with even greater intensity than Elizabeth longed, to know more. Though she would not have dreamed of doing what Elizabeth had done and looked over the letter, she could not but be thrilled with the fact that there were four pages. "So it must be about something," she thought, knowing the difficulty of making letters that were about nothing extend to three. Perhaps Lucia would tell her; Lucia and she were so very friendly, and the girl often talked to her confidentially. Yet she had hardly ever said anything about Lord Brayton, and Cathie felt in her bones—like rheumatism—that there was something to tell. And it was partly because she wanted to know so much that she felt it utterly impossible to ask her.

Sea View was a house in a row of sounding titles. On one side of them was Blenheim, on the other Balmoral, while further down were Engadine, Chatsworth, and the houses of Devonshire and Stafford. Six rather steep steps led up from a small clanging gate to the front door, which had panels of stained glass in it. On one side was the drawing-room, which Elizabeth had made quite homey with a quantity of woollen head-rests, here really necessary, since without them the person who reclined on the American-cloth sofa would have instantly slid off it on to the floor. The mantelpiece was of the type known as handsome, and had imitation malachite plaques opulently let into a smooth hard substance that might easily be mistaken for black marble. Tiles of bright floral design framed the grate, which was filled with ribbons of polychromatic paper. In the bow-window, rather obstructing the view out, but equally obstructing the view of those without who wished to look in, was a marine telescope on three brass legs, which Aunt Elizabeth vaguely felt should have its cap permanently put on to it because of the bathers. It was true that you need not look at the bathers, but if you did they would appear so unpleasantly near. A bookcase contained apparently centuries of the *Monthly Packet* bound in shiny brown calico, and, indeed, the whole house seemed to be rather full of hard and slippery furniture, oilcloth taking the place of carpets on the stairs, and the wall-paper being an imitation of marble that was otherwise happily unknown. A barometer and an umbrella stand naturally stood in the hall, the former of a pessimistic nature that silently stuck to the fact that it was "stormy." But the whole house was, except when the kitchen door had been left open, redolent of the freshness of the sea, and Lucia, who had again secured a bedroom at the very top of the house, lived as in the deck cabin of a ship.

All these details of the place had a certain relevance with regard to the letter that Lucia had received, and which she thought over as she made herself tidy. For Lord Brayton, it appeared, before going to Scotland was to spend a few days at a house near Littlestone, and he asked leave to come over some afternoon. He named the date when he would be in the neighbourhood, which was unfortunately during the week that Maud would be staying at Sea View. And in any case, whether Maud was there or not, she could with difficulty picture herself talking to him as he sat on the American-cloth sofa, facing the malachite of the mantelpiece.

But this latter consideration did not long occupy her. It was true that she would have chosen not to be found in these hopeless surroundings, but if he came she could arrange that they should all have tea on the beach, or do something that should detach him from the house; but Lucia was not yet quite sure that it was better that he

should come. She did not exactly fear Maud as a rival, but she must either tell him that Maud would be here, and Maud that he was coming, or else—somehow or other—Maud must know nothing whatever about it. For though Lucia had never for a moment gone back on her original intention as to cutting Maud out, if possible, she felt that the moment for telling Maud about her growing friendship with this man would be a rather difficult one. Indeed, she had to decide at once whether to tell Maud about it, before things got further, or not to tell her till she herself had done her best, and succeeded or failed. Failure, however, she did not contemplate. Then it struck her that his request to come over was rather pointed, and that she could really invent no valid excuse why he should not. But if, so to speak, any "good" were to come of his visit, he must be given the opportunity of seeing her alone. That was practically impossible if her aunts and Maud were in the house.

Then she saw her whole plan illuminated and complete from end to end. It was rather a hazardous one, but she was prepared to take risks. She wrote a charming little note to him, suggesting that he should come over on one of the dates that he had mentioned, found a train in a local time table that would bring him to Littlestone about four in the afternoon, and another one that would take him away about six. Then, since fine weather was essential to her plan, she almost prayed for fine weather, posted her note at the pillar box outside the house, and joined her aunts at lunch. She told them many things Lord Brayton had said in his note, a few he had not, concerning the weather at Brixham, and somehow omitted to mention that he had asked leave to visit them the week after next, or that she had begged him to do so.

Maud arrived some ten days after this, and received the warmest of welcomes from Lucia.

"Ah! it's too, too splendid," she said, "and, if you think, now that I've got you here, that I am going to let you go under a fortnight, you are quite, quite mistaken. Yes, the busman will take all your things to the house—won't you, William?—and you and I will go straight off to the beach till tea-time. It's the biggest, emptiest beach you ever saw; there's nothing there at all but the sea, lying like some great, kind animal. And the house is quite the most ridiculous you ever saw, and you slide off every chair if you are not careful, and Aunt Cathie wades, isn't it heavenly of her? Oh, you've never seen her, have you? so you can't yet grasp how heavenly it is; and Aunt Elizabeth played patience on the beach yesterday, and a gust of wind came, and all the cards rose up like at the end of 'Alice in Wonderland.' Now you may talk for one minute, and then I shall begin again."

The arrears of general events were soon cleared off, and after a stroll along the beach the two sat down on the hot, dry sand, and the talk became more intimate.

"Yes, I turned over a new leaf soon after I went down to Brixham," said Lucia, "and it all became so much pleasanter. But you see, you do naturally what I had to make a great effort to do."

Maud's grey, grave eyes looked with admiring devotion at Lucia, as she sat with legs crossed, like some graceful boy, pouring the dry sand through her fingers in the fashion of an hour-glass.

"And what's that?" she asked.

"You know. You are naturally unselfish, and you don't have to think about other people and their wants and desires. The thinking does itself with you, and you just go and do the things. Now, I have first of all to make myself think, and then make myself do the things. You are nice inside, as I told you before, and I am not. People can't help loving you; but I have to go through all my tricks before they love me. Even then they don't always."

Maud laughed.

"Oh, Lucia, what dreadful nonsense you talk!" she said. "You whom everybody has fought for, so to speak, and done their best to spoil! And they haven't succeeded one atom. Even I haven't succeeded in spoiling you."

Lucia let her hands go wide, dropping the sand that was in them.

"There was nothing to spoil," she said with a sudden earnestness. "You can't spoil anything unless it is good to begin with. I turned over a new leaf, as I said, but why did I do that? Simply and solely, Maud, that I might have a more comfortable time. I want people to love me, but why? Because then they will be nice to me, and give me what I want. That's me—not pleasant, but me."

"Ah! you are mixing up two words which haven't anything to do with each other," said Maud. "We all find it convenient to be liked, because that does make things pleasant. But love is quite a different matter."

Lucia sat quite silent a moment. The simplicity and certainty of what Maud said struck some chord within her of which she was but seldom conscious. Just for these few seconds she felt on a plane immeasurably low compared to her friend: it was as if some unquiet wind was conscious for a moment of the stillness of the stars. Then Maud spoke again in that cool, slow voice that so admirably expressed her.

"How wilful you are sometimes, dear Lucia!" she said; "as now, when for some reason you seem to want to make yourself out so mean and unfeeling. Is it not a good thing that I see through you? You know the difference quite well. If one just likes a person, and there is a piece of pleasure going about, why, I am afraid one

grabs it very often, and doesn't mind much whether the other person has to go without it. But if you love anybody, you grab the pleasure in order to give it to the person you love. And the fact that you deprive yourself of it is just what makes the giving it away so delightful. I daresay that is selfish in its way, too; giving it is to give yourself the highest possible enjoyment. You delight in the cost of it. Dear me, what very commonplace sentiments! I apologize."

Maud, always slow with her tongue, always reticent about what she felt keenly, stopped abruptly. She saw that something in what she said had affected Lucia—that her words, commonplace as they seemed to her, put something difficult before her friend. What it was she scarcely asked herself; far less did she dream of asking Lucia.

But poor Lucia—she saw the idea like a view of distant mountains, intolerably far, and intolerably above her. And her next feeling was one of resentment and rebellion at the presentation of what was but barely intelligible to her. She felt impatient with it, as a man feels impatient at some sentence spoken to him in a foreign tongue, the meaning of which he but dimly conjectures. And this impatience quenched the momentary impulse she had felt to tell Maud, anyhow, what she had done, what she was doing, what she intended to do. And the impulse fainter than this—to abandon her design, or rather to think about abandoning it—went out like a candle in a high wind; a puff, and it was dark night again.

She scooped up the dry, hot sand and once more let it trickle through her fingers.

"Oh, one way of love and another way of love, as Browning tells us," she said quickly, "and another, and yet another. We're all different and all our ways of love are different, just as our manner of drinking our tea is different, which reminds me that it must be tea-time. Wouldn't it be dull if we were all alike? You want to love to slow music, you know, and I want to love to—to a cake-walk."

She paused just a moment, and became thoroughly content with herself; distant mountains were gone, and there was no far-off starlight any more.

"Oh, Maud!" she said, getting up, "and what of It—Him? Lord Brayton? I've seen him again, by the way. Somebody died, and he is Aunt Cathie's landlord, and I think he's delightful. He came to lunch one day, and we talked about Aims and Objects of Existence—all with enormous capital letters. Do you still want to grab pleasures, and give them him? What complications in your plan! If there's a pleasure lying about and you grab it, and he wants it rather, and I want it rather more, to which of us will you give it? If you say you will give it him, I shall never speak to you again."

Intimate as Maud was with Lucia, she felt she could not explain.

"You don't understand," she said quietly. "Things don't happen like that."

Again Lucia felt the degradation of her level, and again that made her impatient and incredulous of the reality of the other level. She spoke daringly, but with calculation.

"But I really want to know," she said. "Oh, Maud! look at that fishing boat with a red sail against the grey of the sea. Suppose Lord Brayton liked me better than you, would you ever forgive me?"

The daring of this was justified. To Maud's transparent mind the case necessarily became a purely imaginary one, otherwise Lucia could never have spoken it.

"But, of course, I should want both of you to get what you wanted most," she said. "And as for forgiving, you can't forgive or not forgive a thing as big as love. It is destiny, too. It must happen or not happen, independently of us. You might as well quarrel with the sun for rising in the morning."

Lucia laughed.

"Well, I do if it wakes me up," she said.

Maud had not yet met Lucia's aunts, but within a couple of days she was a dweller in the innermost places of Aunt Cathie's heart, partly by virtue of her devotion to Lucia, partly by the charm of her own simplicity and goodness. By virtue of that she at once pierced through Aunt Cathie's reticence and gruffness. She easily divined what tenderness and softness lay beneath that marvellously horny shell, knowing in herself how difficult it was to her to put into words anything that was deeply felt. And Aunt Cathie, she saw at once, had the same barrier in her speech, that made words and feelings of kindness and sympathy rebound, so to speak, from it and stun themselves. These limitations, in fact, of the two were a bond between them, even as was their essential kindness, and in each heart was the same presiding goddess, Lucia.

The presiding goddess had refused to come out this morning till she had written her letters to her three particular friends at Brixham, but in obedience to her suggestion, Aunt Cathie had taken Maud out to sit and stroll on the beach, till the bathing hour of noon. Even in these two days there had been conferred on Cathie the degree of "aunt" to Maud also, and this fact was pathetically precious to her, for it had come naturally, involuntarily. Only yesterday Maud had begun a sentence, "Oh, Aunt Cathie," by accident, apologizing immediately, and saying that Lucia had so often called her Aunt Cathie that the phrase had escaped without thought. Aunt Cathie had flushed a little and killed a wasp on the window with extraordinary truculence before she replied. Then she said: "Well, you can't go back now. I'm your

aunt, Maud."

So aunt and niece sat together on the shore, each more easily expansive to the other than to anyone else, though their friendship was of so short duration, if measured by the misleading scale of hours. The sea was very far out, for the tide was low, and the glory of the shining sand stretched at their feet. A few red sails struggled seaward, for the wind was northerly; a little way off, inside the bathing tent, Elizabeth was busy with head-rests.

"That's Lucia all over," said Cathie suddenly. "She can't enjoy herself till she has remembered other people. Did I tell you about the tennis, Maud?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, she and I used to play lawn-tennis. I thought it would amuse her. You've never seen me play lawn-tennis. I throw the ball up and can't hit it, you know, heaps of times. So Lucia and I played. Then the other day I saw her playing at some garden party. It was quite different: people hit the ball: it went backwards and forwards. She must have thought me mad. But she appeared to enjoy it, just because of that—because she thought I was liking it. She never let me see what a bore it must have been."

"Dear Aunt Cathie!" said Maud, "but it was just as nice of you to do it. It bored you just as much, you know."

"Didn't bore me at all; I loved it," said Aunt Cathie, "for I thought Lucia was enjoying it. Only now I know she can't have been."

Aunt Cathie took off her spectacles and wiped them. "There's a poem somewhere," she said, "about somebody being a sunbeam. I've often looked for it in six volumes of selections which I've got at home, but I can't find it. Lucia's that; she does it as easily as a sunbeam, too; she just shines. I wish I could put my hand on it—Longfellow, perhaps, or Mrs. Hemans. She—she confides in me, too," went on Aunt Cathie a little tremulously. "She tells me if she is in a hole, and once, Maud—once I managed to help her out of one. I did enjoy it. You see, when you get old like me and Elizabeth"—she glanced nervously round—"though, of course, I'm much older than Elizabeth, you seem to lose something. You are there, just the same, but people think it's only an old woman who is there. And so very naturally they don't take much notice. It's that that Lucia does: she takes notice of us—oh, it's more than that—she loves me, I think; she makes a girl of me. I—I can't tell you what that is to old people. We talk French, we sketch, though Lucia doesn't think much of the touches; we have little conspiracies. And now, dear, you've come, too. You let me talk to you like this, and make me able to talk."

Aunt Cathie blew her nose very violently.

“So bless you, dear,” she said. “I’m a little cramped with sitting.”

A voice came from the bathing tent.

“The time, please, Catherine?” it said.

Aunt Catherine fished up the warming-pan watch.

“Just on twelve,” she called back.

There was a short pause, and Elizabeth appeared at the tent door.

“Then Lucia will be wanting the tent,” she observed, “and I have just got into my stitch.”

“Get into it again,” said Cathie.

Aunt Elizabeth moved a little away.

“I had no intention of interrupting,” she said. “If I sit in the shadow of the tent at the far side, I trust I shall disturb nobody.”

There was a short pause in the conversation of the others.

“What hole did you help her out of?” asked Maud at length. “Lucia hasn’t told me, I think.”

“Well then, dear, I mustn’t,” said Cathie. “It’s Lucia’s secret. I can only tell you she left cards, mine and Elizabeth’s, too, on somebody one shouldn’t have thought of calling on.”

“Do you mean the person wasn’t respectable?” asked Maud.

“Good gracious, no! We weren’t, so to speak. So I said I had done it, because he came to call on us, without our having called, so far as Elizabeth knew. Don’t ask me more. Change the subject. It’s Lucia’s and my secret. You’re not in it this time. Ha! We’re rivals. I’ve won.”

Aunt Cathie gave vent to an extraordinary sort of crow, of which the intention was humorous, but which had a serious foundation. She rejoiced that Lucia had not told Maud their secret, and could not help crowing. Lucia had told her what she had not told to her best friend. It was true that she had told Aunt Cathie about it (and had made no secret of that) because Aunt Cathie could help her. But in this hour of triumph that was forgotten. Then the dear old soul, still pining for love and affection, laid a hand on Maud’s arm.

“Old folks are greedy,” she said. “Can’t you tell me something you haven’t told Lucia? I should chuckle over Lucia, too, then!”

Maud sat up and devoted a few moments to honest reflection.

“I can’t think of anything,” she said. “I think I have told Lucia all I have to tell. I’m so sorry.”

That concession was something. Aunt Cathie felt another year or two younger.

Two days after this Lucia announced a plan, or in other words, a picnic. To-morrow was going to be the second Thursday in September, when there was to be an old English autumn fair at Trew. Trew was ten miles off, but one carriage would hold them all, and the plan was a surprise. She had engaged a carriage to be at Sea View by eleven next day—this was her "treat"—and they would all go over and lunch at Trew, see the old English fair, and drive back in the evening. In fact, it was no use anybody saying she wouldn't go: she had set her heart on this, and Aunt Elizabeth needn't look bankrupt, because she hadn't understood, for the carriage was Lucia's, and she was going to take them for a nice drive. She had read the account of the projected fair to them all two days before; it was a sort of pagan harvest festival, full of folk-lore, and was tremendously picturesque. At eleven to-morrow then, please, and she and Maud would bathe before breakfast.

Aunt Cathie was intensely discouraging, but simply because she was so touched.

"Frightful extravagance," she said. "Go by train and walk at the other end."

"And who gave me a set of tennis balls?" said Lucia gently. "And who lengthened the lawn? And who got me out of an awful hole? And who is Aunt Cathie?"

This passed under cover of somewhat louder objections from Elizabeth. She supposed they would have to take cold lunch with them, and where were they to have tea? Cathie, as was her nature, found no reply to Lucia's whispers, and answered Elizabeth instead.

"It's cold lunch, anyhow," she remarked. "So we take it. Tea, too. Such things as tea-baskets. I've got one. Great fun; thanks, Lucia. I wanted to see it. So does Elizabeth."

"I had meant to work to-morrow," said Elizabeth, "but I can do more the day after and make up for lost time. I hope you beat the man down, Lucia, and said you would only give him half of what he asked. I never heard of taking a carriage for the day!"

Lucia clapped her hands.

"No questions allowed," she cried. "You get into my carriage at eleven. You get out again about eight in the evening. Dear Aunt Elizabeth, I hope it will be amusing. You shall take your woolwork with you, if you like, and I will hold skeins from the seat opposite."

With this the subject was dismissed. Aunt Cathie, bursting with tenderness, gave Lucia an enormous helping of cold lamb and piled salad on her plate.

But Lucia hardly tasted these things.

CHAPTER VIII

Lucia sat up in bed on hearing the noise of the retreating wheels of the carriage, and cast the clothes from her. The plan had gone quite excellently up till now, and under the same inspiring hand it would no doubt continue to prosper. Aunt Cathie and Maud, of course, had come tip-toeing into her bedroom to ask how she was, and to suggest putting off the expedition, and she had had a perfectly sound reply. The expedition could not be put off, since the old English fair was on this day and no other, and as for herself, she begged nobody to worry. It was just a headache: quite horrid, but the only plan was to let her lie quiet, to turn her face to the wall, like Hezekiah, and wait till it was better. It was a bore; oh yes, a dreadful, dreadful bore, and it could not have come on a more inconvenient day, but as it was there, there it was, and the thought of anybody waiting behind and not going to Trew made it feel worse. They must all go and enjoy themselves, and tell her about it in the evening. Probably her head would be all right by then. She only insisted that they should all go, and not attempt to return early in order to keep her company. When her head was like this she did not want company. She just wanted to shut her eyes, and wait till it was better. Yes; she thought it was coming on last night, when she did not want any dinner. "No, darling Aunt Cathie, if you talk of lunch," she said, "I shall be sick. Please just leave me alone. I am so sorry for being so unfriendly, but I only want to lie still. Oh, and I *do* hope you will have a nice day. Good-bye!"

So before very long the carriage wheels crunched the ground, and Lucia sat up. Then she got out of bed and bolted her door, in case of surprises. It was all dreadfully mean and infinitesimal, but she never neglected details. Then she put on a dressing-gown, ate the breakfast she had not yet touched, and carefully pulled a chair out on her balcony, where, under the sunblinds, she could sit unobserved.

By midday (this was part of her plan) she felt rather better, and lunched downstairs. As a matter of fact she was extremely hungry, and it required all her self-control not to eat largely. But she exercised it, left the greater part of her cold lamb on her plate, and cut and swallowed a very large slice of cheese, during the interval when stewed plums were left with her. Then, when her coffee came in, she announced she was much, much better, and soon after went ostentatiously out of the house. It was all well done; obviously she ate little lamb; obviously she left the stewed plums alone (though certainly there were many stones in the small flower-bed below the window) and nobody knew of the cheese, which had been on the sideboard, and had not even been offered her.

She took up her place on the beach just in front of the house. That was not the

delectable sandy beach to the east, and it consisted of large round stones, and a cloak was necessary to make sitting on it possible. She took with her the later edition of Omar Khayyám, sat with her back to the houses, and her face to the sea, and smoked two cigarettes, the stumps of which she threw far away from her. Then, from not far off, she heard the whistle of a train, and, a minute or so afterwards, saw a solitary figure coming straight down the road from the station to the beach. Just on his left was Sea View; just in front of Sea View was herself.

The day was dry and windless and the steps of this solitary passenger were defined. She never looked round, but heard them pause at the corner, and then come straight on. From the pause (and the instructions in her letter) it was clear that he knew where Sea View was, from the pause and the advancing steps it was clear that he had seen her.

The large round stones slipped and grated below his foot: she heard all that. Then, when the slipping and the grating were close at hand, she turned lazily as if to see the stranger who was passing. Then she got up quickly, and Omar fell face downward.

"Lord Brayton!" she said, in excellent surprise. "How are you? But—but to-day is Thursday, is it not? I—I expected you—but how nice to see you! How quick of you to notice me! I had just come out from lunch. Thursday, yes, Thursday, of course."

There was an undercurrent of embarrassment in her tone, that he could scarcely miss.

"But it was Thursday you said?" he asked.

Lucia had got up, to shake hands with him. Then, still embarrassed, she suddenly burst into a peal of laughter.

"Somehow, by your mistake or mine," she said, "and it doesn't really matter whose it is, the most awful thing has happened that ever happened. No doubt it was mine, but I thought I suggested Friday. And to-day, Thursday, the state of affairs is this: We were all going on a picnic to Trew this morning, and I had a headache—but a headache—and the others, all of them, went without me. I lay in bed all morning; felt better and came on to the beach."

Lucia seemed to abandon herself to these embarrassing reflections for a moment, then she pulled herself together, and entirely cast them off.

"But supposing I hadn't had a headache, supposing I had gone with the others, it would have been even worse. You would have come here and found nobody at all. What would you have thought of me?"

"That you had made a mistake merely," he said. "But I should have been very

sorry for the results of that mistake."

He laid just the faintest stress on "that," enough to make the inference clear.

She burst out with sudden delicious laughter again. "I think it would kill Aunt Elizabeth if she knew," she faltered between her ripples of laughter. "She would die of the infamy of it. So we must never say you have been. But let us settle whose mistake it was; I promise to forgive you if it proves to be yours, and you must try to forgive me if it has been mine. Surely I said Friday. Ah! your engagement book is no evidence; you may have put it down wrong."

In point of fact, he had taken his engagement book out of his pocket. But that was only to expedite his search, and immediately he produced Lucia's note to him. There was Thursday, as plain as need be.

"Condemned!" she said, "without any recommendation to mercy. But I am so sorry, Lord Brayton. Let me say that once for all. I don't desire, anyhow, to wriggle out of it. Besides, there is no way of escape. Now be kind, please. No; I know what you are thinking of—there isn't a train back before the six something, and even if there was it would be very rude of you to go by it."

Lucia's swift mind made a sudden excursion round all the angles of her scheme. All were safe except one. She must make it appear to him that her aunts expected him to-morrow, and at the same time he must not come.

"Ah! and one more thing," she said, "you must send me a telegram, please, to-morrow morning, saying you can't come owing to some brilliant excuse which you will invent. You see, we thought it was to-morrow, owing to my mistake."

"But let me come to-morrow, too, then," he asked.

This was extremely awkward. Though Lucia highly approved the feeling that made him want to come, it would never do if he came. It would be known that she had asked him.

"Ah! no, no," she cried. "It would be delightful, I needn't say, but much, much too risky. You would betray some familiarity with the house or I should allude to something that happened to-day. It would all come out. How horrid and inhospitable it sounds of me!"

There was good sense in this, as there was in all that Lucia did, and the danger was averted. But it had been quite a close shave; she might have been unable to think of an excuse.

"Ah, how quick you are!" he said admiringly. "You make me feel so slow and heavy-witted."

She picked up her Omar.

"It is an impression that is confined to yourself, then," she said. "It is—what do

Christian Scientists call it?—a false claim. Now, Lord Brayton, do not let us stand here. What would you like to do?

> "'The bird of time has but a little way
>   To flutter—and the bird is on the wing.'"

she quoted. "Shall we walk along the beach? Shall we sit and talk? Oh, good gracious!" she added suddenly.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I can hardly tell you. Oh, but I think I must; it will make you laugh. I've sent the parlourmaid out for the afternoon, and who will get tea ready for us? Isn't it funny? In the course of your varied life were you ever asked anywhere to get a reception the least like this?"

Then, like two children, they just stood and laughed.

"I have never enjoyed a reception more," he said at length, with perfect truth.

"Oh, how nice of you to say that! You know I am glad to see you if that helps. Let us walk. There is a heavenly sandy beach a little farther on, quite, quite empty—nothing but sand and the tent I put up to bathe from. And Aunt Cathie wades. You saw her at Brixham, you remember. Did you ever hear of anything so darling? Now you shall talk a little, if you like. I'm afraid I haven't allowed you to speak much yet. Tell me about Brixham. How are things going? Did you have a pleasant party in your house?"

"I really haven't been in to Brixham since the day I lunched with you," he said. "My party? No; to speak quite frankly, I thought it was rather dull."

She laughed very genuinely, for she was delighted.

"What a dismal tale!" she said; "and to cheer you up, I take you to this large and desolate beach. But you must like my beach; I can't bear that people should not like what I like. It's so big, and empty, and clean. I should like a room as big, and I should put three chairs in it, and one small table, and have no carpets and no pictures."

"And would you have all the rooms in your house like that?" he asked.

"Ah! no, but one, into which I should go when I found myself getting funny and stuffy and microscopical. Dear me! I'm not letting you talk, as I promised. I assure you I don't always monopolize conversation. I think it's your fault, Lord Brayton."

"I am quite willing to bear both the blame and the conversation," he said. "But why my fault?"

Lucia turned and faced him with the frankness of a boy.

"Because there is something in you that makes me want to talk to it. Oh, there

are people who make me feel as if I was talking to a large lump of damp dough. I dare say they are really full of beautiful thoughts and delightful feelings, poor dears! but they are imbedded in dough. Or perhaps it is I—probably I."

Again he found that he was scarcely attending to what she said, so absorbed was he in her who said it. And never, so he thought, had her charm appeared so brilliant, as when she stood here on the empty golden sands, in the blaze of this shining afternoon. Truly and faithfully did her noble beauty reflect the splendid spirit that dwelt within; meet was the house from which her soul looked forth, so generously, so warmly on the world. As he looked his heart rose within him: the fire kindled, and he spoke.

"The empty beach, do you say?" he asked quickly. "Lucia, it is full—full. From end to end of it, it is you. You and my love for you."

Lucia stood quite silent for a moment, looking at him with mouth a little open, startled and surprised. Cool and calculating as she had been throughout, yet when this came there was something deadly serious about it. Often she had imagined to herself what she would say when the much-to-be-desired moment came, and she had in these sketches of her fancy been quite up to the mark. But now, though what he felt was unintelligible to her, she knew that to him it was something tremendous; the hurried, stammered words showed her that, and it a little frightened her. It was not smooth and romantic and polished, there was something fierce and elemental in it.

"Oh, Lord Brayton!" she said, very feebly.

He took hold of both her hands, grasping them hard.

"I can't do without you," he said; "it's no use. You are for me; do you understand."

Lucia was furious with herself; she had not foreseen that it would be like this. All that he felt was leagues above her head, since for the time, anyhow, he had got completely outside himself, and she had no idea what to say. The softly murmured "yes," the averting of the head, the faint flush, and the gradually growing radiant smile, all of which she could have managed beautifully, she knew to be so utterly off the point as to be ludicrous, and she simply stood there mute and helpless. She did not know her part, and her heart, which was the only possible prompter, appeared not to be in its place. It struck her that her assurance that she did not always monopolize the conversation was being most inconveniently demonstrated. She had expected (and had provided for) some declaration which would be cultivated and decorous, and perhaps a little self-centred, with an allusion as to how wonderfully she would further and assist the aims which they had talked over together; but

instead of this he told her that she was his with a suppressed violence which the suppression made more potent.

"Lucia, you know it, too," he said, still savagely; "I swear you know it, too. There is no separate existence possible for either of us."

But Lucia just made a gesture of appeal to him.

"Ah, don't, don't!" she said. "I am frightened."

Somewhere deep inside her she knew that if she only had passion on her side to meet his, the whole thing would be the simplest, most natural, most divine thing in the world. But she had none, and the vehemence of his was unintelligible, and in so far as it was understood, it was terrifying. By her spells she had raised something over which she had no control, and though distantly, so to speak, she could just hear the ecstatic shouts with which she—the worldly, calculating she—welcomed her own triumph, in the foreground there stood this alarming genie which she had raised. Then, to her immense relief, the genie showed another aspect.

"Ah, what a rough brute I am," he said. "I am sorry, my dearest—I am sorry. But your beauty, your 'you' drove me mad."

That was much better; her triumph-song sounded suddenly louder.

"You startled me a little," said Lucia; "it—it is very stupid of me, Lord Brayton; will you be very kind? Will you——"

Then all her courage returned. She had won; she had accomplished what she had set herself to do, had captured this huge prize—had captured, also, a man she liked, with whom she was in sympathy. There was no need for her to say what she had meant to, to ask him to wait for her answer. So, with shining eyes and outstretched hands that still trembled a little with that curious spasm of fear which was as real an emotion as any she had ever felt, she advanced a step to him.

"Oh, Edgar," she said, "there is no need for me to ask you to be kind. I am not frightened any more: I can't think why I was frightened. It is 'yes' my darling, it is 'yes.'"

The sea and the empty sands were witness. Lucia had put a high price on herself, and it was paid. But the price she received was immeasurable in terms of what she asked, for she was given love. And she did not know what that strange coin was; she had never paid it out of her own self. It was scarcely her fault; simply the mint of her personality, the currency by which she was individual in the world, had not coined it. But she was quite willing to entrust all that she knew of herself to him.

She was not frightened any longer, and it was with complete self-possession that she received his kiss on her lips. Indeed, she was on the other side of calm, and

what frightened her before was welcome now. It was even more than welcome, she felt more than kindly towards it. He was a dear to love her like that; she would do her very best to deserve and to meet and to honour that which was symbolized thus. And since to be the self which he had known and fallen in love with was most likely to satisfy him still, with all the intimacy added which that which had happened demanded, she was herself again.

"There! there!" she said. "Oh, we mustn't be 'Arry and 'Arriet at Margate! I must sit down. I think I am—yes, what 'Arriet would call 'all of a tremble.' Do you think being happy makes you tremble, as being frightened does? Oh, Edgar, it was the empty beach to which I brought you."

"Never empty," he said. "You were there."

"The full beach then. Oh, it is full. You see, I never saw you here before. Look at the little bathing tent! Was it lonely, do you think, before you came? Was it waiting? Was the sea waiting, and the sands? Oh, did God make this big shining place just for this?"

It was quite easy to her, now that the savageness had gone from him, to say things like these. She was not consciously deceiving him; she was engaged to him, and merely said what her brain told her was natural to say. Ignorant though she was of love, she guessed its language very well. He listened like one entranced; and he never looked so handsome.

"Yes, that was so," he said. "Oh, Lucia, tell me more of the world and of you."

She let her eyes dwell on him a moment, then sighed and looked largely round. And she spoke, smiling.

"But we have to see the world with our own eyes, when all is said. Things are as they are to us: our consciousness of them is the final appeal. Whether you ask me of the world or of me, it is your estimate of them you want to have told you."

He laid his hand on her knee.

"No, not so at all," he said. "It is your eyes I must see with. You know I began to see with your eyes the very first day, when I had tea with you alone at your house. You made me see my aims with your eyes, and now I must see everything with your eyes."

This, again, was quite in her grasp; the conversation had become a philosophical discussion, intimate, it is true, but comprehensible again to her. She felt she might even introduce a humorous touch into it—a thing that a few minutes ago would have been dreadfully incongruous.

"Ah, I understand," she said mischievously, "I must tell you about yourself, is it not so, because you are me? And I must tell you about the world as I see it, because

that is how you really see it? Oh, it is a beautiful world, and it has all been kindled to-day. It is more vivid. Oh, Edgar, I have it now! We, you and I separate, looked at life with one eye each, as through a telescope. Now that this—this has happened, we are like the two eyes of one person: what we see is solid, instead of being flat. What do they call it? Binocular! And I began to see for you, did I, when first you saw me——?"

"No, not the first time," he said. "I met you in London, do you remember? Your friend Miss Eddis introduced me to you."

"But it was then that you began for me," said Lucia, softly.

"I did not guess it," said he.

"Nor I, then."

The sea was very still; now and then a wavelet hissed on the sand as if it had fallen on molten gold; the wild birds of ocean wheeled round them, a red sail smouldered against the blue. And Lucia tried to feel more than she felt, and could not; but his cup of feeling was full.

There was a long silence; each was looking at the other, Lucia smiling, he very grave. Then her smile broadened into a laugh.

"We must be sensible again," she said, "sensible, I mean, in the practical sense. Oh, how prosaic it is! But please look at your watch."

"It doesn't tell the time any more," he said. "It is now. There is no more than that."

Lucia leaned towards him, and pulled it out of his waistcoat pocket.

"Oh, it is now," she said, "I know that, do I not? But what particular bit of now is it? Ah, it is five o'clock—now. You will just have time to let me give you some tea before——"

"Before what?" he asked. "Who cares?"

Lucia sighed.

"It is very tiresome being sensible," she said; "but hadn't we better let it be tiresome? Besides, I—I want to do something for you——"

"When you have done all?"

"Yes, I want to boil some water for you, and give you some tea. I do really. How silly of me, as if it mattered!"

"Nothing matters so much as what you want," he said.

"Then I want you to get up, and take my hands in yours, and pull me to my feet. Oh, Edgar, this full happy beach! It was so empty!"

"But I never saw it without you," he said.

They walked for some fifty yards back towards the single line of houses in silence. After climax there is always anti-climax, since human life has the deplorable effect of never remaining on a permanent top-note, and to each came anti-climax. To him it came naturally and gently; he had always been intent on what seemed to him the worthy things in life, and he thought of them again in the new light that Lucia shed on them. For a few minutes, or for more than that, all his life, all himself had been absorbed in her. It was no less absorbed perhaps now but it looked out from inside her, and saw the aims, the scope of life, again. Those things were there still the same in themselves, but with a new and wonderful light thrown on to them. But they were there, and it was possible for him to regard them again. It would have been unnatural if he had not done so, for no nature becomes suddenly different from that which it had always been, however vivid and astonishing is any new experience. He had fallen in love with the girl weeks ago, and his outlook was not radically altered because she had accepted his devotion. His nature was not changed because he had the promise of its fulfillment. Whether it was enlarged or not, even, was a question for the future to solve. But the fact that Lucia had accepted his devotion, had confessed to her own devotion for him, did not put a different aspect on what he knew of himself. Intensely happy he certainly was, but he had anticipated this happiness, and thus, though quite unconsciously, he had discounted it. He had not, in fact, proposed to her with any feeling that she would not possibly accept him. He was genuinely in love but he had not anticipated discouragement. But there was no abatement of bliss; "now" was exquisite; but the future would be more exquisite. The smouldering gold of her hair, the flower-like mouth, would be his just as her companionship, her stimulus, would be his. He had felt them his already; he was in love with them all. And his love was accepted; it was returned.

Lucia also had her anti-climax. All that had happened had happened to the utmost pitch of her aspirations, and with the exception of her sudden terror, she had done her part with the completeness that her imagination of it all demanded. His love for her was of an ardour she had not contemplated, but the embarrassment of that was past, and she was at this moment on the top step of all that she had planned. Then, with a furious rush, all sorts of infinitesimal inconveniences which must be averted, came into her mind. She thought these all over, and then, taking his arm, put them into speech.

"I shall love to show you the dreadful little house," she said. "I shall love to go down to the kitchen and boil the water and cut the bread and butter. No; you shall not come and help. I want to do it for you. You will have just time to eat the bread and butter that I shall cut, and then you shall go to the station. Yes; I will walk as far

with you. Oh, how much simpler if you could stop and let us tell Aunt Elizabeth and Aunt Catherine what has—has happened. But you mustn't; I want to be alone with the knowledge for a little—oh, you must really give me that! I want to make it real to me myself, before I tell anybody. Yes; it is real—I know that—but I want to get a little used to it before anybody knows. So—it is hard to say—don't come here to-morrow, even now, when nothing matters except It. I want to sit on the beach again—can you understand, I wonder?—and look at the sea again as I—we saw it, and make all things mine. They are yours just at present; you have taken them from me; and they must be mine again. But not mine any longer, nor yours, but ours."

For one moment Lucia wondered at herself. All that she had felt was that Edgar must go away before the others returned from their expedition to Trew, and that he must not come to-morrow, while Maud would be still in the house. That she would be able to explain things to Maud eventually she did not doubt; but she was not prepared to explain this at once. Things had to be thought over; it was obviously wise to give the best possible aspect to events, especially if they were events that one had caused oneself. And at the present moment their aspect was rather ugly; somehow that aspect must be painted over. She must find a new light to cast on it which should make it appear beautiful. But that she had to think over. It would not do at all if he came again to-morrow in the character of accepted lover.

Her reasons for not wishing to see him the next day enchanted him.

"Yes, yes," he cried. "You make me see. You tell me what I feel also, though I did not know it. I want to be alone with the knowledge for a little—to let it burn in its secret shrine——"

Again she had raised the genie over which she had no control. That which she had suggested for her own petty, paltry reasons appealed to him on another ground, in ways of which she had no conception. Though it was charming to find that her wishes on this subject so mysteriously accorded with his, it was less satisfactory to know that he had arrived at the same goal by some golden aërial route unknown to her. She had quoted, as she knew well, from what Maud had said to her, how that there was something secret about love—some isolating quality. She had extended the principle, it is true, assuming that at the first even lovers themselves wish to be alone, but her extension appeared to be perfectly sound.

The rest of his visit was all it should be. Lucia felt her way with unerring tact and instinct. By a sort of divination she gave him just that which a man naturally self-centred would look for when, for the time at any rate, he has been hoisted out of himself by love. And, indeed, she did it all with sincerity. Ignorant as she was of

passion, she wanted to get as near to it as she could, to understand what he felt, and talk the new language. She was gay and gentle with him, breaking out now and then into childish merriment at this adventure of theirs in having tea in the kitchen. That had been quite unpremeditated on Lucia's part, but it was brilliantly successful, and it was at his suggestion that they had their tea there, rather than carry up the apparatus to the drawing-room. For they found that not only the housemaid but the cook also had gone out; they were quite alone in the house. Then again, even in the middle of her laughter, she would grow tender and grave again in answer to his mood, and let a long silence speak for her. Soon it was necessary to go to the station and wait till his train went.

"Horrid train!" she said gently, raising her eyes to his, as he stood at the carriage window. "Don't ask why; you know."

Lucia had what she called "a big think" all by herself that night. She had gone upstairs to bed rather early, with a view to "getting over" all fatigue and after-effects of her headache, which she said was quite unnecessary, at the urgent advice of Aunt Elizabeth, and in case of Maud's coming in to see if she was all right, had really gone to bed. But she had been very actively awake for the next hour or two, and when she came downstairs next morning, she had formed a resolution which she knew would require all her courage to carry out. Sooner or later Maud must know of her engagement, and that being the case, it was much better that she should know at once. How she would take it Lucia, though she knew her so well, could not guess, but her knowledge of her friend told her that she would be deeply hurt if she found out that Lucia had been engaged without telling her. So she decided, with a view of saving that, to let her know at once, and to tell her herself. It would have avoided an interview which, in anticipation, Lucia almost dreaded, that Maud should learn it as all the rest of the world would learn it, but it would save a far deeper wound to Maud afterwards if she found that she had not been taken into Lucia's confidence. Eleven o'clock had struck before Lucia came to this determination. It took her another hour to think out the manner of what she would say.

The girls went out early after breakfast next morning, before Aunt Elizabeth came down. She came down late to-day, not because she was tired, but because she had been on an expedition the day before, and after expeditions it was usual to come down late. Aunt Cathie waited indoors to give her breakfast, and so the two were alone.

Lucia was rather silent as they walked, with their towels and bathing dresses over their arms, toward the tent, and Maud noticed it. She put her things aside, and

then came and sat down on the sand by her friend.

“What is it, Lucia?” she said. “Is anything wrong? Have you a headache again?”

Lucia took hold of her courage. Her resolution did not fail her; it had got to be done, and, according to her plan, she was going to do it with utter completeness. Maud was going to be told absolutely everything. Lucia was determined to take no risk of her finding anything out afterwards.

“No,” she said, “I have no headache at all. I hadn’t one yesterday, either. Maud, I wonder if we shall be friends in half an hour’s time.”

This bomb-shell had no effect whatever on Maud. Her serenity was quite undisturbed; so, too, was her faith in Lucia.

“Oh, you must be mistaken about something if you think there is any chance of our not being,” she said. “At least, I can only speak from my side of our friendship—no, I speak from yours, too.”

“You don’t know yet,” said Lucia.

“No, but I know you, and I know myself to some extent.”

“But what if in half an hour you find yourself saying that you have never known me?” asked Lucia. She felt herself horribly weak in temporizing like this, but it was more difficult to begin than she had anticipated. Anyhow, she was preparing Maud for something dreadful.

But it seemed as if Maud refused to be prepared. She laughed.

“Darling, you look like Lady Macbeth,” she said. “Do begin; now for the revelations.”

Lucia sat straight up and looked Maud full in the face.

“I am engaged to be married,” she said—“I am engaged to Edgar Brayton.”

For half a second Maud shrank back as if a blow had been aimed at her. But the movement was as instinctive as the wincing from pain; it was not her will that dictated it. Then she took both Lucia’s hands in hers.

“Oh, Lucia, Lucia!” she said. “I—I know you will be very happy. Just give me a moment—just five seconds.”

Scarcely so many passed—and then Maud drew Lucia’s face to hers and kissed her.

“Ah, my darling, I congratulate you most sincerely,” she said. “I was a little brute at first, and found that I couldn’t. But I am all right again now. I *do* congratulate you. I *do*! Friends indeed! What would my friendship be worth if I could think—good gracious!”

Lucia’s eyes suddenly filled with tears—genuine ones. She was immensely

touched.

"Oh, Maud, really, really?" she asked. "Even though I knew all the time what you told me last June?"

Maud smiled—that quiet, serene smile which was so characteristic of her, and lay on her face as sunlight lies on the yellow harvest fields. It lacked the fire and animation that would have been more characteristic of her years, and it had about it the trustful happiness of those to whom experience has brought no unsweetening of their nature. Above all, her smile was full of love rather than enjoyment, of happiness rather than pleasure.

"Yes, but what I told you in June was not my fault," she said; "nor is what you tell me in September yours. Love is like that, I think, Lucia. It comes, it happens."

For one moment Lucia thought of telling Maud all; not only the things that she would certainly find out afterwards, like the fact of her engagement, but the things which, it was to be hoped, nobody would ever find out—namely, the spirit in which she had set out for the capture of this man, from no motive of love, but from simple, sheer ambition, and the triumphant satisfaction of her success. But in a moment that impulse passed, there was no practical end to be served by it, and in truth it was no more than that cheap instinct of honesty, to keep nothing back, that at times assails the most secretive and diplomatic.

"And—and you forgive me?" asked Lucia.

"Oh, my dear, you don't understand; there is no question of forgiveness. It is as I have said. Oh, Lucia——"

Maud stopped a moment, calling to mind the extremely crude things that Lucia had said about love, when they sat in the window seat of the house in Warwick Square.

"How completely love has turned the tables on you," she said. "Don't you remember the dreadful things you said to me that night—that all young men were exactly alike, and that you did not like them, but that you could imagine liking an old man most awfully? And all the time, I remember, you thought you were making discoveries about yourself, and getting to know yourself! Now go on quick—quick, dear Lucia! I am dying to hear it all—all from the very beginning down to the fact of your having no headache. I am sure that will be entrancing. I think we will have that first."

Lucia felt much better. Though she had known how devoted Maud was to her, she had not guessed that her devotion went so far as this. But what it had cost Maud to take her revelations in this way, how fierce had been the struggle between all that was best in her and her sense of personal loss and bitter bereavement, she did not

think of considering. Maud had done her part heroically, had recited like a creed what she knew to be the truest and the worthiest way of looking at this, and had so stifled all in her that cried out against the cruelty of it that Lucia never suspected that there had been struggle at all, or that she was struggling now, and would have to struggle long to be true to her best self. She thought it very wonderful of Maud to behave like this, but to Maud it seemed perfectly natural, as if there was no other possible mode of behaviour. And she accepted this incomparable attitude with gratefulness. Indeed, as has been said, she was immensely touched, and proceeded to the recital of the diplomatic headache with composure.

"I wonder if you will think it was too awful of me," she said. "You see, he wrote to say he was staying in a house near, and asked if he might come over. But you were here, and—forgive me, dear—I didn't know how you would take what I have just told you. So I arranged things, as you see. I meant to tell you about it all. I am telling you now."

Lucia had quite recovered her normal vivacity. She sat up, brilliant, bright-eyed, full of the intensest exultation.

"So I wrote to him, asking him to come here yesterday, and then sent you all off for a picnic. I had to have an excuse for not going, hadn't I? So I invented a headache."

Maud's serenity, however, which had vanished but for a moment, when Lucia told her the first part of her revelations, seemed quite to have deserted her now. She looked at her friend with puzzled wonder.

"But, Lucia, dear Lucia, what *would* he think?" she asked, "when he found you had invited him over here, and received him alone, without anybody?"

Lucia laughed; she was still too much taken up with the ingenuity of her scheme to notice the change in Maud's face.

"Oh, I thought of that, too," she said. "I allow that I had to sit down and think, so to speak, but when I really sit down to think I generally get it right. He found me seated on the beach, and I was embarrassed. I didn't tell a lie, but I said, 'Didn't I ask you for Friday, not Thursday?' And then I broke to him that I was quite alone and that everybody but me had gone for a picnic. He produced my note to show he hadn't made a mistake, and there, of course, it was—'Do come on Thursday.' Oh, Maud, the Bismarck of Littlestone! That's me."

Even now the supreme egotism of Lucia's nature blinded her to the effect that this story of successful diplomacy was having on Maud.

She proceeded:

"And then we walked down on this beach, this dear, empty beach, which I told

him I was so fond of; and he said it was full—full of me! And so there we were. Oh, I am so happy. I don't think anyone has ever been as happy as I. And as for you, Maud, you're a perfect darling! I don't know which of you I love most—I don't indeed."

Maud sat quite silent, while Lucia babbled on. Before, when Lucia discharged the first bomb of her revelations, her best self was in entire sympathy with her friend: it had only been against what she would have called her selfish self that she had to struggle. But now, in order to be in sympathy with Lucia, she had to struggle against her best self, which was in revolt. This diplomacy, the ingenuity of it, the—the meanness of it, and, perhaps, above all, the self-deception of it when Lucia had proudly announced she had not told a lie was utterly antagonistic to Maud; she could not praise it, could not rejoice in its success. It seemed to her that to sit down and think out such means, and then to employ them, infected and tarnished the love on behalf of which they were employed. If only Lucia had felt the meanness of it, acknowledged it, regretted it, the case would have been different, but she gloried in it; she laughed with exultation at the thought of its success. And then, without desire or conscious encouragement on her part, there came into her mind other occasions when for a moment (a moment as it had then appeared of petty disloyalty and suspicion on her part) she had thought that Lucia had acted in a way that was unworthy, deceitful—in a way that she now saw was entirely in accord with this. She could not bear to think that it was Lucia who had done this, or who prided herself on it now. Surely this was not the real Lucia.

"Was it not well thought out?" demanded Lucia in conclusion.

This was a direct question; she paused for a reply.

"Yes, very well thought out," said Maud. "Brilliant, quite brilliant." But cordiality of tone was beyond her; it was as much as she could do to smile in an awkward, distorted way, that could not easily escape the notice of the Bismarck of Littlestone.

"Why, what is the matter?" asked Lucia.

Maud looked at her imploringly.

"Oh, Lucia, don't let us talk about it," she said. "It's time to bathe."

Lucia frowned.

"I want to know what is the matter?" she said again.

Maud gave a little groan of despair.

"Oh, don't be cross with me," she said, "but I hate it, you know. I am so sorry you did it. It can't be right, even in things like a picnic and headache, to deceive everyone like that. And to make him think that you had intended to ask him on Friday, when you had so carefully planned Thursday. And—and to do it all for the

sake of what is so splendid as love; I think that is the worst part of it. Of course, everybody says 'not at home,' because that is only a formula, and nothing depends on it. But to deceive people when a lot depends on it——"

Maud looked appealingly at her: if only she would say that she understood, it would be something. But Lucia did nothing of the kind. She replied in a hard, cool voice.

"I see I made a mistake," she said. "I did wrong to tell you. It was a pity."

"No, no, not that!" cried Maud.

"Yes, just that," said Lucia. "I expect it is always a mistake to be absolutely frank with anybody as I have just been with you. Do you remember that I wondered whether in half an hour we should still be friends?"

Lucia suddenly became aware that she had lost her temper, and that, she knew, was never wise, unless something definite was to be got from it. She saw Maud's look of entreaty, of despair almost, and, after all, Maud had behaved quite splendidly about the more important part of her revelations. She instantly did her best to mend matters.

"Oh, I am such a beast," she said; "but, at any rate I have always told you so, and I have always told you the worst I know about myself. I am a beast—I am. Of course I shouldn't have done all these things; I know it perfectly well, really; but, darling, what would be the use of the General Confession, if we never did what we ought not? We should have to get new prayer-books with the General Confession left out. But when I have done a thing, right or wrong, and it comes off the way I meant, I can't help being pleased and calling myself a little Bismarck. I will promise not to be a little Bismarck oftener than I can help. Now what shall I do? Shall I tell Aunt Elizabeth and Aunt Cathie about my false headache, and the result of it? Maud, I don't believe it would be right. Aunt Elizabeth would certainly expire. That would add murder to my other crimes, which wouldn't mend matters. They might hang me for it."

Maud tried not to laugh, but the effect only made her red in the face first and then the laugh came next. She knew she ought to have been serious, but she could not. And Lucia proceeded.

"Or ought I to tell him?" she said. "Oh, Maud, don't say 'yes.' I should feel so unutterably cheap, and when I'm cheap I'm nasty, and he wouldn't like that. What a brute you are, dear! You've spoiled all my pleasure in being Bismarck. Don't speak till you have counted twenty slowly: I want to think."

Maud had only got to "fifteen," when Lucia interrupted.

"I've finished thinking," she said. "And—I'm sorry. And—Thank you, darling.

Will you give me a kiss or not?”

There is, doubtless, such a thing as a falling-out that all the more endears, but there is, unfortunately, another sort of falling out which does not have such happy results. Outwardly the reconciliation was complete, but to Maud it was as if an earthquake—very slight indeed, but perceptible—had made the very foundations of the noble building of her friendship with Lucia to tremble. The building stood there again, fine and beautiful, but there had been those moments of tremor which shook the foundations of it. And Lucia, on her side, said to herself that she must remember to be careful in what she told her friend. Maud was a darling, but she did not always completely understand. If a girl wanted a thing sufficiently, she would take reasonable steps to procure it, though she herself would never have taken these if they were not necessary. And she, Lucia, was the best judge of what steps were necessary in the management of her own affairs.

CHAPTER IX

Lucia was alone in her white sitting-room on the afternoon of her twenty-third birthday. She had been married rather more than two years; for it was mid-June, and just a month ago her husband had given her the most delightful wedding anniversary present in the shape of an enormous black pearl. He had been rather mysterious about what he was going to give her for her birthday, and had only said that he was sure she would like it very much. She had liked it, and at this moment she was looking at it, or at least looking at bits of it, for it was large, and there was not the possibility of seeing it all together, since the human eye is the human eye. It was enormous, being the entire Kelmscott Press on vellum. But after the black pearl, and Edgar's admission that she would like the new gift very much, she had—no doubt without sufficient grounds—expected that her birthday present would be more pearls, or perhaps diamonds. The Kelmscott Press was delightful; Lucia liked it enormously. But she liked pearls also very much, and just now, in the middle of the season, there seemed more time for them than for Chaucer. Of course, it was charming of Edgar to present her with so magnificent a birthday gift, and she had gasped deliciously when he brought her to it (for it was physically impossible to bring it to her with any ease), but she had certainly expected jewels. For when, a week ago, he was wondering what he should give her—what was worthy of her was his exact phrase—she had told him pointblank she wished for nothing, that she had all, all that she desired, and hoped he would not spend his money on her. Immediately afterward, she had referred to a sale of jewels that was coming on that week at Christie's, and had said there was a diamond necklace (necklet rather, for it was only an affair of twenty stones) that was a dream. She blamed herself now for that miscarriage; she ought to have said it two or three times to make sure. Oh yes, it was her fault, for in an unthinking moment directly afterward she had, still reading snippets from the paper, told him that there was a book-sale at Sotheby's.

As a girl Lucia never wasted much time over regrets, and she wasted very little time over this now. She was going to have a little dinner-party this evening, and a North Pole explorer had sent regrets this morning, saying that he had influenza and could not come. That seemed very absurd; and it was ridiculous that people who exposed themselves to the rigours of those extreme latitudes should get these mild complaints, but there it was, and she was a man short. Edgar (he was a little old-fashioned in some ways) had then volunteered to go out and see if at the club or elsewhere he could find a man, rejecting her proposal to telephone instead until

somebody said "yes." That, again, had seemed to her absurd. What were telephones for except to get people at the last minute? Edgar, however, held a husband's and a dissentient view. He said that anyone who came to fill up a place at the last minute was a benefactor, and that such a man ought to be approached verbatim, with gratitude and apology, not with a telephone. So he went out, armed with gratitude and apology, to seek one.

Lucia, having looked with chastened appreciation at the back of the vellum Kelmscotts, devoted a little time to the general contemplation of those reflections to which Edgar's scruples gave rise. It was her birthday, and therefore a day on which, most naturally, the thoughts are as a header board to project the person who has been born into either the future or the past. Lucia took a neat plunge into the past.

It was a very sunny sea; all had gone extremely well, and even if there were occasional clouds, the amount of sunshine registered was certainly above the normal. She did not seek to deny that she had made certain sacrifices to keep it at the desirable level, but up to the present she saw that her sacrifices had been quite worth while. Yet they had not been inconsiderable. For the first year of their marriage Edgar and she had hardly been in England at all, but had widened their mental horizon by prolonged foreign travel. They had been through Canada, through Egypt, through Japan, through India, and had spent certain dolorous weeks in the South Sea Islands. Then they had come to London for some six weeks of the season, and had started off again almost immediately afterwards to visit other more rarely travelled countries. There was nothing haphazard, there was no idea of merely passing the time about this; it was the fulfilment of preconceived and thought-out ideas which he had broached to her before marriage. The upshot of them, as she went over it in her mind now, did not really give a fair idea of them, since, taken in bulk, they savoured of too rooted a passion for education. But the various items of this menu had been suggested singly; it was only when they were put together that they became excessive. But to her mind now they formed a sort of soliloquy, delivered in Edgar's smooth voice, to this effect:

"You will like to see Canada, my darling, will you not? So let us go there directly after our marriage. The yacht will meet us at Liverpool, and we will go by the Northern route, where we shall certainly see an iceberg or two. Then we will leave the yacht at Quebec, and travel by the Canadian Pacific to San Francisco. I am told that American enterprise has already largely repaired the destruction caused by the earthquakes. It will interest me, no less than you, to see the speed with which the most terrific convulsion of nature is overcome by the industry of man. Think of us! Little pigmies, little ants on a planet, yet whatever Nature destroys is repaired by us

in a minute. It is as if you stir up an ants' nest with a stick. How quickly they rebuild!

"Egypt, Lucia! How I long to see the valley of the Tombs of the Kings with you! What lights you will strike for me! How, with our imaginations helping each other, we will conjure up out of the past the spectre of bygone civilization! I think of my life before I knew you as the vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel. There were facts then, there were cut and plucked ideas then—all dry bones, and I wandered among them. Then you came; bone went to his bone, and already there is standing an army. But I want twenty armies—fifty armies!

"My darling, you don't appreciate Japanese art. I have often noticed that. I shall drag you to Japan; perhaps there I may be of use to you. Give me that chance, Lucia.

"Then for what we neither of us know. Let us see the Southern Islands; see where Stevenson lived, and where he voyaged. Tusitala, the teller of tales. We should both like to see Apia, should we not, and Vailima, and pluck a little of the sensitive plant which he warred against? Oh yes, it will take time, but nothing that is worth doing is waste of time. Two years, shall we give ourselves two years, more or less to get what is to be got from other lands, from the contemplation of other peoples? And then, my Lucia, we will come back to make our home, not complete—heaven forbid I should say that!—but open—open and ready to catch any thistledown of suggestion that floats by, learning, not by hearsay only, but by sight and experience, all that there is of wonder and interest among the other civilizations. And Russia—we must certainly go through Russia on our way back from Japan. And let us end with Greece, and the isles of Greece. The yacht can meet us at Constantinople."

To Lucia now this formed one concrete speech. The voice paused and made one addition.

"And Minorca on the way home," it said. "Chopin, you know. That Polish exile in the blue sea."

Lucia knew that she parodied in her own mind her husband's voice and her husband's ideas. She made it sound priggish to herself, but she knew that she might have projected any part of that programme, or the whole of it, without the slightest taint of priggishness coming in. He loved Chopin, for instance, and what could be more simple and natural than that he should suggest that they should stop at Minorca (or was it Majorca?) on the way home, to see the place where the preludes were written, and where the rain dropped on the iron roof? Yet she framed the sentence he had spoken about it in priggish fashion. She, in her own mind, made him say priggish things even about San Francisco. As a matter of fact, it was she who had

suggested the interest of seeing a town spring up mushroom-like again after the catastrophe. He had merely adopted her suggestion, and had—had phrased it. But that made the whole difference.

He phrased things; that was one of the occasional clouds. He could not avoid seeing things in an improving light. If they went to the National Gallery to see the new Velasquez he would not look at the picture; he would only look at the impression the picture made on him. And all the time, it was she, he told her, who had re-created the world anew for him; it was she who had put into words, and therefore into being, his earlier ideals. She was responsible for the realization of what he had dreamed of—that cultured, critical life of the educated and trained taster. He had only vaguely striven after a life that should be less idle, less card-playing, than that of the ambient world. So, while the world went to Goodwood, Lord and Lady Brayton went to Japan; while the world watched horses racing, they rode donkeys to the Tombs of the Kings; while the world (which was crazy on teetotalism just now) drank barley water, he and Lucia imbibed knowledge.

But the two years they had given themselves to learn all that could possibly be learned by foreign travel was over, and only this morning he had spoken to her of the home life which they would lead in the autumn, between the time when they came down from Scotland and Christmas. They would be at Brixham a great deal, and the house would be constantly full. They would have a dozen big parties at least. And as in those first dear days at Brixham she had opened his eyes to his opportunities which he had no more than dreamed about, so again now she would have to show him the way. They had educated themselves; it was time now to let the world have the privilege of observing two educated people at home, the centre of a cultured, critical circle.

The last sentence was invented parody; he had never said that but it was, though a parody of other words of his, no parody of the idea that prompted them. Put into words, it was that he meant, and that was another of the occasional clouds. And for this cloud Lucia knew that she was largely responsible. Deliberately and of set purpose, in order to make herself real to him, in order to attract him to her, she had at the beginning of their acquaintance, which had ripened so rapidly, said exactly that sort of thing to him about his life and his opportunities. She had told him what a magnificent rôle he might play—how he might spread culture round him (this was scarcely even a parody of what she had said), and in this idle and pleasure-loving age form a new and wonderful cult for all that was lovely. Her own sentences, in fact, though with the stamp of his personality upon them, were repeated to her. They had inspired him in the first instance, but she did not find them inspiring now. But she

had not been altogether insincere when she first found words for his aims; for before that she had imagined for herself a life of brilliance, not brilliant only from the merely worldly point of view, but keen with culture, eager after what was beautiful, quick to perceive. And he had taken her by the hand and said: "Lead me; be my guide to the beautiful life."

Hitherto, in these two years of travel, they had been learning, but somehow, though in it there had been much that was edifying (and, indeed, hardly anything that was not), Lucia had not found anywhere the magic that she had once told him was in Schubert, in a *la France* rose. Though Egypt, for instance, was most interesting, and though a knowledge of the history of the Pharaohs was undeniably a proper ingredient in that complex affair called culture, she felt that neither of them had assimilated the mysterious land of the ancient river. She did not find Egypt—Egypt itself, that is to say, Egypt assimilated—in the neat list of dynasties of which Edgar had made two copies, one of which he pinned up above the washing-stand in her cabin, and the other beside the looking glass in his, so that he could learn it while shaving; nor was she any nearer attaining it when they said the dynasties to each other at breakfast, nor when they rode across the noon-struck desert to where, on the gray hillside, Hatasoo (eighteenth dynasty succeeded by Thothmes III.) had raised the temple of Deir-el-Bahari. Nor did Egypt pass into her blood even when on the deck of their dahabeeah after dinner, with the stars burning large and low down to the horizon, and waking points of wavering reflection in the steel-coloured water of the river, Edgar repeated to her in his precise and even voice Shelley's "Ozymandias' Sonnet." Indeed, one thing only in Egypt, if the truth was known (which it was not to her husband), had made any really vital impression on her.

That was when one evening at Cairo they had gone together to a café to see native dancing. It was a tawdry affair enough in itself: there were a couple of Nubian girls laden with brass necklaces, and blue beads and wisps of staring Manchester-dyed clothing, who performed the *danse de ventre* to the accompaniment of a couple of drums stretched over half a tortoise-shell, and three or four squealing, tuneless pipes. The floor was sanded, the walls, decked with a few prints better not looked at very closely, and soiled fragments of embroidery, streamed with moisture, and two or three dozen natives, with a stray tourist or so like themselves, squatted on the floor, and watched the dancers with growing excitement. The air was hot and stifling, but somehow genuine: it was heavy with the smell of cheap incense and street scrapings and cigarettes. They had scarcely been in the place for a minute, for Edgar had taken her arm and led her out again as soon as the style of the entertainment was manifest to him, and had apologized to her afterwards for not finding out about it

first, and had spoken severely to their dragoman for letting her ladyship go into such a place. And all the time Lucia had longed to stop; there was nothing shocking in it: it was merely primitive. And it was real, it was human; it was, though not ancient Egypt, modern Egypt, and in that one moment modern Egypt had become more real to her than ancient Egypt had ever been, even though they evoked its spectre with neat dynastic lists, endless visits to temples, and the repeating of the most suitable poetry. They both of them had large quantities of its history by heart before they left Port Said again to go eastward, but that assimilation which is necessary before facts can become the food of culture, that kindling of the blood, as with romance, had not occurred. Lucia felt that she had got no more nourishment, mentally speaking, from Egypt than she would have got in a bodily sense by swallowing quantities of Brazil nuts without cracking their shells. Indeed, the simile might be pressed a little further. Instead of receiving nourishment, she was conscious merely of a violent mental indigestion, and the very mention of a temple gave her qualms of nausea. She had digested just that one thing—the grinning Nubian dancing girls, the heat, the eager faces of the natives, the good, stuffy, sweet smell of living things—hot, southern living things.

It was the same wherever they went. Lucia, quick to learn and retentive of memory, was a positive encyclopædia of Indian affairs, of its art, its history, its flora, and its fauna before they touched at Bombay. But there was the assimilation still wanting; the country did not get into her blood, though here again she had a vital moment, when at the close of a day of great heat they saw Delhi smouldering under the dusty crimson sky of sunset.

But Edgar, though she did not believe that he assimilated any more than she did, seemed not to want to assimilate. It was enough for him, apparently, to place in the well-ordered shelves of his mind the volumes of knowledge, now profusely illustrated by the memory of the places they had seen. To sit with her at Colonus, and read Mr. Murray's translation of the famous chorus, was sufficient; that appeared to make Colonus his. Or to read the account, in Mr. Grote's history, of the battle of Marathon while seated on the shore of the little bay was to make Marathon his own. He went even further than this. On one day of the sudden Greek spring he repeated to her the stanzas of the first chorus from Swinburne's "Atalanta in Calydon." That, for a moment, reached her, and when he recited the line, "Blossom by blossom the spring begins," and she saw the thickets and broken ground at the foot of Pentelicus starred with the crimson anemone, and feathered with orchids, her emotion was stirred; the line became part of her and beat in her blood. But Minorca (it turned out to be Minorca) had been a dismal failure as far as she was concerned.

He had played her the prelude where the rain drops on the roof, but the piano on the yacht was not in very good tune, and she felt no more than she had felt when she played it on Aunt Cathie's piano at Fair View. But this performance, very meritorious in itself, for he played well, had been quite sufficient for him. He had put Chopin into his bag. That was just it; he put everything into a bag, having wrung the neck of each thing first. His bag bulged with dead, genuine specimens. Lucia's bag was nearly empty, but what there was in it was alive, and pulsating with her own blood. The tawdry Nubian dancing girls were there, the smell of Egypt was there; there was a dusty crimson sunset, a wild thicket at the foot of Pentelicus. And privately she thought that, little as she had really got from this long tour, she had got far more than he. He, if you will, had learned a dozen new languages; the defect was that he had nothing worth saying to say in them, while she had but a few babbling words in the tongues in which he was so glib, but her words meant something; they signified.

There was one cloud more dangerous than all these, which she thought about also. It was no bigger than a man's hand, but it was well above the horizon at the close of their second year of marriage. Sometimes she questioned herself as to whether, if she had gone to all these magical lands, either alone, or with Maud, or even with Aunt Cathie, she would not have had a richer harvesting. And as soon as she asked herself that question, there was no longer any need to ask it, for it was already answered. There was something in Edgar that, for her, killed romance. More than once, on an evening on the Nile, for instance, she had felt the romance of the ancient mysterious land floating like some dim beautiful bird above her, drawing nearer to her in the dusk. Then Edgar with an apt quotation, or a few remarks about Amen-hotep, had shot it quite dead, so that not a single heart's beat was left in it when it fell, a bundle of bones, at her feet. He, satisfied both with his fresh addition to the bag, and also with Lucia's lip-appreciation, so to speak, of his marksmanship, remained completely unconscious of his fatal aim, but Lucia already wondered what would happen when that man's-hand cloud cast a shadow over him also, when he saw that he, who should have been for her incarnate romance, was the agent who, not in Egypt only, or in Greece, but wherever the two were together, unintentionally and unerringly destroyed all romance for Lucia.

Probably he would never know that; Lucia felt that it would be a supreme stupidity on her part if she let him.

But in spite of these clouds she was extraordinarily content. She had not asked life to give her romance, but success, and that, as far as she had gone, it lavished on her. She had, from the social points of view, that most brilliant gift of all—namely, the faculty of enjoying herself—compared to which wit and mere cleverness are but as

the copper change of a new sovereign. From the first moment of her appearance in town as Edgar's *fiancée*, the whole world saw that she had that splendid birthright; wherever she went, whatever she did, she brought with her the splendour of her pleasure, the invigoration of her superb spirits. Even in the scarcely detached limits of Fair View, it has been seen how, when she took herself in hand and determined to make the best of her cabined circumstances, she so quickened the lives of her aunts that the one learned French and the other a new patience, and now, when every door was open to her, and everything that money and youth and health can offer was waiting her pleasure, it was little wonder that the outpouring flood of her delight was irresistible. In the first few weeks that she had spent in town a year ago she, knowing that she was new to the game of enjoying yourself as much as you possibly can, had watched with attention and perception what people who were successful at it did and did not do—what were the rules, in fact—and it took her a very short time to perceive that there were no rules at all that she was in the least likely to transgress. A man might not wear his hair long (unless a pianist) or cheat at cards; a woman—there really was nothing she might not do, except be brought into the divorce court. Apart from these things the only road to success and popularity was to enjoy yourself. Plenty of people get on excellently by pretending to enjoy themselves; Lucia in this, at any rate, was genuine—she was in love with life.

This sketched analysis must be taken as the dissection of her consciousness of her attitude towards external things as she stood looking at the backs of the vellum edition of the Kelmscott Press, and from it, it will be seen that the last two years had altered her very little, but it seemed as if she had lived a dim, subaqueous existence until the time of her marriage, like the chrysalis of some water-breeding fly. Then the moment had come; she had floated up to the sunlit surface, had crawled out from her confining sheath, and had spread gauzy, iridescent wings to the summer air. Not that she ever floated aimlessly about; it was no brainless life that she so strenuously enjoyed, with nothing but a waltz tune singing in her head, and nothing but her own replete engagement book to read. She enjoyed with her brain as well as with her body, looking not only with her eyes on the kaleidoscope of life, but interested, almost absorbed, in the instincts and impulses that made it move and glitter. She read much, she studied drama and music, she loved the rapier flash of argument and criticism, and if she lay awake at night, it was not with the memory of a waltz, but with the excitement of some well-played scene in a play, or the relentless tragedy of the Dusk of the Gods. But as a matter of fact she lay awake very seldom.

Lucia, after an interval of a year, had been in London only a fortnight, and that fortnight had been very busy. In fact, but for a hand-press and a smile of genuine

pleasure at a dance, she had not yet seen Maud. That was nearly a week ago, but on that occasion she had urged Maud to come to lunch any day, since she made a rule always to be in at lunch. But no sign had come from Maud till this morning when, over the telephone, she proposed coming in to see Lucia about five, if she would naturally be in then, and they could have a talk together. Lucia had been just a little piqued by Maud's apparent indifference to the fact that she could come and have lunch any day; of old she felt that Maud would probably have appeared not only any, but every day; indeed, before coming to London this year, Lucia had hoped that, though it would be delightful to see her old friend again, Maud would understand that one's time was really not one's own, and that the old long talks, prolonged into the night, and the mornings spent together, were out of Lucia's power now. She did not mean to drop Maud at all—nothing was further from her thoughts; but in these weeks of whir and rush, one's duties had to come first, one's pleasures afterwards.

But she awaited Maud's arrival to-day with eagerness; indeed, she did not like to think that they had been in the same town for two weeks and had only once set eyes on each other. She felt inclined to blame her friend a little for this; Maud could not possibly have nearly as much to do as she, and yet she had never once come near her. Yet, after all, perhaps it was not her fault: everybody was up to the eyes in June; June was a close time for friends. You only saw a million acquaintances. But when London was over, she would insist on Maud's coming with them on the yacht, or spending a fortnight at least with them in Scotland. Real friendships, so Lucia considered, must not be lightly broken. She herself had not changed at all towards Maud; she was quite as willing as ever to be adored. But even now, when Maud had made this appointment for five, she was late. The goddess was waiting; why "lagged the tardy worshipper"?

Lucia never wasted time on regrets, and now she began making out the arrangement of the table for her little party this evening, while she waited for her friend. It was going to be quite small, but she proposed to enjoy it very much; and in asking her guests she had told them all that nobody must go on to dances or music afterwards till half-past eleven at the earliest, since she wanted a talk with everybody. But the table could not be completely arranged, since Edgar had gone out to seek a man instead of letting her order one by telephone. She could not tell who he might be; he might be important, or he might not. But, after all, it was going to be a perfectly informal evening, so whoever he was, he must sit on her left and take in Fay Alderson, who was amusing enough for anybody. That was the best way to settle it, and——

Ah, Maud at last. Lucia got up, feeling very cordial, and putting an added touch of eagerness to her manner to show that she was not hurt by Maud's neglect of her.

"Ah, you darling," she said, "how delightful to see you! Here am I, quite, quite alone, according to your orders, with all my engagements until dinner ruthlessly cancelled, so that we might be alone and have a real, real talk. I am at home to nobody, Rackson, whoever it is. No, don't sit down at once, dear; I want to have a good look at you first. Maud, I almost wish I had sore eyes: they would be quite well again now. There now, you may sit down: you have not changed a bit in this last year. You are absolutely my own Maud."

Lucia almost felt all she said. Maud was such a satisfactory person; she was so genuine, so sterling, you could completely rely on her. She, on her side, too, was delighted to see Lucia, and the old glamour and charm asserted themselves at once. But she was a little embarrassed and had not the gift, like Lucia, of working the embarrassment out of her system by voluble but slightly exaggerated speech. The exaggeration was only slight, but it was there, and consisted in the fact that in the matter of friendship Lucia took the part, to-day, rather of the wooer than the wooed, knowing that she reversed their positions. Maud took refuge in sincerity instead.

"It is dreadful that I haven't set eyes on you all these weeks," she said, "for I don't count meeting you at a ball as setting eyes on you. One never truly meets a friend at a ball; people don't go to balls, they only send their society-wraiths there."

There was a neatness of phrase about this that surprised Lucia. Maud was not apt in speech; she was reticent, and found expression difficult, and this little bit of social criticism was astonishingly trenchant. Lucia loved all that was clean-cut.

"Ah, that is quite brilliant," she said. "I have long wanted to know what gave the air of unreality to all parties. You have absolutely defined it; there is nobody there; it is only the society-wraiths of people one knows that crowd the room. Yet is there nobody who is genuine all the time? I should have thought that you were. To have moods doesn't mean that you are not genuine, for moods are not poses. Though one is all sorts of different people, they are all oneself. But don't let us talk about abstract questions yet. I want to know all your year's history; I want you to know mine. Let us talk about ourselves entirely for half an hour."

Maud smiled at her with that old sweetness and serenity that Lucia knew so well, and at this moment somehow envied. Three years ago Maud had been the fairy godmother who gave Lucia London treats and though the positions were reversed, for Lucia quite meant to give her old friend treats now, she wondered if it was really possible to do anything for one who was so evidently happy. That word came to Maud's lips, too.

"Of course, I want to know everything in detail," she said, "but it is all summed up in a word. I do hope you are quite happy, Lucia."

Suddenly Lucia thought she was not if she compared herself to Maud. She had certain clouds, after all; Maud looked as if she had none. She enjoyed herself quite enormously, and never till this moment had she wondered whether that was the same as happiness. For the present, in any case, she assumed that it was.

"Happy? Yes, brilliantly happy," she said. "It has all been the most wonderful success, and I am sure Edgar is happy, too. We both want still; that is such a good thing, for I think that happiness really ends when you have all you wish for. That must be so dull."

Maud thought she could only be speaking of one thing, namely her childlessness.

"Ah yes, of course, dear, I understand," she said. "But when you have one child, which pray God you may, you will want another. And then you will want to see them grow up."

Lucia had not been thinking of this at all; all that was in her mind was the little clouds that have been spoken of. But she picked up her cue instantaneously.

"Yes, of course, there is that big want," she said; "but even apart from that it is nice to know that the little wants are not dimmed or diminished. Oh, Maud, delightful as all our wanderings have been, it is nice to settle down. I want—oh, I want to squeeze every ounce out of life. I want everything, all the arts, all the witty and beautiful things of the world, to yield their uttermost. And the amazing and glorious thing is that they never can. Even while you suck one orange another is ripening. Worldly? I don't think it is worldly. It is to make the best possible out of this world, to use all that is given us."

Maud laughed.

"Anyhow, you haven't changed in the least," she said. "You are still quite deliciously rapacious."

Here again was neat phrasing. Lucia just noted it, but her egotism for the time was *in excelsis*, and she went on.

"That is what dear Edgar does not quite understand," she said. "He is not insatiable as I am. He does not want all there is. I told him so the other night, and it rather puzzled him. I want him to get me the Pleiades to wear in my hair; I want to wear the moon as a pendant round my neck; I want Saturn and Jupiter to shine in my girdle; I want Venus. But I was out of breath, and so I told him I would be Venus myself. And there is so little time; the years pass so quickly; since I married two have already gone, and I haven't begun. I know I have all the time there is, but they ought

to have made much more. The days become weeks, and the weeks months, and there are only twelve months in a year, and even if I live to be eighty I have only fifty-seven years more. And by then I shall be old and ugly, and probably deaf, but I hope not dumb, and all the sap will have run out of my life, and I shall be raddled in the face and rheumatic in the joints. Oh, it's damnable! Have some more tea."

Lucia laughed, then stopped abruptly.

"I don't know why I laugh," she said. "It is all serious enough, and most depressingly true. I am made that way, and it's not my fault, and it's no use blaming me. You might as well blame a colt because it isn't a cow. Thank goodness I'm not a cow. There are only two sorts of people: colts and cows. The cows are the good ones, who are quite content, and give quantities of warm, white milk to other people. The rest are colts; they want to kick up their heels and snuff the morning air and neigh, and then run as hard as they possibly can because they have such beautiful limbs. Already, you know, to do me justice, I have run a good long way. Three years ago I was in that awful little Fair View, with the railway embankment behind, and that was all I had, living with two perfectly delightful old aunts, it is true. But to live with aunts wasn't much for a girl who even then wanted the heavenly constellations to stick into her bodice. And the horizon was bounded—except when you were a darling, and gave me a heavenly week in town—by the roofs of the Laburnums and the Hollies and the Pomegranates. How I stifled! It seems to me perfectly incredible that it was me—this me—who used to talk French with one sloppy girl, and play duets with another, while Aunt Cathie beat time. And those were the comparatively palmy days."

Lucia paused a moment, the hour of sincerity was here; she spoke that which she was.

"Before that," she said—"before that I lived in Brixham, and there was, so I thought, nothing whatever there of any sort or kind. There was really. There were all the materials of what I have called the palmy days, but for a year or two I lived there—this identical, actual I—without seeing anything that broke the endless gray monotony of my days, or any way of escape. And what pleasant memories and associations were mine! A home broken up, a father dying in disgrace. Maud, it is awful to confess it, but all that really went on in my emotions concerning him was something very like hate. Otherwise I had no emotions except always the frantic sense of wanting, and the utter incapability of ever getting. I held Aunt Elizabeth's skeins of brown wool—oh, everything was brown—and she made headrests of them, because antimacassars was a vulgar word. I know it was quite suitable, really; she had an antimacassar mind, and warded life off. Yes, that's what she did, she

warded life off—shut the windows and drew the curtains so that by no chance could it ever come in. Then she sat down and played Miss Milligan. After which, Miss M. being shy, and not wishing to come out, we all kissed each other and went to bed, to prepare ourselves for the duties and fatigues of the next intolerable day."

Lucia drew down the corners of her mouth, making what she called an "archdeacon face."

"Not that we hadn't our times of delirious excitement," she said, "which gave us headaches. There were the garden parties. The Bishop came once, and the garden, being exactly eight feet by ten (I used to play lawn tennis in it with Aunt Cathie, who wore sand-shoes) and there being nine people present as well as a tea-table, it was quite a crush. The Bishop drank three cups of tea, and said the flower-bed was a blaze of colour. He preached next Sunday about the gardens of our souls, which made us feel public characters. Aunt Elizabeth almost deprecated such publicity. Everybody knew he had called the flower-bed a blaze of colour."

Lucia suddenly became quite serious.

"Oh, Maud, I could cry to think of the wasted years! What wouldn't I give for just the time I spent there, or the time that Aunt Elizabeth is spending now! She doesn't care for it. She gets no enjoyment from it, any more than she gets from the best silver teapot which was presented to my grandfather the Dean, and is never taken out of its tissue paper. It's not fair. I grudge people having things they don't use and don't enjoy, when I could use them so beautifully. They ought to be mine—they really ought."

Lucia had not changed in the least; Maud felt that more strongly than ever at the end of this brilliant piece of egotism, but she had certainly developed. Whether that development was satisfactory or not Maud did not, for the present, inquire. The charm of Lucia's vitality held her again; it was mental champagne to be with anyone who felt so keenly, who desired so greatly.

She laughed.

"Then would you propose to kill everyone who was not enjoying himself," she asked, "and put the years he would otherwise have lived to your credit balance?"

Lucia's eyes lit up.

"Ah, if it could be done!" she said. "Surely it would be an admirable arrangement. It would be a true kindness to put them out of their boredom, just as you put suffering animals out of their pain. Can't we manage it? Edgar shall bring in a Bill for the extinction of the bored in the House of Lords. It won't be a party measure. Besides, being bored is one of the worst social crimes; it is an infectious disease, too. You catch it, if it is about, unless you are very strong. Ah! I should take

away from everybody not only the time they don't enjoy, but the things they don't enjoy. Somebody would be the happier, I shouldn't wonder, for Aunt Elizabeth's teapot. Certainly, he ought to have it, then."

"Leave me something," said Maud.

"Yes, dear; you shall be left all you have got, and shall have heaps of things besides. You look tremendously happy. I hope you have been getting all sorts of nice things."

"I have been. And I'm going to get the nicest of all."

"Maud! tell me at once! Why haven't you told me?"

"You really haven't given me an opportunity," remarked Maud.

"I give you one instantly. I will never open my lips again. I guess, of course, you are going to be married. How very nice! Women never begin to count until they are married. Quick! Who is it?"

"Charlie Lindsay. He is a cousin of Lord Brayton's. But I don't think you know him, though I think you met him once at Brayton's."

"And why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because he didn't tell me before. He only told me yesterday. Nobody knows yet, except you. I had to tell you at once, Lucia, because——"

Maud paused a moment; words were always difficult to her when she felt deeply.

"Because I knew you must often have wondered, dear, whether you had come between me and my happiness. I was such a little brute to you down at Littlestone, when I didn't instantly congratulate you when you told me you were engaged. I know you must often have causelessly reproached yourself. So I had to tell you at once."

Lucia came and knelt down by her friend.

"You darling!" she said. "It is sweet to be believed in like that. Maud, you are the best friend a woman ever had. Now——"

Lucia, contrary to custom, found it hard to proceed.

"Now perhaps you will think me utterly heartless," she said, "but I will confess. I didn't reproach myself. It was inevitable; I couldn't help it. You can't help love, can you? You said so to me immediately—immediately afterward. Now I want to ask such heaps of intimate questions."

"You needn't ask the intimate questions," said Maud. "I can give you the intimate answers. I don't think my first—you know—was—was much. It wasn't like this, anyhow. There is nobody else but Charlie. That, frankly, was why I haven't been to see you these two or three weeks. Wasn't it horrible of me? I simply didn't want

you.”

“And now?” demanded Lucia.

“I am so happy that I want everybody, and you most of all. So I came.”

“And you’ve allowed me to run on about my little wee concerns, while you were bottling this up?” said Lucia. “How could you?”

Maud smiled deep down in her brown eyes.

“Oh, it was such fun!” she said. “When you were small, didn’t you ever put an arm out of bed on a cold night, to have the joy of putting it back again? I kept myself in the cold just like that, hugging myself to think how nice and warm it would be when I told you. Oh, Lucia, I am so happy—so utterly happy.”

And once again Lucia wondered whether, compared to this, she was happy. This time she knew she was not. And she felt herself envious of her friend’s bliss; she wanted it herself.

CHAPTER X

Maud had scarcely gone when Lucia's husband came in. Most opportunely as he entered she had just taken up a volume of the Kelmscott Chaucer, and was reading it. The action had not been entirely spontaneous; she expected him to be back very soon, and it would certainly please him to see her already using his gift to her. Lucia never neglected the small change of kindness and pleasure-giving, just as she never forgot to tip a porter. She just smiled and nodded at him as he entered, and went on reading; it would please him better to see her absorbed in the book than that she should pay any attention to him. He paused behind her chair a moment, saw what she was reading, and passed on very complacently to the tea-table.

Then Lucia roused herself.

"Yes, dear, I'll come and give you tea in a moment," she said, "but oh, Edgar, I must just read you a line. Listen—

"'Whan Zephirus eek with his swetë breathe
Enspired hath in every holte and heethe
The tender croppës and the yongë sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfë cours ironne
And smalë fowlës maken melodie,
That slepen alle the night with open eye.'

Oh, is not spring there? Do you see the daffodils? There, I will give you tea. I won't neglect you for the daffodils. Ring, darling, will you? This tea has been standing, and I will not permit you to drink tepid tannin."

He laid his hand on her head a moment.

"Yes, I see my daffodils," he said.

He rang the bell and came back to her.

"What magic there is in words," he said. "Words always seem to me to have a music and a colour of their own as melodious as a symphony, as vivid as a Giorgione. It isn't only what they mean; it is the words themselves. Let me cap your Chaucer—

"'Der Winter floh, und Lenz ist da.'"

Yes, he had capped it, as you cap a candle with an extinguisher. Out it went. It was his very precision of thought that deprived it of all its meaning.

"And have you cooped yourself up all afternoon?" he asked.

"I haven't stirred. I expected Maud, you see, and then I had my new friends."

And she nodded and just kissed her hand to the regiment of the Kelmscott Press.

"Oh, and it is too exciting about Maud," she said. "She told me that it was to be announced to-morrow, that I might tell you now. She's engaged. Guess? No, don't guess, because you might guess right, and then I should be deprived of the pleasure of telling you. Charlie Lindsay, my scarcely-seen cousin."

"Ah, lucky fellow!" said Edgar. "I am delighted, though; Miss Eddis will be exactly the wife for him. Charlie is too much of the disinterested critic with regard to life, instead of being an actor in it. She will make a man of him instead of letting him remain a Skimpole all his life. I like Charlie very much, but he is a little Skimpolian."

"Oh, but I hope Maud won't entirely cure him," she said. "Skimpoles aren't common; I think they should be preserved. It is rather nice that there should be a few people with no sense of duty or responsibility. They make one feel young."

Edgar did not in the least agree with this.

"We will discuss that," he said (and instantly Lucia felt as if she never wanted to hear the word Skimpole again), "though I do not think you could really justify what you say, dear. By the way, a curious coincidence. The first man I saw to-day at the club was Charlie, and being afraid I might not see anyone else, I asked him to dine to-night to fill your vacant place. He had another engagement, and though I urged him not to throw it over when I heard that, he really insisted on coming. He said the other engagement was a nightmare, and he proposed to have a sharp attack of influenza, especially as he is going out of town to-morrow for a few days. It was a little annoying, for at that moment Gerald Plympton came in, whom I would far rather have secured for you if possible."

"Oh, Edgar," said she, "I am glad you didn't. He would have to sit next to me, and he is heavy—heavy. He has a greater sense of responsibility than anyone I know."

Edgar considered this.

"I think that is why I like him," he said. "He spends the whole day in his office, and personally reads every paragraph that is to come out in the *Daily Review*."

"I should expect that," said Lucia incisively. "I know now why it is so unreadable. It reeks of responsibility."

"You are rather down on the sense of responsibility to-day," he remarked.

"Yes; I think it is the fault of Chaucer. I like the 'smallë fowlës maken melodie' better. They are so improvident and irresponsible. Sometimes, do you know, sometimes I wish you had been a labourer, with eighteen shillings a week. Then on Friday evening we would have gone to the Queen's Hall with the last two shillings, and have had nothing to eat till you got your wages on Saturday. Oh, Edgar, it is

delightful to be rich, but I wonder sometimes whether it would not be more exquisite to be poor. To do things we can't really afford! I think one would value them more. If you just manage to get something, you like it better than if you get it quite easily."

Lucia had gone too far; she had roused what she did not intend to rouse.

"How often have I wished that!" he said. "I wish I had been a breaker of stones on the road opposite Fair View. You and I would have been together now, just the same. And we could have denied ourselves for the sake of what we loved. You would have whistled the 'Unfinished' to me again. You whistled it from an upper window when I called on you the day of our cricket match. So it has become not Schubert only, but you and Schubert."

Lucia laughed.

"After all, Schubert began," she said. "You might call it Schubert and me, not me and Schubert."

"But he left it unfinished until you came," said Edgar.

He felt what he said; it was a lover's speech, but he could not help being neat over it.

Lover and killer of romance! Lucia hardly knew in which character she found him most difficult to respond to. Sometimes he killed external romance, when she believed it was just on the point of becoming luminous to her; sometimes, as now, he suddenly hoisted the flag of internal romance, and she had to be the wind to make it wave. And there was not a breath of air in all her welkin. She had, so she pictured it to herself, to go swarming up the flagstaff, and with her hand pull out the flag, and hold it extended, so that he might think it was waving. Never yet had she failed to do that; her arm might ache, she might be busy with other things, but she never failed to agitate the flag. That was clearly her business; it was her part of the bargain. But she wondered sometimes, and wondered now, how long she would have to go on doing this, for how many years more he would continue hoisting the flag for her to wave. In course of time she supposed he would cease to be her "swain," as his favourite Elizabethans phrased it, and she looked forward to the more prosaic years with more than equanimity. Just now, too, the whole impression made on her by Maud caused her to be both envious and impatient of romance. Maud was haloed with it; it shone from her. And Lucia, though she had never authentically felt it, recognized its authenticity in others. It was so common, too; it was a thousand pities she had missed it. The people who changed hats knew what it was, the couples who moored punts underneath the trees of Cliveden knew it; it was only she who had to contrive to appear to know it. Others had not to think; they just did as they felt inclined, changed hats or what not, and that was somehow the genuine thing. Even Edgar's

invariable neatness did not blind her to the fact that he, too, was genuine. Though it was no beacon flaring from the windy mountain-top, like that which led Siegfried to Brünnhilde, that burned in him, it was the authentic fire, though burning, so to speak, in a neat grate with polished fire-irons, and a small broom to sweep the hearth with.

Lucia, a little impatient, a little envious, failed to wave the flag for the first time.

"Oh, my dear," she said, "your compliments are charming, but are they quite, quite sincere? If you said I wrote for you a third verse of 'Her golden hair was hanging down her back,' I could understand, but when you tell me that I have finished the 'Unfinished' for you, you strain me a little."

She saw his face fall, she saw a pained surprise come into his eyes, and instantly repented of her impatience. It was always a pity to disappoint people, unless to fulfil their expectations implied an exertion disproportionate to the pleasure you gave, and she instantly attempted to remedy her mistake. She sat down by him and took up his hand.

"It is so strange, so incredible to me, to think, that I, this foolish flippant I, can be that to you," she said. "Sometimes I can't believe it, because it makes me out to be such a wonderful person. I am sure I disappoint you sometimes, and to finish the 'Unfinished' for you would imply that I was never disappointing."

"You could only disappoint me by doubting my love for you," he said.

That would have been enough; unfortunately he completed the sentiment.

"Or by making it possible for me to doubt yours," he added.

That was tiresome; Lucia had to think very rapidly and very intently before she replied. Then she withdrew her hand.

"Edgar!" she said, with an excellent suspicion of tremolo.

He softened a little, but he still felt that his reply had been just.

"But, my darling, what was it you said to me? That you could not imagine being more to me than the third verse of some dreadful vulgar song. What am I to gather from that? Surely that you believe that my love for you is not the wonderful thing it is. You make out that the very foundations of our life are unsound."

Anxious as she was to close this rift without delay, she could not help mentally criticizing what he said. It was like him—oh, so like him!—to say "a dreadful vulgar song." He had to put that in. Then she attacked the main question with extreme adroitness.

"I imply nothing of the sort," she said, speaking quickly. "I have told you already what I meant. I never doubted your love for me. It is left for you to do that, if you choose. I only wondered—as I told you—how it can be possible that I should inspire it."

She could not have done better than to seem deeply hurt. That appealed not only to his love, but to his manhood. So she forgave him, and promised that the thing should pass out of her memory, and be as if it had never been. It had not been he who had spoken.

But for him now, as well as for her, a cloud had risen on the horizon. Just for the moment, in this renewed sunshine it was invisible, but it was there, and some day it would quite certainly appear again. Just now he could with all sincerity accept his wife's explanation of what had so wounded him, for, indeed, it was admirably reasonable. But that which she had explained so well had gone deeper than her explanation of it. She had but smeared paint over the rift. But he did not know that now.

Lucia never did things by halves, and since she had promised to expunge the incident altogether, it was part of the fulfilment of her bargain that she should be in the highest and most exuberant spirits at their little dinner that night, and she came downstairs prepared both to enjoy herself and to show Edgar that her forgiveness included that higher power of forgiveness which is to forget.

"Oh, it is easy to forgive," she had said to him once; "it only requires a sort of cow-like meekness to do that; but the forgiveness that counts forgets as well, and to forget an injury does not mean that you have a bad memory, but that by an effort you turn the thought of it out of your mind. It will come back, and you will have to do it again, until it sees that your mind is no place for it. So remember, whenever I injure you, I expect to be forgiven like that."

It was this that she was quite prepared to do now, for even an hour only after the occurrence she believed, though without conscious self-persuasion, that she had something to forgive. She forgot also, with swift and astonishing completeness, the amazing cheapness of her own share in it all, her feigned reproaches to him, her half-choking justification of herself. All that she remembered (and regretted) was the moment when she had been betrayed into candour and frankness. She must guard against that happening again. For that, in order to insure the success and happiness of her marriage, for his sake no less than for her own, was the wisest and most sensible way to behave. He had married her, it is true, under the slight misapprehension that she loved him, and for two years she had, with the exercise of a little tact and thoughtfulness, kept that illusion undeniably alive. It would be, so to speak, grown-up murder to kill it now; if she had meant to kill it, it would have been better to have committed infanticide, and have done so immediately after her marriage. To be frank with him now could only lead to unhappiness and misery for

him and great awkwardness and discomfort, even shame, for herself. Frankness was the refuge of the tactless, thought Lucia, as her maid clasped her pearl collar round her tall white neck; they blurted out unpleasant truths because they had not the finesse requisite to play a delicate part. Honesty was the best policy only of those who were not politicians.

Charlie Lindsay, a thing not rare with him, was the last to arrive. To-night he was a notable last, and made a somewhat talkative entrance, with the butler close on his back to say that dinner was ready.

"I am so sorry," he said to Lucia, "but I thought Edgar said half-past eight."

Here his eye fell on the clock.

"That won't do," he said. "It would make me a quarter of an hour early, instead of being a quarter of an hour late. Tiresome as it is to be late, it is better than being early."

He broke out into a perfectly natural, boyish laugh, as he shook hands.

"I will try to think of another excuse, if you wish," he said.

Lucia laughed too; there was something extraordinarily attractive in his complete lack of shame.

"Yes, please, I want another excuse," she said. "Try to do better, won't you? Will you take in Mrs. Alderson and deposit yourself between her and me? You know her?"

"Yes, rather. I am in luck."

Lucia devoted herself at first to her right-hand neighbour, and talked Strauss with him. Fay Alderson and Lindsay on her other side appeared both to be talking at once, with shouts of laughter, and it was only a sense of duty that kept her from joining them.

"Nine bars of orchestra," said Lord Heron impressively, "and into those nine bars he has put all the ardour of the East. It has been a hot day, and the air is full of the fatigue of its hours. Then the curtain goes up on the courtyard of Herod's palace. There is the green tank behind, the young Syrian and the page of Herodias are talking together. The short tragic phrases fall drop by bitter drop like blood, hot and corrosive."

"How wonderful!" said Lucia absently, for from the other side came the most enchanting fragments.

"So she put the peacock in the cupboard, don't you remember?" said Fay Alderson, and Charlie's laugh showed that he did.

Elsewhere, too, round the table everyone seemed to be full of laughter, all except Edgar, who was saying something about the photographic instantaneousness of

Japanese art to Lady Heron, who did not know a picture from a statue. But for some reason, which Lucia did not yet grasp, being still new to London, Lady Heron "mattered." She was a tall, handsome, grey-headed woman, who had both a past and a present. She had not in the least lived her past down; she took it about with her still, like a dachshund. Lucia meant to study her very carefully; nothing in the art of living should be overlooked. Then she recollected she had spoken absently, and turned eagerly to her neighbour again.

"I adore Strauss," she said, "if it were only for the fact that he makes Wagner sound so melodious. Then somebody will come who will make Strauss sound the sort of music that you can carry away with you. I never heard of anyone yet in whose head Strauss 'ran.' Fancy having Strauss running in your head. I must get Edgar to take me to hear 'Salome.'"

Lord Heron shook his head.

"No, go alone," he said. "It is almost always a mistake to hear music with other people, just as it is a mistake to see pictures that are new to you with other people. You want to find out first of all what you think of them, not how they strike other people. You couldn't read a book with somebody else reading over your shoulder."

"Ah, no; but because you want to turn over before he had finished, or be afraid that he would want to turn over before you."

"It is just the same with music or art," said he; "somebody points a thing out to you before you have really come to it, or else hasn't got to the point you have got to. It is just like the turning over of pages."

Certain moments in her months of travel with Edgar occurred to her. It had been just as Lord Heron had said: he was often at points which she had already traversed, or to which she had not yet come. She could not help alluding, though distantly, to this.

"Ah, that is interesting and true," she said. "If two people are both genuinely interested in something, they can easily get on each other's nerves, in spite of their interest in the subject, and their—their affection for each other. You would say that was because their minds did not keep the same time."

"No minds do," he said, "in matters of art. For two people to attempt to see any new and complex work of art together, and expect to keep in harmony themselves, is a thing as impossible as it would be for two people to play a duet together if the music was written in one time for the bass and in another for the treble. As you say, they will also get on each other's nerves, and each will say that the other is not keeping time."

Again Lucia's private thoughts were reflected in her speech.

"But cannot one of them play so loud that he does not hear what the treble is doing?" she asked. "He will be unconscious of her music, and just thump his own, and say 'How glorious!' when he has got to the end of the piece."

Lord Heron liked this; he was heavy of body, and inclined, when left alone, to be pompous in mind. But he appreciated agility in others.

"Yes, that may happen," he said, "but the treble will probably refuse to be thumped out of existence for ever. She will play a few pieces with him, and then—go and play pieces with somebody else."

Lucia still pursued her private theme.

"But the bass may go further," she said. "He may kiss her hand at the end and say, 'How wonderfully you played that! How you inspire me!' All the time it has only been his own music that he really heard."

He laughed.

"Then she ought never to have consented to play duets with him at all," he said.

At that moment the compass-needle of conversation swerved. Beginning at the other end of the table, Edgar suddenly spoke to his left-hand neighbour about Japanese art, and the direction of talk altered. Fay Alderson turned to the left, and Lucia turned to the left also.

"I love seeing an excuse discomfited," she said to Charlie Lindsay. "You surely ought to have looked at the clock before you said you thought dinner was at half-past eight."

"I looked at you first," he said.

Conversation had blossomed again.

"Maud's friend," he added quietly.

"Yes, she was here to-day. She told me, you know. I congratulate you most sincerely. Yes, I am her friend. She is adorable, is she not? Nobody knows it so well—anyhow better—than I. Oh, this isn't dinner-talk. Do let us talk about Maud afterwards. At present, who put the peacock in the cupboard? No, on the whole, don't tell me; priceless fragments can be marred by their context."

"I want to talk about Maud," said Charlie.

"Then you mustn't. I hear you threw over another engagement to come here. I thought that was charming of you."

"Edgar is a dreadful gossip," said Charlie. "I recommend you never to tell him anything private. Do you know, I was staying with him when he went to Brixham to pay calls, and found you alone."

"And he told you?"

"How could I know otherwise?" he asked.

"Oh, do be indiscreet, Mr. Lindsay," she said, "and tell me what he said when he came back. It's about me, you know; all women want to know what others say of them."

Lucia looked at him a moment, mischief dancing in her eyes, which found something that answered it. How boyish he looked; how young she felt! That was the Skimpole effect.

"Did he do me justice?" she asked. "Do give me handles against him; I never can get any of my own finding. He is always up to the mark. But do tell me he said something unappreciative."

No young man dislikes being treated intimately by a woman, even if he is just engaged to another. Charlie did not dislike it in the least.

"No, he was tremendously appreciative," he said. "I got rather bored with you, in fact. But I thought you probably wore spectacles."

Lucia did not say "Why?" She thought it over for a moment, then exploded with laughter.

"Oh, I see perfectly," she said. "I quite understand your thinking that. I must really wear them whenever I meet you; it was so right of you to think that. There was Schubert's 'Unfinished' on the piano, he told you that?"

"He did."

"And Omar Khayyám on the sofa?"

"So he told me."

"And—and what vulgar people would call antimacassars on the sofa?"

Charlie shook his head.

"No, he never told me that," he said.

"That was dear of him. Because they were there. Do go on. I quite see about the spectacles. What else did you think? Oh, be honest; there is nothing so little likely to be found out. Tell me with detail what you thought I should be like."

Charlie guffawed.

"Remember I am not insulting you," he said. "I'm only damning myself. I thought you would have spectacles as I said. I thought you would have large kind hands. I thought you would have an intellectual expression."

"I have," she exclaimed.

"Yes, no doubt, but that isn't the first impression when one sees you. Is it?"

"I hope not," said Lucia. "I'm sure an intellectual expression is delightful, yet I hope not."

"Why?"

Lucia refused ice, and put both her elbows on the table.

"Because Maud hasn't got an intellectual expression," she said.

"No, thank God!" he said.

"Ah! why that?" she asked.

"Clearly because as she is quite perfect as she is, and has not got an intellectual expression, I thank God she hasn't, since any alteration must be for the worse!"

"Oh, but that is not very nice for her," said Lucia. "It means that any change in her implies deterioration."

Charlie laughed.

"That's what comes of being perfect," he said.

There was something final about this: he seemed rather to sum up what they had said instead of leaving an opening for further developments in the conversation. She took his hint as instinctively as he had given it.

"You must bring her down to Brayton in the autumn," she said. "We are going to be there from October straight on for ever and ever. Do you know, I can't imagine you and Edgar alone. What do you talk about?"

"His character, chiefly," said Charlie.

"Ah! he would like that," said Lucia. "I mean he loves discussions."

Charlie filled his mouth very full, so as to avoid an immediate reply. He was shaking with internal laughter, for the first part of Lucia's speech had been so obviously genuine and unpremeditated; the second sentence so gloriously lame. Then, unfortunately, their eyes met; by a superhuman effort Charlie swallowed half a peach, and they both laughed.

"But he does love discussion," said Lucia.

"I know. So do I. Don't you?"

This was rather adroit.

"Yes, I like it, with limitations. But I don't think it's really the most enjoyable form of conversation."

"What is, then?"

"Ridiculous conversation—conversation which you can't remember afterwards, and only know that nobody listened and everybody laughed."

"Ah! let us have lots of that at Brayton," he said.

Lucia suddenly gave a little exclamation of annoyance. Cigarettes had been handed round almost during dessert, and she, without thinking, had taken one. Edgar knew she smoked in private, but he held very strong and marvellously old-fashioned views, so it seemed to Lucia, about women smoking in public. This was one of the things in which she gave way to him without a murmur; it mattered very little to her,

and for some reason which she could not understand he disliked it. But for the moment she had entirely forgotten, till, looking up, she saw his eyes fixed on her in distinct disapproval. The disapproval she tacitly resented, but she was annoyed with herself at her own forgetfulness, and instantly quenched the burning end of her cigarette in her finger bowl, and gave him a little glance of deprecating apology across the table. But Charlie had heard her exclamation, and followed the little drama with comprehension.

"I'm sure he has discussed that with you," he said.

Lucia collected eyes, and rose.

"I love prejudices," she said; "it is they that make people individual. People's dislikes are always more characteristic of them than their likes."

"Their likes? The likes of them?" he asked.

Lucia laughed at the futility of this.

"Ah! keep that for Brayton," she said.

Their guests showed no tendency to wish to go on anywhere, and the prohibition to leave before half-past eleven was universally construed as a permission to stop till twelve. There was a little music, and a couple of bridge-tables had been put out, but Edgar noted with satisfaction that, though Lucia had twice called attention to these, nobody had played.

"It is too pathetic that most people cannot get through an evening without sitting down to win each other's money," he had said to Lucia once. "Do let our house be known as one where anybody is, of course, perfectly at liberty to play cards, but where nobody does."

This was immediately after their return to town this year as they were driving home from a house where Edgar had been compelled to make up a table, and had lost twenty pounds with remarkable rapidity. Lucia felt dreadfully inclined to ask him whether the idea was that the richness of tone in their house was supposed to be the deterrent, but wisely refrained.

"Oh, I quite agree," she said. "It shows an uneasy consciousness of one's lack of ideas to sit down to bridge immediately after dinner. People like playing largely because it prohibits conversation, and prevents their barren minds being exposed."

"Then let us never have a card-table put out when we entertain," he said. "Coming fresh to London, we have to experiment rather, to make trial hosts of people, but that will sift them."

There was something priceless about this, but she replied quite gravely.

"Ah! let us go one better," she said; "let us have bridge-tables under our guests'

very noses, and see how much more attractive they find conversation."

She had forgotten about this as a matter of fact, but Edgar had not, and when he came upstairs again after seeing the last guest off to-night, he pointed to the tables.

"You were right, darling," he said. "Nobody wanted to play. Nobody does, except when he is bored. I noticed also that, though carriages were announced at half-past eleven, there wasn't a move made till after twelve."

Lucia was a little sleepy.

"I think it went off all right," she said. "I don't think people found it tiresome. Oh, Edgar, I am sorry about that cigarette. I was interested; I quite forgot."

He made a great concession.

"I am inclined to relax my prohibition," he said. "I noticed Lady Heron smoked, and I talked to her about it. I said I did not wish you to smoke in public."

Lucia resented this; she was quite willing to indulge any foolish prejudices of her husband, provided they did not seriously inconvenience her, but she rebelled against the tone that alluded to them as a prohibition to her.

"I don't think you should have done that," she said. "It makes one out a child, as if I should not do as I choose."

That would not do; that was a mistake. She instantly covered it up.

"Darling, it makes you such a Bluebeard," she said; "and you are not. But as the prohibition is relaxed, we needn't say any more about it. Oh, Edgar, I thought Charlie Lindsay was delightful! What nice relations you have got. He is so quick, too, so intelligent. He gives a staccato note."

Edgar stiffened slightly. Charlie had been a little flippant in the hall on the subject of the widening effect of foreign travel. He had told him that his mind must be as broad as it was long after all that voyaging. Also he had an allusion to make to Lucia's last speech.

"One moment," he said, "and then we will talk about Charlie. I think you said 'As if I should not do as I choose.' Do you imply that you would not be guided by me and my experience in such matters?"

Lucia felt a sudden exasperation at this. But she checked it admirably.

"My dear, my own experience of women smoking is necessarily greater than yours, owing to my sex. The whole matter is infinitesimal, though; it is not worth discussing. Besides, I neatly and immediately covered that up by saying that you made yourself out a Bluebeard. I crossed the other out—erased it."

Edgar paused with his finger up, a trick he had in discussion, showing he had something to say.

"Ah, I put my finger on a weak spot in your argument. You say that, owing to

your sex, you have a greater experience of women smoking. A quibble, my darling, a palpable quibble. We are talking of the impression produced on the world by women smoking in public, not on the inhalation of tobacco smoke."

"My dear, you shall have it just your own way," said Lucia, "especially since the prohibition is relaxed. I repeat that I thought Charlie Lindsay delightful. We shall, I hope, see a good deal of him. That will naturally be so, will it not, as he marries my greatest friend!"

Edgar contemplated the very shiny toes of his evening shoes for a moment in silence.

"Perfect frankness is the foundation of success and happiness and harmony, is it not?" he observed. "So I will be perfectly frank."

"That means you have some objection to make, I suppose," said Lucia.

"Why do you anticipate that?" he asked.

"Simply because nobody calls attention to the advisability of frankness when his views coincide with another person's."

"Well, to a certain extent you are right. I wonder, anyhow, that you think so highly of Charlie. My experience of him, you will allow, is greater than yours, and while confessing that at first I found charm in what you call his quickness, his intelligence, I find in him now—especially after our two delightful years of travel—a superficiality and a flippancy that you also, I feel sure, will soon perceive. Frankly, then, Lucia, I do not think of him as one of our habitués, one of our more intimate circle. I hasten to add, however, that I see that it is possible, even probable, that Miss Eddis will do much towards making him more cultivated, more earnest. Shall we for the present dismiss the subject? We are not likely to quarrel over it."

"Especially if we dismiss it," said Lucia. "But with your own admirable frankness, I would just like to add that though your experience of him may be—is—greater than mine, it does not follow that your judgment is more correct. Also I have asked him and Maud to lunch to-morrow. I hope you don't mind."

"Ah, my dear Lucia, how can you think me so infinitesimal?" he said, laughing. "And now let us talk for a moment of a subject far closer to us, and dearer to us both. My darling, you are splendid—you are superb! The chorus of admiration of you from our guests when I saw them off! And the loudest voice in the chorus was Lady Heron's. She was immensely struck by you. Some little phrase of yours—what was it? ah—yes, about people being only the society-wraiths of their real selves at balls and big parties, took her fancy immensely. She said that we—she was kind enough to say 'we,' but it was mere politeness; she meant you—that we must inaugurate an intellectual regeneration in London."

Lucia looked up quickly.

"Did she really say that?" she asked. "What a darling!"

"Indeed she did. I had quite a long talk with her downstairs. Another phrase of hers—'London hates bluestockings, but adores fine minds.' She noticed, too, that nobody played bridge, and said that alone was an intellectual triumph."

Lucia laughed.

"She seems to have been laying it on pretty thick," she remarked.

"Ah, the repeated word always loses its lightness. You would not have said so if you had heard her."

Lucia laughed again.

"It is a good thing I did not," she said, "or I should have been puffed up. Now, dearest, I must really go to bed. I have an enormous day to-morrow, and there are at least two balls I must go to in the evening."

She paused a moment in front of him, fingering the stud in his shirt. Though the evening had been so successful, and though he was clearly pleased with her, there had been certain moments in the day the memory of which she wanted to expunge completely from his mind. There had been that little passage before dinner; there had been just a shade of friction about her smoking, and about Charlie in this last talk.

"I am so pleased," she said; "and I have had a beautiful birthday. And I am most pleased of all that I have pleased you. I always want that most, dear. And if ever you think me tiresome, or wilful, try to remember that that is the surface only, and deep, deep down—— There, you will get conceited, too. Don't sit up too late."

"I am coming upstairs immediately," he said.

CHAPTER XI

Lucia rode divinely, and certainly Edgar was delighted to supply her with divine horses to ride. He did not very often in London accompany her himself, for after being up till the small hours began to grow large, he did not feel inclined to tackle the middle-sized hours again, but preferred that they should pass over his head like a troop of ministering angels while he slept. But Lucia, to whatever hour she might have been dancing, was always ready to be up again by eight, and usually began the day by a gallop in the Park. Sometimes Maud rode with her, sometimes Charlie, occasionally both. On this particular morning, half way through July, it was Charlie for whom, so it turned out, she waited by the Alexandra Gate.

"Oh, you are late, Charlie," she called to him. "Don't try to excuse yourself; there is no clock. Did you ever see a more heavenly day? How hot it is going to be, and in three minutes how hot you are going to be!"

"Morning, Lucia," said he. "How long did you sleep last night?"

"I never know the time. And what is the use of knowing at what hour by the clock you go to bed or get up? People invented watches, and then became slaves to them, so that they get up and go to bed or have their meals when watches and clocks point to a certain hour. I go to bed when I am tired of being up. I get up—yes, I suppose I have to mention the hour. But it isn't the hour that matters; it is to see the young day that matters. Oh, don't talk so much. Only birds are fit to talk early in the morning, because they just sing in gratitude for the nice big worm they have swallowed. Charlie, let's go and drink the dew and eat a few worms, and then sing till evening. Then more worms, and you tuck your head under your wing—have you got a wing? mine are sprouting—and go to sleep again. Yes, don't talk so much. We will gallop up to the end, and then seriously gallop down the mile, and after that I shall be able to speak. And why isn't Maud here? She is as bad as Edgar; they both want to sleep and sleep. Aren't they darlings? They really were made for each other. Now, ride!"

The day was of midsummer; it was no apology for blue that domed the sky; the colour would have been considered blue anywhere. Rain had fallen during the night, and now, as Lucia looked on the lime-leaves, clean and varnished with the fall, and on the pearl-laden grass, she remembered having woke once during the night while it was still dark, and having heard the beautiful whisper of its outpouring. Across the path from the Serpentine came belated bathers, towel on neck, who, like-minded with her, made the most of the morning hour when all London forgets itself, and is country again. As they raced, tan-scattering, past the Knightsbridge Barracks, some

bugle sounded, and there was a stir of erect figures. A little mist, born of the night-rain, hung in the air, and the steeple of the Albert monument just pricked it, showing gold against the blue. Houses were a little veiled in these ascending vapours, and the roadway outside the Park was damp with them, so that Prince's Gate looked like a line of Venetian palaces, with the dark water of a canal (the wet wood of the street) reflecting them below.

Lucia turned to her companion, snuffing in a great restful breath of the cool morning.

"Don't speak," she said, "nor will I. But, oh, it's so nice!"

They cantered round the short bend at the top of the mile and then turned on to the straight.

"Now," she said.

They started level, and she had to check her mare to let the shorter stride of Charlie's cob keep pace. There was no wind; the elms by the side of the Serpentine were towers of motionless leaf, but the movement of their going made a soft, steady breeze to hum against them. Of other sound there was none, except the soft rhythmical chant of the horses' hoofs, scattering the loose brown stuff behind them. Occasionally one or the other of their mounts tossed a bridle, with a little jingle of a bit, or the mare blew out an audible breath from her wide nostrils. Then, too soon, the mile was over, and Lucia drew rein, with a great deal to say.

"The complicated life!" she said. "That is what I love. Oh, how I despise simplicity of existence; to be content with it shows a very low vitality, or very high stupidity, probably both. I like to ride like this, then to rush home and have no time for breakfast, because I am going to see the Rodin Exhibition at ten. Three-quarters of an hour there, and then a dressmaker; then lunch with Madge Heron, then a concert; then I must be at home for an hour, because I have told fifty people I shall be in; then I shall read till dinner, dine, dance, and get to bed about this time to-morrow. Let's turn and walk up under the trees. Don't you agree, Charlie?"

"Oh, I like it," he said—"heaven knows I like it! But I haven't got a passion for it, as I think you have."

Lucia looked at him sideways a moment.

"I believe you have, too," she said, "only just now you have put a lid on it. Oh, a lid of gold, I grant you; no one knows that better than I. But a lid."

Charlie did not affect to misunderstand this.

"I'll tell Maud you called her a lid," he remarked.

"Do. Charlie, you are the luckiest man on the earth."

"That I know. About the lid. I don't agree with you. Maud has got just as much

intellectual and artistic and human activity as you have; it is merely a question of *tempo*. But when God wrote your music, Lucia, he marked it *prestissimo*."

Lucia flicked off with the tassel of her whip a fly that her mare was twitching its skin to get rid of.

"Probably," she said. "I maintain, however, that He marked you *prestissimo* also, and that Maud crossed it out and put *andante con moto*."

"No, she played me her own piece, and I liked the time better than that of my own. I crossed mine out."

Lucia thought over this a moment.

"I crossed Edgar's out," she said, "and substituted *presto*; but he got hold of it, and wrote the old direction in again: *allegro ma non troppo, e ben marcato*."

"Yes; he always was *ben marcato*," said Charlie.

"And always will be. But I am learning that it is never the slightest use to interfere with somebody else's *tempo*. Everyone proceeds at the *tempo* to which he was set. You might as well try to alter a person's character. You can make people act as if their characters were not what they are, but the character itself cannot be altered by other people or by circumstance or life. You can squeeze it and squash it into all sorts of other shapes, like those india-rubber faces you get on crackers; you can make it wear all sorts of different expressions, but the moment you put it down it goes back into what it was before. And *tempo* is decidedly a part of character."

Charlie laughed.

"Then we might all of us have spared our pains in crossing each other's *tempo* out and substituting a different one," he said.

"Yes, that seems to be the conclusion. Not that we shall any of us cease continuing to do so. You see, character is destiny; that's what it comes to. Or you can call it the divinity—or something else—that shapes our ends, but divine or not there is something in ourselves that shapes our ends; and that something is character. Dear me, I think I shall write a small book of table-aphorisms. 'Character is Destiny,' shall be the first. Yes, 'Table Aphorisms by a Lady of Title.' That's the sort of thing which the serious-smart like nowadays. They think it is so clever, and they find they can all do it, which is very gratifying. Of course, they can when they are shown how. You only have to think of an idea, and then say it in as few words as possible."

"The serious-smart?" asked Charlie. "Is that the same as the New Set?"

"Of course; you belong to it. Edgar is delighted with me because he says I invented it, brought it together. He and Madge Heron were quarrelling about it the other day; she says I only precipitated it, which is probably much nearer the mark."

“How precipitated it?”

“Oh, don’t you know how, if you drop some sort of clear solution into another clear solution, they both become cloudy or solid or something? Cloudy is more the word with the serious-smart; they are a little vague, and tend to confuse Moroni with Murillo.”

“I don’t,” said Charlie stoutly. “I know nothing about either. You can’t confuse two things if you are totally ignorant of both of them.”

“No, you are rather refreshing. Oh, Charlie, isn’t it a pity that I am made in such a way that I instantly begin not to care about anything very much as soon as I have got it! And the worst of it is that if it was then taken away from me, I should miss it. However, there is lots more to get, even with regard to the serious-smart; in fact, it has only just been born and baptized. No; when I come to think of it, Madge is wrong and Edgar is right. After all, I did invent it; it is just what I sketched out to him three years ago, in a small backyard at Brixham, with luggage-trains squealing all round, and Aunt Cathie in sand-shoes doing the pear-tree touch while Aunt Elizabeth made headrests. I don’t mean that all these things happened actually together, but they are the composition of the picture. It was then I really had the moment of inspiration which led to all that has happened since. I told him of my vision of him as the centre of an artistic, intellectual set of eager, beauty-loving people. I said the vision was of him, but it was really of me. And it’s all coming true. We work, we study, we appreciate, we criticize. By the way, he is going to take a house at Fantasie, near Baireuth, for the festival, and we are going to have a sort of Bowdlerized Boccaccio party. There! again it sounds as if I was laughing at it, but I’m not, I’m not!”

“I hadn’t heard of that before,” said Charlie.

“No, it only occurred to him yesterday. I wish you and Maud could come with us, but you will be on the honeymoon, I suppose. Oh, Maud was so divine the other day—more divine than usual, I mean. Zimpfen had been playing the ‘Appassionata’ at my house *too* perfectly, and Gertie Miller was there, who is very, very anxious to learn, the darling, but cannot avoid exposing her ignorance in a manner that is almost indecent. Well, as you know, the second and third movements of the sonata are always played as one, and when Zimpfen had finished, and we were all a good deal emotioned, Gertie said to Maud: ‘Isn’t he going to play that heavenly last movement?’ But Maud can’t be unkind—except that she told me about it afterward—and only said: ‘I don’t think we had better ask Herr Zimpfen for it; I fancy he is not satisfied with his rendering of it.’ Wasn’t it darling of her? And Gertie said, ‘Oh, how sweet and remembering of you!’ Where was I? Oh yes, you and Maud will be

honeymooning still, I suppose. Couldn't you have an eclipse for a week and join us? You will have had a fortnight by then."

Charlie looked at her, smiling.

"'O moon of my delight that knows no wane,'" he quoted.

"Then you can easily spare a week, if that is the case," said she.

"It is so kind of you," he said. "Personally I should love to come, if we are anywhere within reach, but I don't know if Maud——"

"Oh, then Maud will love to come too," said Lucia.

They had walked their horses slowly to the west end of the mile by now, and Lucia looked longingly down the broad brown ribbon of it. But she shook her head; the sun was already high and had wiped the washed face of the earth; it was time to get to work again.

"I long, I just long for another gallop," she said, "but I am late already. Do get Maud to come out to-morrow, and let us start at half-past seven. We shall get an hour then. Good-bye, Charlie; we shall meet again somewhere, I suppose, in the course of a few minutes."

"Mayn't I ride home with you?" asked he.

"No, I think not," said she. "It would be a pity. We should have to bawl remarks at each other if we talked at all in these roaring streets. Remember to tell Maud about Baireuth."

Though beyond doubt the New Set, such as it was, had been invented and prophesied by Lucia three years ago, Lady Heron, in spite of Lucia's demur, was more right than Edgar when she said that his wife had only precipitated it. For just as in Brixham, in the days of the lean years, so here, on a larger stage and with greater luxury of appointment, Lucia had done no more than to make herself a rallying point. She had, so to speak, the quality of centrality; whether at Newnham or at Brixham or in Prince's Gate, she was apt to be in the middle of a group, not revolving round others. Nor was that strange; with her charm, her position, her beauty, her brilliant vitality, it was small wonder that where wealth alone can do so much, she easily and without effort made herself a very central situation. The imitative instinct of the world did the rest; for two years she and her husband had been known to be on a pilgrimage of culture (on board a most luxurious yacht), and culture this year became a craze, especially when it was seen how delightful the pursuit of culture was. For it was still more than permissible, it was even desirable, to go much to the Opera, to attend concerts, to stroll about the National Gallery or the Tate, the spacious halls of

which were much cooler and more airy in this torrid weather than the middle-class suffocation of the Academy. Dress, again, was by no means beneath the notice of the cultured; indeed, in the chase of beauty it was incumbent on its huntresses to be exquisite; they had to realize as completely as they could in themselves the ideals at which they aimed. Even the palate, too, must share in the education of the senses, and the lamp of Art must shine in the kitchen, no less than from glowing canvas and the piercing sweetness of the horns. Nor did this renaissance cause an emptying of ballrooms. Dancing was an exquisite thing, an art; so, too, were the music of voices, the gleam of diamonds, the great staircase hung upon, as with a swarm of bees, by the brilliant crowd, the entrancing rhythm of the band.

All this to Lucia and to many others was absolutely real. She, like a large minority of those among whom she moved, had a potential passion for the beautiful and exquisite things of Life, but she became, as has been said, the centre of what in the microcosm of London was a real movement, because her passion for these things was articulate; she understood with her fine taste what was fine, and she could talk about it in a way that was marvellous to all those whose emotions, as is generally the case with English people, are the subject on which they are most dumb. She enjoyed, too, but not pedantically, as it is to be feared her husband did; he could never completely get out of his head that it was more improving to the mind to listen to a Beethoven symphony than to hold four aces at bridge, whereas to Lucia these unimpeachable moral sentiments never occurred at all. She preferred Beethoven to bridge merely because she enjoyed it more, but she could and did play bridge with remarkable acuteness when, so to speak, Beethoven was not present. All that was sincere, but what was not less sincere was that it was all part of her plan. She had intended to have everything, and she was raking it in.

What had established her, had made her the authentic centre of this really considerable constellation, was the Brayton week. It was extremely daring, and, like all really daring things, unless it is a fool who has dared, it met with the success it merited and she leaped on to her throne. Toward the end of June she had observed that the second week in July was a perfect congestion of gaiety in town, and she had then and there written thirty notes to her most intimate friends, who, like herself, would be engaged over the page on each day, and asked them to come down to Brayton for a full week from Monday to Monday. They were going, so ran the note, to have a really nice time. There would be a band in the house, and the French company were going to play two—well, two nice little plays; otherwise—it was a little scratch gathering—everyone would do exactly as he chose. There was golf and rather good fishing, and the garden was looking nice. In fact, it would be a sort of

retreat, with a little music in the evening. No doubt lots of people would come down for the day (underlined) on most of the days, and stop to dinner and go up late, but she particularly wanted the recipient of this note to spend the whole week there. It would be so cool and pleasant to sit in the garden and read books, and not talk unless you felt inclined, and you *must* come. The notes were all delivered by hand.

Edgar had been simply craven over this experiment.

"They will all refuse," he said, "and where will you be then? You will have to begin all over again, from the very beginning, and besides, London never forgets a failure!"

Lucia stared at him in blank incomprehension.

"Begin what all over again?" she said. "What do you mean? London never forgets a failure? You speak as if I was fighting for a place."

"Dear, it is rather strong to expect people to leave town in the middle of July," he said.

"Then they won't come," said Lucia, "if they don't want to. I only want, and so do you, to have a quiet week. Personally I believe that plenty of our friends want it too. I may be wrong. If I am, what happens? You and I will have our quiet week alone. I shall—I shall just love it!"

"But the band and the French company?" he asked.

Lucia dimpled at him.

"I'll pay for it all," she said, "if it turns out we are to be alone, out of the ridiculously enormous allowance you give me. It is your birthday this week. But now explain; begin what all over again?"

Edgar felt a thrill of wonder at her, as no doubt she had meant he should do. She seemed genuinely unconscious, so he thought, of the wonderful power she was becoming in the microcosm, and the words had slipped from him, betraying his knowledge of that of which she seemed so unaware. It was better to explain.

"I spoke as a spectator," he said, "when I should have spoken as your husband. You are doing such wonderful things, Lucia; you are realizing all your dream for me so completely, that I cannot help sometimes looking on, so to speak, observing how you succeed. But I am wrong; it is only you fulfilling yourself."

"Certainly that is all," she said; "but you still distrust me, not my plan, any more, but my instinct. Wait until we get the answers to my notes."

Acceptance after acceptance came in. It appeared that everybody longed for exactly that which Lucia had proposed. But Edgar was still timorous.

"But think of the dinner parties you have spoiled," he said. "You will make an enemy for every night of the week."

“Hush!” said Lucia, “and go away. I shall be very busy for an hour. There will be no enemies at all, because I am as clever as I am beautiful. Darling, tell them to send me up reams more paper and packets of envelopes.”

There were five nights in a week, Saturday and Sunday of course not being reckoned, since everybody would be out of town, and Lucia had a dinner engagement for four of these, while on the fifth she had a tiny dinner herself, with music and people afterward. All the diners had accepted her week, instead of the dinner, and she wrote to all those who were “coming in afterwards” to ask them to dine at Brayton instead. There would be a special back to town. Then she crossed “Thursday” out; Thursday was settled.

Monday and Tuesday—she had to consider very carefully. They were dining with the Duchess of Wiltshire on Monday, and with Mrs. Eddis on the Tuesday. She wrote to the Duchess first, who was one of the *intimes*, though at present she had not asked her for the week.

> “Darling Mouse:
>
> “Don’t be cross, but do let me be rude, and not dine with you on Monday, July 6th. Because Edgar and I are going to give a quiet week down at Brayton, and I want you most awfully to come there on Tuesday, and stop till the following Monday. Do come; the whole world is going to be there, I hope, and the French company for two nights, and we really shall have great fun. We shall read books, and sit on the lawn, and play golf, and I personally shall talk to you all the time, if you will let me.”

Mrs. Eddis—it was better to write to Maud:

> “Maud, it’s *too* awful. I’ve asked heaps of people down for a whole week at Brayton from July 6th, and now I see I am dining with you on the 7th. If you can forgive me, come down on the Wednesday, as you can’t come before, or, of course, otherwise I should have insisted on your spending the whole week with us. Do say ‘Yes.’ I think I will promise that Charlie says ‘Yes’ when he knows.
>
> “Yours,
>
> “Lucia.”

Here Lucia bit her pen for a moment. No; it didn’t matter about Mr. and Mrs. Eddis. She would never know if they were friends or enemies. Who cared?

Wednesday and Friday alone remained. She did not want either of her hosts on those nights to stay at Brayton, but she wrote the most charming letter to each, asking them to come down (special) and dine on each other's nights, and hear respectively the string band and the French play. As a postscript, she gave them her opera box on Monday and Tuesday.

Mr. and Mrs. Eddis! She sighed at her own thoroughness, and opened the note to Maud, though she had already closed it, and added that she would be so delighted if her father and mother would use her box on Wednesday. Then she telephoned to the box office, to tell them to let it on the three remaining days of the week if they could.

Such were the preparations for the Brayton week. As they proceeded, Lucia saw what she had not fully grasped at first, the magnitude of its significance, if it succeeded. Nobody had ever done anything like it before, and to plan it and execute it at the last moment had the daring of genius. True, if it failed, she would have not only to begin at the beginning, which was as far as Edgar's purblind vision had taken him, but to begin at a disadvantage, as a minus quantity. On the other hand, if it succeeded, she would leap at one bound to an astonishing preëminence. To empty London for a week in the middle of the season (as the world counts empty) had hitherto been the office of some institution only like Ascot. And as the hours went on, and the telephone rang, or notes were brought her, she saw that she had not been rash, only daring. Everyone was coming; they could settle their differences and inconvenience among themselves; they had thrown each other over right and left in order to come to Brayton. On the minor readjustments which her plan had entailed, she no longer cared to speculate; as far as the Brayton week went, her balloon was above the clouds; it might be raining below; umbrellas and apologies might be running about in all directions, but she had serene weather.

The foundation of the grand success was laid; everybody was coming, right in the middle of the season, at notice so short that it might be called a summons rather than a notice. But Lucia said no "Nunc Dimittis" yet, nor did she lose her head. Instead, she planned every hour of those days, all seven of them, so that while every one of her guests would feel free to do as the spirit prompted, he would find that some admirable occupation was ready, in case it recommended itself to him. Till lunch time each day a careful blank was left by her, but she arranged that motor-cars, golf-caddies, and fishing gillies were lurking like wild beasts round the corner, ready to pounce. There would be lunch indoors or out-of-doors as the weather dictated, but that would be as informal as the affairs of the morning. But—here again she showed herself daring—at half-past five the formal day began. Her dinner guests

would be arriving by then, and she (appearing for the first time that day, if so she chose) would receive them on the deep loggia which had been built the year before to take the place of the veranda where Edgar and Charlie had lounged and drank their coffee after lunch three years ago. It stretched out thirty feet from the windows of the big drawing-room, darkening it considerably, which, as Lucia pointed out, was without consequence, since the room was never used till after dinner. It ran half the length of the house, a hundred feet at the least, and at one end was a raised stage where the band would be placed, and where, when it was shut in down all its length with wooden shutters, the French company would play after dinner. At tea, then, the more elaborate part of the simple day would begin. For those who wanted to hear music, there would be the band; for those who wanted to talk, there would be the garden; while she would occupy the central position, able to stroll with those who wished to stroll, able to move a little to the left and hear the music.

Dinner would follow, and again she gave accident no chance, going through the *menu* for each evening, weighing, so to speak, the value of each dish, not in itself, but in its relation to the dinner. Clever as her *chef* was, he was but a weak campaigner in comparison with his mistress, and it was not till Lucia pointed out that three days of salmon out of seven was an excess of that admirable fish that his mind awoke to the fact. But, with a thousand pardons, what was to be done? Miladi could not have seven different fish. There were no seven fish to be eaten.

Lucia gave this her full consideration.

"Then on Thursday we will have no fish at all," she said; "and on Friday we will have herrings. Herrings! There is nothing better. Mustard sauce, and plain fried herrings. Is it fried? They are browner on one side than on the other. That makes Friday's dinner all wrong. Let us begin it again. It must be all plain, quite plain. *Bonne femme*, the herrings, *sans blague*, Adolph, I mean it. Then—then little bits of lamb, yes, you can get lamb in July if you insist, quite little lamb, done up round, *epigrammes d'agneau*, that is it. But neat epigrams, you know. Then——"

M. Adolph waved his hands in French despair.

"But dinner for the *bourgeois*, miladi," he said.

"Not at all. *Epigrammes d'agneau*—yes. Then cold beef, do you understand? Plain cold beef, with horse-radish sauce, and endive salad. Yes, I know what I am saying, endive salad. Then one vegetable. Asparagus is so common. Make something out of cabbage, Adolph. Only cabbage, I charge you. Then—no, no bird at all, absolutely no bird. Then apple tart, please—plain apple tart. After that toasted cheese, *à pâté*—no, not either. Apple-tart and the dessert. But please see that the coffee is good. Do not grind it till the apple-tart comes up. And that evening we will

have an English *menu*—soup, herrings, lamb, cold beef, cabbage, apple-tart. Saturday—yes, perhaps you had better put in an extra *entrée*. *Cailles à la Lindsay* would do. Mr. Charlie will be down that night. But they must be served in separate little casseroles, and over each you must pour the juice of another quail. And little squares of toast served with it, so that the juice can be eaten. How good!"

"But miladi never eats quail," said Adolph.

"No, but other people do. That is all, Adolph. I want you to take particular pains over this week. You can get extra help if you need it. There will be about thirty for breakfast and lunch every day, and I expect about seventy to dinner. Wait a moment."

Lucia rang a bell, and a male secretary appeared.

"The Brayton week," she said. "The numbers only——"

She looked quickly at the list.

"That is all, is it?" she asked. "Very well, Adolph. On Monday we shall be fifty-one. Tuesday, Wednesday, about sixty. Thursday—please pay attention—the special will arrive at five, and so you must make preparations for tea as well, and they will all stop to dinner, a hundred and forty. They will not leave till quite late—no, no supper, but plenty of sandwiches and ice and fruit. Friday, Saturday, these are the numbers. On Monday you can go back to town. Just leave a *marmiton*; his lordship and I may not return till Tuesday."

The infinite capacity for attention to details certainly characterized Lucia. She cared not a cheese-straw what she ate, herself alone considered, provided that, however plain, it was clean and excellent of its kind; but she knew, supremely well, how large a part of life is played by palate and digestion. She could not give her guests digestion, but with great wisdom she spent a couple of hours over the consideration of how she would make their meals suitable to the state of mind that she hoped they would be in. Dinner on Friday, for instance, was intimately connected with the music. The French company was not going to act that day; there would be the band only, and arranging the music first, she had arranged a corresponding dinner. Friday, indeed, was to be the crucial day. On Thursday there was going to be a French play, which perhaps was almost too—— On Saturday there was going to be a third play (this she had not announced in her invitations, and it was a surprise), which was also very French. Friday, therefore, in order to enhance the memory of Thursday, and to anticipate Saturday, must be plainly exquisite. The band would play the Suite in D, by Bach, after tea, and on that day—and on that day alone—she meant to go to church, at seven in the evening, a short service to be over by half-past seven, so that there would be time to dress for dinner

if one chose. Then, after the plain dinner, there would be more simple music. Mestra was coming down that night; he would play the Handel Sonata in A, for the violin. Lucia, planning this day, almost had a fit, so she told Edgar, at the thought of the slovenly proceedings that in the general way characterized hostesses.

"Who wants to listen to Bach after a great fat dinner?" she said; "or who would want to look at 'Ami Intime' after cold beef, such as we shall have on Friday? To be any use, you must arrange the whole *menu* of the day. You must make your arrangements, not only for what your people eat, but for what they do."

"What they do depends on the weather," said he.

"Yes, darling, but I don't. I look further ahead than that. Do you suppose that I will give them a fat, stuffy dinner if it has been wet? Not at all. There are two *menus* for every day. If it has been hot and fine, and everybody has been out of doors, you will get *menu* A. If it has been wet and rainy, so that at the utmost we have walked under umbrellas or played billiards and bridge, you will get *menu* B. Oh, I am not an ass!"

That was thoroughness again; Lucia certainly was not an ass. The audacity of the Brayton week, which appeared so unpremeditated, had to be solidly meditated over. She had to provide, and did, for fine weather and wet weather, in so far as she could. Whatever was the conduct of the possible winds and clouds, she had to be prepared with a counter-check to any devilish manœuvres on their part. She was climbing, and knew it; the essential thing was that nobody else should see she was climbing. She must appear to the world as having arrived, appear as one who had only to write a few notes in order to fill her country house with guests while yet July was scarcely middle-aged. She had done that. She had done it in such a way that it appeared effortless. There happened to be a French company playing at Brayton, and an excellent band; there were a few special trains to be arranged for, all of which, though hideously expensive from one point of view, were extraordinarily cheap, if they got her what she wanted—namely, a fashionable exodus from town. And Edgar wanted that sort of thing no less than she. The intellectual renaissance which Lady Heron had spoken of had impressed him enormously. It bore out Lucia's original prophecy for him, and he felt confidence, as was most reasonable, in her power of getting into practical shape what she had prophesied about. Even the special trains did not stagger him. To entice fifty people out of town in order to have dinner, see a play, and go back again that night, was clearly a feat. He respected feats, being himself capable of imagining them, but wholly incapable of doing them.

No feat can be perfectly calculated; blind luck may spoil the most thorough plans, but in regard to the Brayton week, blind luck had ranged itself on Lucia's side.

It was not merely that a spell of prodigious heat drove the gasping out of town, or that the weather, so intolerable there, was of brisk warmth only down in Hampshire; it was that the world in general was interested at that particular and psychological moment in Lucia, the girl from nowhere, who looked like Aphrodite fresh from the sea, and had had the cheek—yes, the cheek—to ask everybody to leave London at its midmost and spend quiet days in the country. But what was originally cheek became, as the week went on, the kind of genius that London respected. Lucia did not give them the precepts of the lecture on the delectable life; she gave the delectable life itself. She had anticipated their inclinations, and anybody who felt inclined to do anything found that the implements and adjuncts of his inclinations were at hand. Among her guests, for instance, there were two or three socialistic aristocrats—they found a Labour Member or two coming down by special train, and a polished writer of suburban plays who spoke of the intellectual movement going on in Tooting. There were musicians there—pure and simple musicians—who on Friday after a cold-beef dinner (with excellent wine), listened to Bach, while the moon was reflected in the lake. There were others who liked—well, they liked the French plays. All who could possibly help Lucia at that period were catered for; she fed them all, she entertained them all, she provided congenial pursuits for them. It was the planting of her garden, the sowing of seed with lavish hand. Later, no doubt, she would lead, would choose her line, for it appeared to her that of all the various types of fool that the world supplied there was none so abject as that which continued to be of the menagerie order. If you liked tigers, have tigers; if you liked parrots, have parrots. But why anybody who had "arrived" kept a menagerie, she, with her cool, clever brain, could not imagine. The point of the world was to pick out from it what you wished to do, and to do it only; to see those about whom you wished to see. But you had to see them all first.

To-day, after her ride with Charlie, she knew that she would be called upon to go gardening in herself, for she was to lunch all alone with Lady Heron, and this all-alone lunch was the upshot of several interrupted conversations, several beckoning glances, that had passed between them. In spite of the brilliant success of the Brayton week, Lucia knew quite well that there was something that sat between her and above that kind of success. In that week, she had made her definite mark: she had "pied-pipered" London down to the country, but—but she knew she had "pied-pipered" it. What she really wanted was to do that without effort, because it was natural to her to ask her friends, and because it was natural in her friends to come. But that week had been an effort; she had had to think, to plan. She wanted to get where no planning was necessary, to issue her inclinations to the world and have

them gratified; to admit the world into her own private manner of passing her time. In this week at Brayton she had studied the world's inclinations and gratified them; between that and the more regal style, as she already dimly guessed, there was a world of difference. Three-quarters or more of the busy climbers in London would have been ecstatically satisfied with what she had already achieved; she had the brains to use this success only as a fresh springboard to higher branches. Others never thought of doing more than they had already done; only last Sunday, indeed, Lucia had gone down to spend the afternoon and dine with a largely entertaining hostess near Kingston at a royal and select party. But how stupid and *bourgeois* it all was! A prima-donna had sung, an actor had spoken a scene, Royalty had eaten and giggled; everything was exactly as it had been on similar Sundays for the last ten years. That sort of repetition was so aimless, yet people were gratified at being asked, and thought it all so smart and so wonderful. It seemed to Lucia that the only wonderful thing about it was that people thought it smart. You stopped reading a letter or a book if it began to repeat itself; surely you had better stop entertaining if you could think of nothing new to say or do.

Madge Heron had kept her word about Lucia's lunch with her to-day being an all-alone lunch, and a tiny table was laid for them in the corner of the balcony outside the ballroom, already awninged in, in preparation for the dance she was giving this evening. As a matter of fact the keeping of this *tête-à-tête* engagement was entirely in accordance with her own wishes; she wanted very much to have a talk with Lucia alone, for she was immensely interested in her, immensely attracted by her, and up till now Lucia's self (though not her success) puzzled and interested her. That bright reflecting surface on which life so shone and sparkled, naturally dazzled and attracted this pleasure-seeking brain of London, and her freshness and originality were sufficient to assure her success. She was something of a new type also, a woman who really was desperately in earnest about appreciation of all that was fine from an artistic point of view; she had at least precipitated a New Set, and without affectation those who were of it would prefer, even in the height of the season, to spend an hour at the Tate rather than at Hurlingham. There had been sets like it before, but Lady Heron found a new note in Lucia's precipitate; she and hers really knew about what they admired: they did not only "thrill," as other sets had done.

But all this Lady Heron believed to be only the surface of Lucia; what lay below, whether she was kind or selfish, good or bad, she had at present no idea. It was that she wanted to find out, and now, whereas a few weeks ago Lucia had considerably studied her, it was she to-day who wanted to study Lucia no less.

Lucia appeared, as always, with a rush. On this occasion she hurried upstairs

before Lady Heron's wan-faced butler could overtake her, and came into the room some eight yards in advance of him, while he gasped her name out from the neighbourhood of the door.

"Dearest Madge," she said, "and nobody else is here, is there? How heavenly of you! Oh, I wish I had large brown eyes like you, and grey hair! As it is, I lack impressiveness. I've ridden, I've been to see the Rodin Exhibition—I shan't go there again—I've been to my dressmaker, and I want lunch more than I can possibly tell you. How are you?"

"What's the matter with Rodin?" asked Lady Heron.

"I'm not sure that I can explain—yes, perhaps it is that his things are quite small, I mean in actual size, but on a scale as big as a nightmare. Things on a big scale must be of a certain size, just as things on a small scale must be of a certain smallness. You can't have Hercules, or Day or Night or Morning to stand on the top of a clock, any more than you could have a Dresden shepherdess nine feet high. Also, if a man never finishes his work at all, you can't help wondering if it is because he can't. Gertie Miller was there, gasping. She has taken to gasping, because she doesn't really know what she feels about a thing, and if she gasps she can't talk. And Charlie and Maud turned up. I rode with Charlie this morning. Do you know, I have scarcely set eyes on you since the Brayton week? I want to ask you such a heap of questions."

"About it? There is no need for any question at all. It was quite beyond question. I don't know anybody else who could have done it like that. It seemed perfectly effortless, and so I suspect that it was most carefully planned."

Lucia nodded.

"I should just think it was," she said. "I tried to leave nothing to chance."

Lucia leaned back in her chair.

"I came here for tuition," she said. "I want you to tell me your plan. It seems to me that anybody who does anything must have a plan, like the string that keeps the beads of a necklace together. It is invisible, but it runs through them all, keeping them together, making a whole of them, instead of a series of detached beads that run into corners and get lost. Or am I wrong?"

Madge Heron considered her answer. She felt that Lucia was talking far below the surface, as it were; she was not talking, at any rate, from the Brayton-week standpoint. But before she answered Lucia went on:

"Do you see what I mean?" she said. "It is that I should consider it a dreadfully stupid thing to do, if I only went on giving Brayton weeks, so to speak. I gave that one because I thought it would amuse people, and because—to be perfectly frank—

I wanted to get a foot down firmly. But after that, what next? That was just a bead. What is to be the string? Of course, oneself, one's character, is the string; but what is oneself? I know the shell of it, the case of it, and that is love of art, love of beautiful things, love of worldly success, if you like. Oh, I do like that enormously; it is the greatest fun. But in a manner of speaking, that is mine. Now, I want to stand firmly upon all that, and jump somewhere else. Where? Where do you jump to?"

This, again, came from below. Madge Heron had sufficiently considered her answer.

"It depends on your power of wanting," she said, "and what your power of wanting is you must find out for yourself; nobody, except a woman's husband, perhaps, can teach her."

Lucia looked up in a sort of comic dismay.

"Oh, but Edgar can't teach me anything," she said. "I had a rhapsody of wanting once, and rhapsodied to him, and he didn't understand the feeling even. It's I who make him want."

"But you propose to jump hand in hand?" asked Madge.

To herself she added: "She has never loved him."

Lucia puckered up her eyebrows for a moment, but at once grasped this.

"Why, of course," she said. "I never contemplated any other plan."

"She has never loved anybody else," thought Madge.

Lucia leaned forward again.

"He jumps beautifully," she said; "the—the only thing is that he looks back to see what a beautiful jump it has been. But I want to hear more about the string of the necklace. He can't teach me, and I know so little about it myself. Do suggest things."

Madge Heron laughed quietly; she saw now why she knew so little about Lucia, for at present there was so little to know. Lucia had never really dived into herself, she had never really brought up the things that lay in the deep water. Her scoopings, her self-revelation, had all been made in the shallows, just as her tastes, her achievements, had all been affairs of surface currents. But she was conscious anyhow of the possibility of depths, and Madge wondered if already some tremor or agitation from them had just vibrated upwards to the shining surface.

"Dear Lucia," she said, "you are a brilliant, beautiful child. Just that. And a certain weird gift of doing the right thing in the right way is yours. Now do answer a question or two. I long to know about you just as much as you long to know about yourself. Supposing—supposing that funny old aunt of yours whom you told me about was dying and wanted to see you, and to see her you had to leave town at 2.30, and there was going to be performed an unpublished opera of Wagner's in the

evening, what would you do?"

Lucia laughed; the laugh already answered the question.

"Ah, that is a dreadful sort of question," she said, "and I don't see how it—oh, I should go, of course, and see her, and hurry back to town. There would be heaps of time."

"But if you could not get back?"

"Oh, Frau-confessorin!" said Lucia, hiding her eyes for a moment. Then she looked up again and shook her head.

"I shouldn't go," she said. "Isn't it awful? But I shouldn't. Would you, if you felt like me about Wagner?"

"Assuredly not. But then I know about the string of my necklace."

They had already finished lunch, and Lucia got up and took a big basket chair next Lady Heron. She did not appear to notice the last remark; at least, her answer did not bear on it. She was looking quite grave, and a certain shrewdness and sharpness of expression had come into her face.

"But I know all that," she said. "I found out long ago that I was not kind, not soft-hearted. You see, if I want a thing, I want it very badly. I wonder if you would be shocked if I told you something. No, I don't think you would. Well, it is this: I knew quite well when Edgar and I met at Brixham that Maud, my best friend, you know, was a good deal attracted by him. But that seemed to me no reason why I should not—well, do what I could. So I did my best to make him want me. I think it would have been foolish to do otherwise. I don't think it was mean; I think it was sensible. Maud saw it in the same light. She realized that I could not help myself."

Lady Heron could not help interrupting with a flash of a question.

"Since you, too, were in love with him?" she asked.

There was a slight pause.

"Exactly," said Lucia. "So I am not kind, you see," she added in a moment. "I wanted you to tell me something new about myself. Or about you. You said you knew the story of your necklace."

Madge Heron's handsome but rather hard face softened a little and looked extraordinarily young under its beautiful grey hair. She liked Lucia, she was attracted by her, and at the moment she was very sorry for her. Clearly, to her acute eye, Lucia's nature had never been awakened at all; all that she had attained had been won by mere brain-work; she had been a clever child, winning prizes at school. And the awakening to life was, in Madge's opinion, a painful process to most women, if it came after they were out in the world and married, for it was always associated with the thought of what might have been. A choice, too, was then set before them, as to

whether they would behave as if they were content, or—grab, steal what was not theirs. She had been through that late awakening herself, and she had chosen. Some day, unless, as now appeared extremely unlikely, Lucia fell in love with her husband, she, too, would have to choose. From the direction and trend of her previous achievements, it was not difficult to guess what her choice would be. Yet it was a pity; and a certain vague regret that stirred in Madge herself tinged what she said.

"My dear, I will preach you a little sermon on beadstrings," she said; "not on my string, nor on yours, but on strings in the abstract."

Lucia's face lit up with that brilliant child-like smile, and she moved her chair a little closer.

"Ah, that will be delightful!" she said. "I shall love to hear a little sermon from you. It is sure to be clear-cut and incisive, like your life."

"I will try to make it clear. Now, dear, with all your success, your—your everything—you don't yet know in the least degree what life is. You haven't even decided, you know, if your string—that is yourself, your character—is to be black or white. You talk charmingly about character; you are full of cleverness and perception; but when you talk about it, it is as if you played—let me see—the 'Appassionata' up at the top of the piano. It is tinkle, tinkle, tinkle. It doesn't go down to the depths. And it can't because you have never been there. All you have done has been done with your brain."

Lucia gave a delighted little sigh.

"Oh, it is too fascinating!" she said. "You mean that even now the whole of life is before me, that there is a whole other plane to explore. But I've got to jump down to that, haven't I, to dive?"

Transcendent egoism was there, but still shallow, still sunny and enchanting.

"Yes, dive probably," said Madge. "But I don't know whether you will find it fascinating. As I said, you haven't yet decided whether your string is to be black or white. Do you understand? Are you going to be good, or are you going to be bad?"

Lucia frowned a little; there was something brutally direct about this, which was not much to her taste.

"Yes, it puzzles you a little because it is so simple," went on Madge; "and no doubt such a consideration seems to you a little middle-class, a little *bourgeois*."

"I always say my prayers," said Lucia, "however late I am. At least almost."

"Ah, that's bad!" said Madge quickly. "If you pray, you should pray when you have got something to pray about."

"Oh, but I always have," said Lucia. "I prayed tremendously that the Brayton week might be fine, and it was lovely."

Madge could not help laughing. Lucia spoke with such sincerity. But she became grave again.

"Oh, you poor child!" she said. "You will be awake some day, and then—then you will either pray prayers that scald you, and wring the heart out of you, or you will not pray at all. It is one thing to struggle to get what you want; it is quite another to struggle not to take what you want. Many people don't struggle then, they take it."

Lucia put her head a little on one side, like some inquiring bird.

"Oh, do you mean horrid things," she said "like wanting somebody else's husband? I think that is so disgusting."

Lady Heron got up.

"I will preach no more," she said. "Dear Lucia, I hope you will never understand a word I have said."

"Oh, but I think it's fascinating," said she. "But I think you are wrong about me."

She got up also, still incapable of honesty.

"You quite leave out the fact that I adore Edgar," she said. "I think you believe I am heartless. Is that it?"

"Tinkle, tinkle!" said Madge.

Lucia felt a little displeased.

"Well then, I hope I shall always tinkle, tinkle," she said. "It is gay, anyhow."

CHAPTER XII

It was a warm, clear evening in late September, but autumn was no less evident in the quality of colour in the blue dome of the sky than in the spots and streaks of orange that had begun to flame among the green of the beech-trees and bracken that lay above and beyond the lake at Brayton. The paleness and coolness of that blue was reflected there; it was no midsummer sky that the lake mirrored, but the clearness of an evening which, though warm, might yet prove to be frosty before morning, and blacken the gay dahlia heads, a little over-bonneted, a little over-coiffured, that stood in stiff rows behind the audacious scarlet of the salvias in the formal garden-beds just outside the roofed terrace of the house. No sultriness of day-lit hours stained the heavens; a few little crimson wisps of cloud floated there, and were reflected below as if the angel of sunset had moulted a score of downy feathers from his wings before plunging westward into the jubilance of the burning horizon. There some ribbons and patches of more substantial cloud of soberer hue floated like little windless tropic islands on a sea of palest green; below them, and just above the pearl-coloured, half opaque mists that hung over the valley where Brixham lay, a streak of intense orange burned along the hills.

The note of autumn, indeed, vibrated everywhere. A torrid August had scorched the lawn to a faded yellow, and already a fortnight ago the big, loose-leaved Virginia creeper on the house had burst into flame, and now only grey and brown ash remained to mark where that triumphant conflagration had flared. The big chestnut by the lake had yellowed, and in the cool of the sunset hour the large five-fingered leaves were detaching themselves, and falling without turn or twist in the still air on to the lawn beneath. Basket chairs, some four or five in number, were placed in the trees' ample shade, and the seats of gaudy chintz were speckled with the fallen foliage. From the surface of the lake the lilies, leaf and flower alike, had withered and vanished, and it spread out its cool, reflecting plain unencumbered to the sky. All summer it had been clothed in green and ivory and gold; now, by some wayward perversion of things, it unrobed itself at the approach of frost. The birds were already abed; occasionally a thrush fluted a little hoarsely from the bushes, but the lawn was empty of its bright-eyed scurriers; they dined early so as not to risk the chance of finding a frozen table after sunset.

But inside the terrace there was no hint of the autumnal; it flared with colour, not the protesting vividness of dying leaves that fruitlessly asserted their vitality, but with the crimson of the banner of summer. The great Syrian curtains and hangings which

had been hung there for the Brayton week in July had been brought out again; it was arranged once more as a huge half out-of-door sitting-room with tables and Persian rugs and groups of chairs. And here, looking out between the brick-columns that supported it, Edgar was sitting alone, regarding the sunset with unconscious appreciation, but with only half his conscious attention. He looked rather colourless, a little bleached instead of sunburnt by the summer, and in his eyes one might say there was already something akin to autumn. But though expectancy was still there, the balance trembled; spring still hoped, but long waiting had tired it a little.

Yet it had not tired it so much that he failed to catch the earliest news of a footfall in the drawing-room behind, when to a less listening sense the sound would still have been inaudible. Something of love-quickness still sharpened his senses, and he knew the footfall. Then came the whisper of a skirt, and then came Lucia.

She held an open letter in her hand, which she was still reading, and the habitual radiance of her face was a little dimmed. It was almost impossible for her to look annoyed, so serenely were her flesh and skin laid over her bones, so deliciously was set a little dimple in each cheek, so used to smiles were the fine curves of her mouth, but a shade of perplexity, a hint of complaint, was in her face. Then, raising her eyes, she saw her husband.

"Ah, dear Edgar," she said, "but I was looking for you. It is rather a nuisance; I am in a bit of a hole. I have just heard from Aunt Cathie."

"She is coming to pay us a visit, I hope," said Edgar. "I remember I begged you to write from Scotland, asking her to propose herself any time after we got back."

"I know. I did so. And she has proposed herself for next week. It really is rather awkward; the whole world will be here. Had I not better telegraph and put her off?"

"But on what pretext?" asked Edgar. "And for what reason?"

Lucia laughed. She wanted to get her way about this, and she always tried good-natured means first. It was such a pity to be cross and tiresome unless it was necessary.

"I see the distinction," she said. "But can't we find a pretext that would also be a reason? The house will be very full; you will be shooting all day with the men, and I shall have my hands full with the women. I shall simply not be able to look after her at all. She will know none of the others; she will feel so out of it. Oh, I know it is my fault for not remembering the party and asking her to come any time during September after we got back. It is quite my fault; I will say so!"

A certain look came into Edgar's face that Lucia had long learned to dislike, and in a manner to fear. It included a little compression of his mouth, a slight raising of his eyebrows. It implied displeasure, and it implied the sort of firmness which she was

accustomed to think of as obstinacy.

"That, no doubt, is an admirable pretext," he said, "and I am sure you would put it delightfully. But it is not your reason."

Lucia glanced at the letter again.

"Ah, then here is a reason," she said. "Poor Aunt Elizabeth is not well, and Aunt Cathie says she is a little anxious about her—at least, no, she doesn't say it, but I feel sure she is. If we put it off, they can come together. That would be much better."

"Pretext again, my dear," said he, a shade pedantically.

Lucia was used to resenting the shadows of implied rebukes which he occasionally cast across her path. The shadow was there now. But she still remained outwardly genial.

"Then tell me the reason, since you are so quick at these distinctions," she observed.

The pedant, the schoolmaster, became a little more marked in Edgar's face.

"I am not sure that you will like it," he said, "when stated. You will see it is not worthy of you."

"Ah, let us hear it," she remarked. "We can discuss it afterwards, if necessary."

"Well, then, you are a little ashamed of your Aunt Cathie. The truth is that you do not want her to be in the house with your other friends. My dear Lucia, she is a lady, and that is all that can be asked of a woman."

"Of course she is a lady," said Lucia quickly, forgetting for the moment to disclaim this as being her reason, "but she is a very odd one."

"So that was your reason," said he.

Lucia was quite well aware that she had come out second best over this, but she still kept her annoyance to herself. Also it was no use trying to explain that away; she had made a slip, and he had put his finger on it.

"Well, for all these reasons and pretexts I think it would be much wiser to put Aunt Cathie off till after next week," she said. "I may also remind you that the burden of entertaining her will fall on me and not on you."

Edgar laughed.

"Nonsense," he said. "Aunt Cathie will entertain herself very well. And I have a very sound reason for not putting her off: it is that I know she will love seeing you as the hostess of a big party. It will give her the intensest pleasure, and perhaps she has not many pleasures. She adores you; she will love to see you shining."

Lucia did not answer at once; but, looking out over the garden, the mists above Brixham caught her eye for a moment, and her mind went back over those very lean years that she had spent there. It seemed almost incredible that it was she who had

been caged there, yet she felt that the individuality which had looked out so savagely on to the narrow limits of her world there was the same exactly as that which looked out so eagerly now over its widened horizon. It had not changed at all; it still "wanted" with the same lust of living. After all, too, she owed Aunt Cathie something, and if, as Edgar said, it was true that the old dear would love to see her shining, as he put it, it was rather darling of her. It would be an inexhaustible subject of conversation, too, with her for the winter, a loaded granary. Also, she would have no end of a tussle with her husband if she was to get her way, and even with a tussle she did not feel sure that she would secure it. So, with the admirable common sense that she found reaped so sure a reward in the affairs of life, she yielded, not ungraciously, but with the most disarming charm. She turned on him with a smile.

"So, if it please my lord," she said, "I will send a telegram, shall I, to Aunt Cathie, with the warmest welcome for next week? Will that please you?"

Suddenly she paused.

"Oh, Edgar," she said, "but we both forgot. We are giving 'Salome' on the Thursday. Tell me, can you imagine Aunt Cathie looking at 'Salome'? If you can, I make my compliments to your imagination. It is brilliant."

Edgar had not thought of that.

"But it's in German," he said, rather feebly. "She probably won't understand it."

"John the Baptist's head isn't in German," remarked Lucia.

"It can't be helped," he said, after a pause. "Most likely she will not care to come, when you tell her."

"Ah, when I tell her!" said Lucia softly to herself.

Edgar did not hear this: Lucia had not meant him to. She was not the sort of woman who speaks asides in order to have them heard. When she wanted to be heard, she spoke out loud.

"Indeed, I am not altogether pleased myself that we are going to give it," he said, getting up. "There was that French play, too, which we gave at the end of the week in July, that I think we had better have done without. We don't want it characteristic of the house that you see here plays which the censor would not sanction for the London stage."

"We couldn't help ourselves about 'La Rouille,'" said Lucia. "The Princess asked us to have it."

Lucia had sat down at a writing table, and taken from the stationery desk a case of telegraph forms, to send one to Aunt Cathie. Edgar, however, as his habit was when a little agitated, was pacing up and down between two columns of the terrace, four quick steps one way, a quick turn, and four quick steps in the opposite

direction. The action in itself always slightly annoyed Lucia; she disliked it also for a further reason—namely, that it implied that Edgar was preparing to discuss something that troubled him. She had begun to hate the word discussion. She immediately heard it.

"I should like to have a little discussion with you, Lucia," he said, "about several questions which arise from and are connected with what we have just been saying. To begin with, you say we could not help ourselves about 'La Rouille' because the Princess Olga asked us to have it. There I part company with you. I disagree altogether. In the ordering of our house, in the entertainments we give, in the guests we invite, I hold that we should consult nobody but ourselves and our own tastes."

He paused for a moment in his "quarter-decking," as Lucia called it, and looked at her. She met his glance quite calmly and spoke quite politely.

"Excuse me," she said, "but if you want to discuss those affairs with me at any length, I will interrupt you at once, instead of later, to ask you if this telegram will do:

> "'Edgar and I charmed to see you on Tuesday. Pray stop a full week. Delighted you can come.'"

Edgar rang a bell.

"Yes, excellent," he said; and when the servant had taken it: "I should like to discuss things with you at some length, as you say."

Lucia had felt for many weeks now that something of this sort was simmering in her husband's mind. Times innumerable she had felt by that sixth sense of instinct, which is surer than all the other senses put together, that their life was not coming up to his expectations. Brilliant as it all was, it was another style of brilliance than that which she had planned for him. That idea of hers which had so appealed to him, and been so identical with his own that they should be at Brayton a great deal, entertain largely but locally, and throw culture broadcast over Brixham, as a ripe mushroom scatters spores, had, to say the truth, not been realized at present; nor, indeed, in Lucia's plans for the autumn and winter did it seem likely to be realized. During the Brayton week, it is true, she had asked—so she said at the time—every man, woman, and child in Brixham, including mayor, aldermen, and even the coroner, to an immense garden party, and had even entertained a large number to dinner and a French farce, but the experiment had not been a success. Brixham, it was evident to her, did not mix at all with the other guests in her house; and though she introduced all Brixham whose names she knew to all London, they had nothing whatever to say to each other, and soon all Brixham congregated together among itself again, like

some large lump of food that would not be assimilated. Even more disastrous was the French play, because the Dean's wife, who knew French, got up in the middle, and signalled to her daughters and her husband to follow her. But he, most unfortunately, was asleep, and she hissed at him in awful tones, "Come away, Henry; it is not right for us to stop," until she made him, like Beautiful Evelyn Hope "awake and remember and understand." It had been screamingly funny, but at the same time it had its annoying side. Lucia did not want to risk such a thing occurring again.

The sequel had annoyed her as well, though, like the incident, it was broad farce. Brixham, it appeared, had had a battle royal over the affair, having, as usual, nothing whatever to talk about, and the faction of the Dean's wife alluded to Lucia as "that Lady Brayton," while her supporters, of whom there were many, chiefly said that Mrs. Gopsall did not understand French. Aunt Cathie's contribution to the skirmish had been to attempt to get an English translation of the play, so that she could judge for herself. This, fortunately, was not to be had. All that was but a teacup storm; it was, however, symptomatic of what Lucia knew would be the nature of this discussion with her husband. It was only gradually that Edgar had seen how utterly divergent his projected line was from that of his wife, for there was much that was common to both. But they led not so distantly to regions very far apart.

"We are alone," said Lucia quietly. "We can discuss these points. But I should be grateful, Edgar, if you would sit down. Your incessant turning rather confuses me."

Lucia did not say that wantonly; she was aware that she would probably need to have all her wits about her. The discussion, she foresaw, would be rather vital. She meant also that it should be.

He sat down, sideways to her, and she spoke.

"You said that you do not want it to be thought characteristic of this house that we give here plays that the censor would not allow on the London stage," she said. "Now, as we both of us know, it is I who really am responsible for the quality of our entertainments, and when you say a thing like that, you make a direct reflection on me. Very well, I am here to discuss this with you. Will you please state your case?"

He looked up at her, startled.

"Ah, Lucia, I don't mean that," he said. "How can you so misunderstand me?"

Lucia had swiftly considered her position, and had spoken advisedly. She thought, rightly or wrongly, that the time had come for Edgar to say all that had been in his mind for so many weeks. There had been an uneasy atmosphere abroad for some time, and she wished for a clearing of the air, whether or no a thunderstorm was necessary for it. It was advisedly that she spoke again.

"I think you will see that you do mean that when you come to express yourself,"

she said. "You don't like the tone of our entertainments, for which I am certainly responsible, and I don't think that you entirely like the tone of my friends. Is that not so also?"

"Many of them I like immensely," he said.

"Let us revise the visiting list, then," she said. "My dear, do come to the point at once, instead of beating about the bush. Who is it?"

"It is Lady Heron," he said.

"So I supposed. Now, as you know, I have not been very long in London, but I see her received everywhere; and, as I am particularly fond of her, I see no reason why I should not be intimate with her."

"People talk about her," said Edgar. "Abominable things are said about her."

"Ah, there is the difference between us," said Lucia. "You listen to gossip, I don't. But since you have done so, please tell me what things are said about her. I mean, by the way, to tell her all you tell me. She is my friend; I think she ought to know."

That sounded gloriously unworldly, and it had the effect of making Edgar's heart go out to his wife in a sudden rush of essential admiration. But it was even more gloriously worldly; it was a piece of supreme wisdom. For the moment she completely disarmed him.

"Ah, Lucia, you are such a child," he said. "You are so unspotted; it was loyalty itself that spoke there. But you can't go through this rough and tumble of a world on those lines. People are brutes; they say that to touch pitch is to be defiled. It isn't so, of course, with you——"

But she interrupted him again.

"Oh, let us be frank," she said. "The pitch—you allude to Madge in that way. What do you mean? Let us have it out. I wish to tell Madge what people say about her. Of course, I shall not say who told me."

He was silent: simply he could not tell her.

"Cannot you take my word for it," he said, "that it would be wiser of you not to see quite so much of Lady Heron? It is true she has a great position, but people, nice people——"

Lucia rose in wrath. How far it was genuine concerned herself only, but certainly some of it was.

"It comes to this, then," she said, "that you make vile insinuations, the nature of which I do not choose to guess, against my best friend, and then refuse to tell me what they are. I don't ask you again; the nature of the statement itself, whatever it is, doesn't interest me in the least. Luckily, since you do not tell me what it is all about, I

can judge of the quality of what you have heard. That sort of stuff is dropped from the garret into the gutter. It only disgraces those who drop it and defiles those who sit in the gutter. I do not, nor does she."

Lucia was conscious that her tongue was running away with her, and she stopped abruptly. Yet even as she stopped, hearing her own words in her head, she endorsed them. With all her huge faults, she at any rate lacked the scratching nails and forked tongue of the mischief-maker. She had the serene indulgence towards the doings of others which, though it may only spring from indifference to morals, is yet a factor in the world that makes for peace and pleasantness. But though she thoroughly approved her own sentiments, she realized that she had said enough, if not more than enough, and with the almost superhuman control that she had over herself she threw her anger from her.

She had risen, but now sat down again, and as if her passion had heated her, she cast back the little cape that she had on her shoulders, and unpinned her hat. Her mood changed altogether. She leaned forward toward him, her chin a little raised, almost suppliant.

"Oh, my dear," she said, "I know how all you have said to me is prompted by the best, the very best, motives, but it is such a mistake. Let us go to the root of it all. Has Madge had lovers not her husband? I daresay. But what then? It doesn't concern either you or me. It is her own business. Supposing somebody came to me to-morrow and told me you were—anything, thief, adulterer—do you suppose I should listen? Don't you understand? What concerns me about you is what I know of you—what you are to me, not what other people tell me about you. I don't care whether your informants are correct or not in what they tell you. It isn't my affair. That is all, I think. Let us dismiss the matter entirely. I will forget it."

But these few sentences of Lucia's, spoken so quietly after her anger had left her, seemed to come to Edgar in fiery stabs. For the moment he could scarcely believe that Lucia had said these things, so astonishing and shocking were they. He got up and began his quarter-decking again, and this time Lucia did not appear to notice. There was drama in the air that demanded her whole attention.

"I am afraid we cannot dismiss the matter, as you suggest," he said. "Perhaps I have misunderstood you, but what I gather you mean is that the character and morals of your friends are a matter of indifference to you. Do you mean that?"

He looked at her with a face gone suddenly pale and haggard. A few minutes ago only he had with all sincerity called Lucia a child, a thing unspotted, but was it a child who had said this?

He came a step nearer and paused, clenching his hands together.

“Quick,” he said, “what do you mean? You have said that the whole moral code—that is what it comes to—is a matter of indifference to you.”

Lucia saw now where they stood. The whole thing was ghastly in its simplicity. Her words had been perfectly sincere, perfectly natural, and they had come to her husband in the light of some horrible revelation, a thing that she saw at once might easily and swiftly spoil their lives if it was allowed lodgment in his mind. She had to dispose of it somehow; she had, with all the force of her quick and ingenious brain, to twist her words from the sense in which she had meant them and the sense in which he had understood them, and give them some fresh turn of meaning. She stood up also.

“Really, it seems to me that I am very good-natured to discuss things with you at all,” she said, “for either, my dear Edgar, you wilfully distort my meaning, which I should be sorry to suppose was the case, or else either you or I must be very stupid: I in having stated things very badly, or you in not being able to understand what appears to me to be a very simple affair.”

She paused a moment, but only for a moment, and it was really rather a difficult task that lay before her, but there was clearly no time to think things over.

“You seem to think,” she said, “that I have nothing better to do than to listen to you making vile insinuations about my friends and saying dreadful things about me. Yes, I must go back to that; for though I said I would dismiss it, you refused to do so. It seems that it is not enough for you to repeat the gossip of the gutter to me about Madge, but you say that you understand that the whole moral code is a thing of indifference to me. You say I have said so myself. That, Edgar, is not true. I said that the stories which people choose to circulate about my friends do not concern me at all.”

She saw her way clearly now.

“Please attend carefully. Even the truth or the falsity of such idle tales does not concern me at all; I will not listen to a word of them. If someone told me hideous tales about you, would it not be vile in me to listen to them? Must not my very trust in you prevent my even considering whether such things are true or not?”

Lucia began to tremble; like all profound actors she was genuinely affected by what she was saying. He would have interrupted her, but she held up her hand to’ stop him.

“Please listen,” she said. “I don’t know, Edgar—indeed, I am beginning to be afraid that I do not know what you mean by love; but to my mind absolute trust is an integral part of it. And if one trusts a person, it seems to me quite impossible to listen to anything against him. You appear to think otherwise. In that case I am afraid I

differ from you radically and completely. I hope I shall always differ from you. But"—here Lucia's mouth quivered so that she could hardly form the words—"but I do not know what I have done that you should think these things of me. It is shameful of you."

Edgar felt his brain swim. Two minutes ago Lucia had been saying things that filled him with horror, that shocked and astounded him, and yet now she was all but repeating her own words, and those words had become a perfect gospel of sublime and exalted thought. He had to choose: to stick to his first interpretation of them, or accept the perfectly sound reading of them which Lucia, with tears in her voice and mouth quivering with outraged feeling, now offered him. Such a choice was foregone.

"Ah, Lucia, it was shameful of me," he cried—"shameful. I can't even ask your forgiveness; but if only you would give it me."

She seemed not to be able to speak for a moment, and her hand gripped the back of the chair by which she stood with trembling tension. Then slowly a smile, like the moon looking out from the flying wreaths of storm-cloud, shone through the quivering of her lips, serene and unshaken by the turmoil that had gone on so far below it.

"Oh, my dear," she said, and held out both hands to him.

She said no other word at all, and when he would have spoken, she laid her cool fingers on his mouth. And in that heavenly silence, he, poor fool! thought only how wonderful, how beyond compare with all other women she was. That was very near the truth, but it was not near the particular truth that he was thinking about.

Then, after a moment or two, Lucia spoke again.

"Do you know, darling," she said, "I differ from you about the question of doing 'Salome' here, and if you are not busy, I should like to discuss it with you. But let us walk about: let us go down to the end of the garden and back; it gets a little chilly sitting down."

It was daring, and she knew it, to bring the conversation back at once to the subject on which they had so radically disagreed so little a while before. But she did it with intention; it was an admirable way of showing him how utterly she had expunged all that had passed from her mind to discuss at once a subject which had been the cause of bitter words.

He winced at her suggestion.

"Ah, no, no!" he said. "I don't think I can."

Here was more opportunity.

"Oh, but really we had better," she said. "I am sure we shall not disagree if we

only talk about it. Because my view is this, Edgar. It is such a mistake to think, to demand that works of art should conform to any moral code. All art, if it is art, is indifferent to morals."

That was intentional, too; she purposely used the words that had stung, to show there was no sting in them.

"And the odd thing about us," she said, "is that we don't demand morals from the classical plays, but only from modern ones. That is what the French mean by our English hypocrisy, I think, and they are quite right. What can be more intensely immoral than 'Othello'? Supposing you called Othello Mr. Jones, and Desdemona Mrs. Jones, and Iago the Honourable Desmond O'Brien, and laid the scene in Brixham, there is no question whatever that the censor would refuse to license the play, especially if it was written not in blank verse but in prose. Of course we are quite right in our admiration for the play 'Othello,' but where we are quite wrong is in making a distinction between what is modern and what is ancient and classical. We are not shocked with the great Catherine of Russia, but if the present Empress behaved like that we probably should be. Yes, darling, I am coming to the point. The fact that we accept Catherine of Russia—who is real life by the way—and Othello shows that we do not really demand morals from art, and we are squeamish only when the characters talk our own language, and wear the clothes of the day. 'La Rouille,' for instance, is not nearly so corrupt as 'Othello'——"

And so forth, with apparently complete success. Edgar grew animated over it, Lucia was animated already. But the success was superficial: she had put a layer of paint over a crack that went down into the centre of the machinery of life, and when, half an hour later, they came in and parted with a little secret hand-pressing, he to his room to read the prophetic works of Blake, she to rest a little before dressing, each sat silent for a while, and Edgar's page was long unturned and Lucia looked at the little sparkle of fire that she had lit in her bedroom without much thought of rest. Utterly as he had yielded, genuinely as he had owned himself shameful, to him mysterious characters, like the writing on the wall, began to show themselves again. Lucia had been perfectly reasonable—yes, yes, in her explanation—but her original words had borne a far more obvious interpretation. But it would not do to think of that; he was wrong about it, no doubt he was wrong about it. He must dismiss it altogether; it must leave his mind.

It left the surface of his mind, but it did not leave his mind. It sank, instead, so deep down that for the present it was out of sight.

And Lucia looked at her fire. Certain words of Madge Heron's came back to her mind. "You must settle if your string is to be black or white; are you going to be

good or to be bad?"

She had done a deplorably mean thing that afternoon, and she knew it. She had, by accident, shown Edgar a bit of her real self, and it had shocked him intolerably. Then, so to speak, she had quickly put a sort of distorting mirror in front of him, herself crouching behind it, so that he might see not her, but a deformed image of himself. When he was sufficiently disgusted with it, she had dexterously tweaked it away, and again shown him herself, smiling, generous, forgiving. It was not nice, but it was clever. He had not an idea how this wonderful conjuring feat was done. It had completely taken him in. But it was necessary to take him in: there would have been ruin otherwise. And if somewhere deep down in her a little voice—conscience, perhaps, or the voice of God—said, "I am hurt; it hurts me that you should be like that," the voice was very little, very far away, very much covered up with the pillows and conveniences of life. And Madge Heron was coming next week; Lucia felt that she must tell her about it all. Madge liked her immensely, but she did not do her justice; she said she only tinkled. Surely when she knew how splendidly loyal Lucia had been, how she had risked a great deal for the sake of a friend, and for the management of a husband, Madge would do her better justice.

The charming telegram which Lucia had sent off to Aunt Cathie was received by that lady some half an hour later, and threw her into a state of agitation that was not without its pleasing side. Nothing could be done that evening, except acquaint Elizabeth, who had so far recovered from an attack of bronchial catarrh that she was able to come downstairs and keep all the windows shut, with the cordiality of her welcome, but Aunt Cathie foresaw busy days to follow. For the *Hampshire Express* had announced this very morning that there would be a large shooting party at Brayton the following week, and the question of dresses was of extraordinary complication. Had Cathie known that there was to be a party, it was doubtful whether she would have proposed herself, but, having done so, in innocence of the subsequent knowledge, she turned a firm but excited face towards the event. She wished, however, that Elizabeth would play her patience and not read the *Hampshire Express*. She might come across that fragment of information, and Cathie saw that the result would be irony.

Elizabeth gave a rather thick cough; usually she gave thin coughs, but there had been bronchial catarrh. But Cathie knew what the cough meant. Elizabeth laid down the *Hampshire Express*.

"I see you have chosen your date for going to Brayton with some care, Catherine," she said. "You will get there on the day the large shooting-party

assembles."

"Yes; didn't know it when I suggested Tuesday next week," said Cathie.

Elizabeth tottered to the patience table with eyebrows markedly raised. That sort of silence with her implied dissent. Then, after a suitable pause, she spoke in a faint voice.

"I hope you will have a very pleasant week, Catherine," she said, "and not feel that you are thrusting yourself into circles to which you do not belong. I suppose times have changed, or I daresay it is I who am getting old-fashioned; but in years that you can remember even better than I we should not have thought of leaving home in October when we had been away all August. Yes, the ace is at the bottom, as usual. You will no doubt take a great many dresses with you, and a good deal of jewellery. As I shall be alone in the house it will be a relief to know that the amethysts are not at the beck and call of the first burglar who cares to walk into your bedroom. No doubt you would like to take my pearls also. I shall be delighted to lend you them. I daresay Lucia will not remember that they are mine, and not yours, and think that you are masquerading about in other people's things. And it is very unlikely that anybody else will be there who knows either of us."

Cathie could easily afford to overlook what bitter sarcasm there was in this peculiarly acid speech. She was often afraid she thought far too much about dress, and as a matter of fact the question of jewellery had been much in her mind since Lucia's telegram had arrived. But Elizabeth's offer to lend her the pearls made a solid foundation for a varied gorgeousness. The pearls were magnificent—Roman, and three large and lustrous rows of them.

"Thanks, dear Elizabeth," she said. "Shall like the pearls. Kind of you. Amethysts one night, pearls the next."

A great project was in Cathie's mind. But she looked with a diplomatic eye at her sister's patience to see if it was prospering before she broached the subject to her, for it was daring. For a little while it hung in the balance; then by some stroke of great good fortune Elizabeth got no less than two spaces, and began piling up cards with a hand that was fevered with success. Black knaves went on to red queens, red queens nestled under black kings, aces flowed out on the table, and showers of twos and threes and fours were poured on them.

Then Cathie spoke, for Elizabeth was actually smiling.

"I've been thinking, Elizabeth," she said, "whether I wouldn't take Jane with me to Brayton as my maid. It's a big party, you see: everybody will have maids. Then my shoulder has been very rheumatic lately. Who's to rub it if I don't take someone? Can't reach it myself, and I shouldn't like to ask a strange housemaid. And with the

amethysts and your pearls, I should be easier if I knew that Jane was looking after them. Besides, there's the tipping to think of. If another servant looks after me and rubs me, I shall have to give her something handsome, and all you set against that is Jane's fare to Brayton and back, but two stations away. The cab's the same whether I take her or not. And if I want tea in the morning, or have to ring my bell, it will be better that Jane should answer it. Having a maid will make me seem more like the rest of them, too. One doesn't want to be peculiar."

Elizabeth did not answer for a moment, for "Empress" was rapidly coming out, a thing that she had not done since August. There was a moment's check; then there was another space, and the thing was done. It was no time for sarcasm or fault-finding.

"It's 'out,'" she said. "Last night was the last night but three at Littlestone. Yes, Cathie, I see no objection. I think it is a sensible plan; it will do Jane good, too, if she feels up to it."

"Then that's settled," said Aunt Cathie quickly, for fear Elizabeth might see objections. "And it's most thrilling that your patience has come out. I well remember the last time."

Elizabeth gathered up the cards.

"I feel better," she said. "I shall get a good night's rest, I hope."

With morning storm and stress really began for Cathie. She acquainted Jane with her destiny at breakfast, and told her that while they were at Brayton she would be Jane no longer, but Arbuthnot, and that she must be very careful, in case she saw Miss Lucia, to say "my lady" instead. It was settled also that Cathie should begin calling Jane by her surname at once, so that it might not seem strange to either of them when the thing had to be done in earnest. Otherwise Cathie was sure that she would stammer, or that Jane would not recognize that she was being spoken to. And Arbuthnot she was when the urn came in.

Then there was the tremendous question of dresses. Without further ado, Cathie sent Arbuthnot to the paper shop at the corner of the road, where residential Brixham became mercantile, to get current copies of all the ladies' papers, up to a maximum of four, that she could find there. An hour's studious perusal of these gave her sufficient information as to what people were wearing now, and an entire turnout of her wardrobe followed. Walking-dresses, she was glad to see on the authority of *Ladies' Dress*, were very simple this autumn, and cut much on the lines of what was known as the "old speckledy." But the old speckledy was certainly old, and a little uncertain about its shape, while the new speckledy, which Cathie had on at the

moment, was, by the standard of *Ladies' Dress*, unsuitably florid.

She surveyed this, comparing it with that which the very small-headed female was wearing in *Ladies' Dress* in the pier-glass of her wardrobe.

"Most unfortunate," she said to herself. "The old speckledy a year or two ago would have been just the thing now. Perhaps if Ja—Arbuthnot irons it. It's just like 'walking dress, suitable for going out with the shooters.' It's as like as a pea."

Aunt Cathie rang the bell and Arbuthnot appeared.

"I'll take the old speckledy," she said, "and the blue serge with the yellow facings, and I shall travel in what I've got on. That will be three. And the Sunday satin."

"Yes, miss. Did you ring, miss?" asked Arbuthnot. The question was excusable since there were eight complete days yet before she need begin to pack. It could hardly have been for this that Aunt Cathie rang.

"Yes; the dresses as I tell you. Iron the old speckledy, Jane; that was what I rang about. Iron it to-day, please, and let me see how it comes out. That will be four day-gowns, won't it?"

Arbuthnot looked incredulous.

"Four day-gowns for a week's visit?" she asked.

Cathie was strong on the subject.

"Yes, certainly four," she said. "There's the old speckledy. Take it down now. One can't tell. It may turn out all right. I've seen a dress so altered by a good ironing that you wouldn't know it."

Still following the lines so uncompromisingly laid down in these papers, a tea-gown was the next question for decision. Shortly before lunch-time Cathie decided against it. With a maid in attendance, she could easily have tea upstairs when she came in from walking with the shooters, and rest in her room till dinner, since no amount of carpentering, however drastic, would transform any of the gowns at her disposal into a resemblance, however distant, to what a "lady of title" said was being worn now at tea. Then came the question of evening-gowns, and over these Cathie could breathe a sigh, not of resignation, but of passionate content. She was more than neat in respect of them; she was gorgeous. Even her second-best was like, quite like, a new confection from Paris, and as for the puce-coloured silk, which had practically no sleeves at all, it resembled nothing so much as the dress that the Duchess of Wiltshire had worn at the last drawing-room in July. It was even more complete than that which so voluptuously figured in the full-page illustration, for Cathie's gown had a Watteau sacque behind, and insertions of lace, rather like

wedges, at the bottom of the skirt. It was comparatively unused, too. If she had been taking it abroad, she might easily have been charged duty on it, for she had only worn it on great occasions, such as the Mayoral banquet or dinner at the Bishop's three or four times every year for the last five years. Elizabeth had occasionally made pungent remarks about it, but Catherine felt now that her daring in buying the puce silk originally was triumphantly vindicated now that she was going to stay in the house of an earl with a shooting party. How few years had passed since Lucia had come to them—orphaned, forlorn, nearly penniless, and now it was necessary for Aunt Catherine to look out her very smartest clothes when she was going to visit Lucia! The puce silk had lived through all this period, and to-day its shining folds, smelling but faintly of camphor, made a brave show. It warmed Cathie's heart that the puce silk was coming out for Lucia, and it had warmed her heart to receive that welcoming telegram. For it was to no quiet week-end that she was being asked; she was asked for the whole of a week, in which the first shooting party of the year was to assemble. Cathie was not of snobbish nature, nor anything resembling it. But it pleased her quite enormously to be so cordially asked to what *Ladies' Dress* would call a smart party. Chiefly it pleased her because Lucia had not altered, but remained as affectionate and considerate as she had always been.

Aunt Cathie turned from the consideration of dress and from consideration of sentiment to another important affair. But she was equally free from anxiety there also. After Elizabeth's splendid offer of last night she need take no thought for jewellery. There were the amethysts, necklace, bracelets, and brooch, firmly set in pure gold. There were the three rows of Roman pearls, very large and lustrous, and of a magnificence indistinguishable from the authentic article. Indeed, if they were distinguishable at all, they were distinguishable the other way round, so to speak, for the little clasp of real pearls which fastened them were less remarkable, since they were small and rather stale-looking. But even they were but the frame of a superb garnet. There were other embellishments, too, for the day—a row of amber beads, which Professor Joblis had pronounced to be very fine, and probably Egyptian, and which exactly matched the yellow facings of the blue serge; a pink coral brooch, a malachite cross, and a large pin for fastening flowers, from the head of which depended a solid silver pig. Aunt Cathie, whether she had flowers or not, was accustomed to wear this pinned to the front of her dress. People said it was so quaint, and it made a good opening for conversation.

Aunt Cathie came down rather late to lunch, feeling she had spent a thoroughly delightful though very strenuous morning. At intervals it had occurred to her whether

it was right to think so much about dress, but, on the whole, she believed her busy hours to have been justified, for since Lucia had ascended into the ranks of those whose dresses formed illustrations for sixpenny papers, and had asked Cathie to join her there, it was clear that for Lucia's sake, as well as her own, she must appear in suitable apparel. It would never do if Lucia had cause to be ashamed of her shabbiness. But though much had been done, much still remained to do. Hats, gloves, boots, jackets, all required thought and inspection. Cathie saw that the eight days that would still elapse before she started would be none too many for all that had got to be crammed into them.

On coming down she found Elizabeth waiting for her in a most sarcastic mood. The excitement of "Empress" coming out had apparently kept her awake, and when she asked Cathie if there was anything of interest in the papers, it soon came out that Cathie's absorption in dress had prevented her from even glancing at them.

Elizabeth, having ferreted out these frivolous secrets, sat for a while silently thinking out a comment.

"All I beg you, Cathie," she said at last, "is not to go and make a guy of yourself. A plain grey dress for the day and your high black satin for the evening would be far more suitable than puce silks. And do you propose to wear pearls with puce?"

Cathie could not be daunted to-day.

"No," she said, "my amethysts will go with the puce. The pearls will go with the grey."

Then she did what was rare with her: she made an appeal to her sister.

"Oh, Elizabeth," she said, "right or wrong, I am enjoying it so. Please don't try to spoil it."

"I should have thought lending you my pearls wasn't spoiling it," observed Elizabeth.

That had to be said, it was only doing the barest justice to herself. But after that, in spite of her sleepless night, she said no more, and indeed magnanimously changed the subject, remarking that wasps were plentiful.

CHAPTER XIII

Aunt Cathie had arrived and was resting in her bedroom at Brayton before dressing for dinner. Lucia was coming up for a chat later, but Aunt Cathie was glad to be alone for a little, and recover from the excitement and strangeness of it all. It was bewildering; things happened as they did in books where money is obviously no object. Three or four motors had been waiting at the little wayside station (the train by which Aunt Cathie was to travel had been sent her on a postcard by Lucia, who was having it stopped on purpose), and out of it poured a perfect mob of people who all knew each other so intimately that she heard nothing but nicknames or Christian names. There was a duchess among them, for Aunt Cathie heard an extremely smart female in a very rustling dress, who carried a little scarlet leather jewel case, speak to her as "Your Grace," while everybody else called her Mouse. And slowly, the awful certainty dawned on Cathie that this resplendent female was Mouse's maid. For the servants there was an enormous omnibus, and for the luggage several large carts, into which Arbuthnot, who stood looking like a tall grey monument of despair, was watching her mistress's trunks being put. Then Cathie observed that she was led away to the omnibus, which she entered with the air of one who took her place in the tumbril that was to carry her to instant execution. Then an enormous footman touched his hat to her, called her "my lady," which somehow was gratifying to Cathie, and found her a place in a motor with two strange men and the Duchess. They were all most polite and friendly, though Cathie was tongue-tied with shyness, and Mouse pushed a footstool to her, hoped she had got plenty of room, remarked how early it got dark, and wondered why the motor crawled so. To Cathie it appeared that they were going at the most dangerous pace, and it was a great relief to her when they reached the house without accident.

Lord Brayton welcomed them, and there was Lucia, looking more radiantly beautiful than ever, who gave her a charming little butterfly kiss, a cup of tea, hoped Aunt Elizabeth was better, and then began talking to a dozen people all at once, in a language which, though certainly English, conveyed nothing whatever to Cathie. She felt stranger than would some survival of the glacial period, if it was suddenly brought into a menagerie full of animals evolved a million years later. And the Christian names and nicknames confused her so horribly; the moment she thought that somebody was certainly Tom, he turned out to be the Babe. And Lord Mallington was Harry and also Tubs, so that in a couple of minutes she had forgotten that he was Lord Mallington at all, while there was another Harry whose surname never penetrated her memory. Edgar did all that could be done. He and Lucia introduced her to

everybody, so that her own name positively rang in her ears, but beyond that (which she knew already) she had grasped little else, except that Mouse was the Duchess of Wiltshire. *Ladies' Dress*, with its full-page illustration of the gown she wore at the drawing-room, fixed that in her memory, and Cathie wondered whether she would wear it again here. How interesting if she wore it the same night as she herself was wearing the puce silk, which it so much resembled.

Then somebody, the Babe, she believed, told her that they were going to have a drive to-morrow, and Cathie, putting all her courage on the conversational altar, said loudly and distinctly that she would enjoy that very much. But the drive turned out to be partridges, and even the knowledge that the old speckledy, which had been marvelously renovated by the ironing, was so like to the dress worn by the lady with the small head when walking with the shooters, did not entirely console her for this dreadful mistake. But how could she know that drive meant partridges? She hoped the Babe did not think that she shot, as she had read some ladies did.

All these things went to form the groundwork of Aunt Cathie's reflections, which, though slightly alarming in certain aspects, had a pleasing terror about them. Not for a moment, even when they came into the drawing-room and its brilliant illumination after the dark of the drive, and a tide of guests, already arrived, rose to meet the other tide with which Cathie had come, and they all began talking loudly and simultaneously, did she falter. She gathered, also, that the house was not full even yet, and that a fresh contingent was arriving in time for dinner. Well, so much the better; it was all homage to Lucia, and had Cathie only grasped a few of their names she would have been scarcely at all terrified. But it was the conversing with a crowd of anonymous folk that was a little agitating; no doubt, however, she would learn their names in time.

Then came a sound outside as if several people were running races down the corridor of polished oak, which Cathie had found so very slippery to walk on at all, followed by a loud bang as if somebody had fallen down, and loud peals of laughter, in which she thought she detected Lucia's merriment. Then came Lucia's voice.

"Oh, did you ever see anything so funny? The whole house shook, Tom. I'm sure you must weigh twenty stone. Yes, Mouse, that's your room at the end of the passage, left-hand side, you know, not the right. That's where the Babe's cradle is. But do see he's dressed in time, and help him to brush his hair, if he needs assistance. Half-past eight dinner, but really half-past, because Edgar always dies at twenty minutes to nine if he hasn't begun to eat by then. So please be punctual, all of you. I hope you'll all find your rooms. I don't know where they all are."

"Where are you going, Lucia?" said a man's voice.

Cathie could not hear the reply; there were a few whispered words, and a stifled laugh, that suddenly made her feel a little uncomfortable. Then Lucia tapped and said:

"Darling Aunt Cathie, may I come in?"

Aunt Cathie was sitting by the fire with only one candle, and the room was nearly dark in consequence. She had thought it strange that there should only be one candle, for at Fair View Cottage they always gave their guests two on the dressing-table and two on the writing-table. But no doubt they would bring a lamp soon. Then Lucia entered and spoke.

"But it's absolutely pitch dark, like Egypt," she said. "Where are you, Aunt Cathie? I can't see anything."

A sound clicked in the gloom, and half a dozen electric lights flared out by the bed, by the dressing-table, by the writing-table.

"Or did you find the light too strong?" asked Lucia. "Shall I put them out again?"

Aunt Cathie rose to greet her.

"Not for worlds," she said. "Never thought of electric light. Why, it's quite an illumination. Beautiful."

Lucia produced a small cigarette case, and suddenly broke out laughing again.

"You never saw anything so funny," she said. "Harry was racing Mouse down to the end of the corridor, and he went over exactly like a shot rabbit. Yes, don't be shocked, dear Aunt Cathie, but I do occasionally smoke, on—on alternate Tuesdays, you know, like your garden-parties at Brixham. Only Edgar doesn't like me to smoke in my bedroom; why, I can't imagine—so I have to smoke in other people's. Oh, and Maud and her Chubby come this evening. You will like to see Maud again, won't you?"

"And—was it Chubby?" asked Aunt Cathie.

"Yes, mixture of Charlie and husband, you see; also it rather describes him. At least, he isn't chubby, you know, that's why. Let's see. To-night Harry takes you down. He's great fun, but don't talk to him about the Underground, or he'll go into peals of laughter. You see his aunt was killed there in a dreadful railway accident; she fell on the electric rail and was literally roasted, and left Harry all her money. She ——"

"Oh, how shocking," said Aunt Cathie, "but why does he laugh?"

Lucia's eye suddenly fell on the puce-coloured silk that was laid out on her aunt's bed. The light shone very distinctly on to it and she rapidly grasped the manner of it. For one moment she looked almost annoyed, the next she nearly laughed, and the third she spoke lightly and good-humouredly.

“Dearest Aunt Cathie,” she said, “is that for to-night? It’s almost too grand, isn’t it? It’s the kind of thing that the wives of South African millionaires go to the drawing-room in. You will find us all in scrubby country frocks, you know.”

A gleam of heavenly triumph came into Aunt Cathie’s face. The puce-coloured silk was smart: there was no denying it. Lucia herself said it was like a millionairess’s drawing-room dress.

“You mustn’t put us all in the shade,” Lucia went on. “Pray wear something less magnificent, or we shall all be green with jealousy.”

Aunt Cathie gave a little bubbling sound of pleasure, half laugh, half purr. She would tell Elizabeth about this, and Elizabeth’s sarcasm would be mute forever on the subject.

“Oh, I have brought other dinner-gowns,” she said. “There’s the grey with the lace; perhaps you remember it.”

“Ah! then I am sure that would be far more suitable for a higgledy-piggledy party like this,” said Lucia. “Do wear that instead.”

Lucia sat down near the fire and poked it into a blaze. She felt she had been very diplomatic over this, for she had both gratified Aunt Cathie by her reception of the splendour of the puce-coloured silk and she had averted the horror of seeing her appear in that terrific garment. No detail had escaped her; she had seen its sleevelessness, its wedges of lace, its Watteau sacque.

“And now I’m going to sit and talk to you for half an hour,” she said. “Or rather, you must talk to me. Tell me about all that’s going on in Brixham, how your garden is getting on, who has been giving parties, and how the servants are. And that nice old parlour-maid, who always had a cough. Fanny, wasn’t it? No, not Fanny—Jane.”

Cathie could not resist a little harmless misrepresentation.

“I brought Arbuthnot, of course, with me,” she said. “She is my maid now, Lucia. It is the same one. She was Jane.”

Lucia gave a little giggle of laughter.

“I must ask Harry if he is any relation,” she said. “He is Arbuthnot, you know. What a glorious name for a maid. It sounds too grand for words. And I must certainly see her. Dear me, what funny dear old days those were, weren’t they? Some time later on, Aunt Cathie, you must let me come and stay with you for a day or two, if it was only to see the Dean’s wife. I must have my old room, and *I* shan’t bring a maid at all—not so grand as you, and I must grub in the garden, and look at Aunt Elizabeth playing patience after dinner, and go to bed at ten and have breakfast at half past eight. Breakfast here? Oh, it’s any time: it’s ready when you are. I never come down myself, but there are things to eat, and you can have it in your room.”

Lucia was quite admirable at this sort of fluent tenderness, which meant nothing at all to her, but so much to Aunt Cathie. She was delighted to come and sit with her for half an hour, and make her feel at home; for since, against her own better judgment, Aunt Cathie had not been put off, she must certainly try to make her visit agreeable. Besides, she herself saw how her aunt loved to see her shining, as Edgar put it, and Lucia never had enough of that kind of homage. In consequence, the feeling of strangeness which Aunt Cathie had so markedly felt at tea had quite evaporated before Lucia found it necessary to "fly" to receive the last contingent of her guests, who would be now arriving. As she flew, she cast one more glance at the famous puce-coloured silk, and warmly congratulated herself. She had done it so neatly, too, had hurt nobody's feelings.

Aunt Cathie sat and looked at her fire when Lucia had gone for some pleasant retrospective minutes. It was all too wonderful to think all this was Lucia's; that this great houseful of people was being entertained by her niece. She did it all, too, as if she had been born to it; she shrieked with laughter when a peer of the realm fell down in the corridor, and shouted chaffing remarks to a duchess. Indeed, it had been worth a week's anxiety about dresses to see this. And everybody was so young, and in such childishly high spirits, and the women were so beautiful and the house was so splendid. And yet Lucia was just the same, and, in spite of all the duchesses and lords, came and chatted to her aunt in her bedroom. But Aunt Cathie wished she would not smoke; if she could find an opportunity, she would speak to her about it.

Her clock—rather a shocking clock, with a bronze lady with hardly any clothes on talking to a bronze gentleman in an equally insufficient costume—chimed eight, and Aunt Cathie, who had not known it was so late, rang the bell for her maid with a little thrill at the novel dignity. Arbuthnot appeared with hot water, looking a little dazed.

"Well," said Aunt Cathie, "this is a grand house, isn't it, Arbuthnot? And her ladyship remembered you and said she must speak to you."

Arbuthnot gave a little choking sigh.

"And to think that dinner's over by now at home, miss," she said.

For one moment, at the thought of the crowd of laughing, jesting people who knew each other so well, and of whom she did not even know the names, a little pang of homesickness came over Aunt Cathie at the image suggested by Arbuthnot of Elizabeth sitting down to her patience in the drawing-room at home, but she instantly shook it off.

"Well, I'm glad dinner isn't over here," she said, "because I'm as hungry as I am

at Littlestone. Oh, and her ladyship thinks the puce silk, perhaps, is too grand. So I will wear——"

At that critical moment Cathie's eye fell on its shimmering folds, its sleeveless splendour, its lace insertions, and the temptation was irresistible. To be grander than the duchesses! To make them all feel that they had scrubby country frocks on, so that they were green and envious! Aunt Cathie was but mortal, and a woman.

"I think I will wear the puce silk after all," she said. "It would be a pity to have brought it, and not wear it at all. And I will wear my amethysts with it—bracelets, brooch, and necklace. Get them out, Arbuthnot."

Cathie spent a memorable evening, and a most delightful one, though there were one or two awkward moments. Lucia, for instance, had clearly told her that Harry was Lord Arbuthnot, and as such she addressed him, just to show she knew. But it appeared that it was the other Harry who was Lord Arbuthnot, and this one was only Mr. Symes. But he had been quite delightful, and he seemed to enjoy immensely her account of a dreadful disturbance there had been in Brixham society a year ago, over the precedence to be taken by the Mayor's daughter, and she overheard him afterward repeating the history of the crisis to the Duchess, who was as much amused as he had been. Equally agreeable, perhaps even more agreeable, was the reception (it was not less than that) accorded to the puce-coloured silk and the amethysts. She had come down rather late, and conversation ceased altogether for a moment in the drawing-room as she made her shining entrance. But she could not, though conscious of her own splendour, agree with Lucia that the others were scrubby. Lucia herself, for instance, was dazzling in orange chiffon, though it was true she had no lace insertions, but Jiminy (whoever she was) had lace on her pink satin, which Cathie saw at once was quite as fine as hers, and though the Duchess's gown was of the simplest, Aunt Cathie, with her eye acute from recent study of *Ladies' Dress*, saw that the simplicity of it was somehow different from that of the old speckledy. Her pearls, too, were quite as large as those of Elizabeth's Roman set, though there were only two rows of them, but awe seized Cathie at the thought that perhaps these were real. But a little embarrassing, again, was the discovery at the conclusion of the story about the Mayor's daughter, which she told at some length to Harry, who was on her left, that while she had been talking three of her wineglasses had been filled to the brim with sherry, hock, and champagne respectively. For the moment it made her quite hot, it looked so greedy.

"Oh, see what they've done while I have been talking," she said reproachfully to Mr. Symes.

Dinner was laid at four or five small tables, holding eight each, and when,

towards the end of it, everybody began talking to everybody else across the tables, speaking again the strange language which, though English, meant nothing to Aunt Cathie, she was quite glad to sit back and rest and watch the stir and animation of young life. Pleasant it was again after dinner to find herself sought out by Maud, who introduced Chubby to her, and sat with her and talked about Littlestone. Then suggestions were made about bridge, a game Aunt Cathie did not know, though when she was asked by Edgar if she would play, she professed her entire willingness to learn if she was wanted to make up a table. That again made Mouse laugh—they all laughed so easily—who said it would be trespassing too much on her good-nature, and they all laughed again. So she looked on instead, and found it appeared to be very easy, like dummy whist, in fact—which she had played often and often for cowrie-shells, and she almost repented of her confession that she did not know it, since she was sure she would have picked it up in no time. But when she discovered at the end of two rubbers, at another table, Lucia had lost nine pounds, she felt she had had a lucky escape. How foolish of Lucia; she could not be much of a player. Indeed, at Brixham she had often said that she did not care to play at cards.

The only thing in fact that at all marred her evening, for the affair of the wineglasses was momentary only, since Harry very kindly had them instantly removed, was Lucia herself. She had seemed almost to avoid her aunt, and did not even kiss her when she said good-night, or come to her room afterwards, as Cathie rather expected her to do. But very likely she was upset at losing so much money; also perhaps she was vexed that her aunt had worn the puce silk after all, and reduced them all to green envy. But its wearer had enjoyed it so enormously that she could not regret the risk she had taken of making the others look scrubby.

Breakfast, as Lucia had told her aunt, was at any time that she happened to come down, and Cathie, not wishing to keep other people waiting while she breakfasted, had come down at a quarter past nine, to find herself quite alone. A quantity of hot dishes with burning spirit-lamps underneath them were on the sideboard, and there were signs, in the form of used plates and scattered newspapers, that breakfasts had already been going on. She was therefore in quite a dilemma; it seemed so strange to sit down and have breakfast all alone in another house, but the alternative to that was to wait, with the risk that everybody who intended to breakfast downstairs had already done so, so that at any moment servants might come in and begin to clear away. If that happened, Cathie felt quite sure she would not have the audacity to tell them that she had not yet breakfasted. It seemed odd to her, too, that when you have so many servants, there should not be four or five anyhow in the dining-room at breakfast time; their absence inclined her

to think that breakfast was indeed over. Yet peeping under the silver covers of the dishes on the side-table, she found that tremendous quantities of food still remained. There were kidneys, bacon, poached eggs, fish; enough to give everybody breakfast twice over. She felt that Elizabeth would be shocked at such extravagance. Personally, she secretly gloated over it; it was Lucia's house where this opulence reigned.

A middle way solved her difficulty, for a staid and elderly man, looking casually in, asked her with great respect, Aunt Cathie thought, if she would have tea or coffee, and a moment after receiving her orders brought in a little tray for her with a silver teapot and hot-water jug. She could not help asking him if she was right in beginning alone, and his assurance on that point comforted her. He also rearranged the pages of a *Morning Post* for her, and laid it suggestively by her, and as soon as he was gone Cathie turned eagerly to the personal paragraphs. Yes, that was what she sought: "Lord and Lady Brayton are entertaining a large shooting party," and then followed a string of names, Duchess of Wiltshire, Marquis of Kempsholt, Lord Arbuthnot, Mr. and Mrs. Lindsay. . . .

Cathie could hardly believe her eyes. But there it was: Miss Catherine Grimson.

Other people began to straggle in, and she hastily folded up the paper, feeling that she could not bear to think that other people should read that paragraph and see her name there. It was as if she had suddenly seen in the paper that Elizabeth had planted a polyanthus in the garden of Fair View Cottage. All her life she had read these paragraphs about the doings of people she had never seen, and in many cases never heard of except in such paragraphs, and here was she, recorded and printed among them. Somebody had set up her name in type, had corrected the paragraph perhaps, had sent it broadcast over England.

There was but little conversation at breakfast, and indeed she was the only woman present. Men in shooting clothes came in, nodded to each other, and just said good-morning to her, and then sat about on scattered islands, each seeming to avoid proximity to anybody else, and got through their meal before Aunt Cathie had finished the sole which she had taken. Then outside the noise of a motor crunching the gravel was heard, followed by a second and a third, and before she had finished she was quite alone again.

The house that had seemed so full the evening before was strangely silent and deserted, and after breakfast she went into the drawing-room, where they had sat last night after dinner. There the windows were open, the fires were unlit, visitors were clearly not expected to sit there. The shooters had started; three motor-cars

full of men had left the door, while it had not been suggested even that she, who had put on the old speckledy, with the amber beads and the silver pig, should walk with the shooters. Meantime, what was to be done? Where was she to go? Fancy having a party in the house and not coming down to breakfast! Probably Lucia knew what was the right thing, but it seemed very odd to Aunt Cathie. It was true that they had been up late the night before, but it was after ten now, and Lucia had not come downstairs. Nor indeed, apparently, had any woman except herself.

It was a deliciously warm and sunny morning, and though Cathie would have liked to go back into the dining-room and read that amazing paragraph in the *Morning Post* again, she was not equal to so audacious a feat, for fear some other servant might come and ask her whether she would have tea or coffee, thinking she had only just come down, which would be too dreadful a suspicion, since it was half-past ten. But the fineness of the day was, so she thought to herself, a temptation, especially since the drawing-room with its empty grates and open windows was far from being so, and, still a little desirous of a comfortable chair, a fire, and a paper, she told herself it would be far more wholesome to have a good walk.

Her bedroom, where she had gone to fetch her hat, looked inviting, too. It was already garnished, and though the windows were open the fire was laid, ready for a match. But Cathie did not know if it was the "thing" to sit in your bedroom, and it would be so dreadful not to do the "thing" in Lucia's house. Besides, she hankered after walking with the shooters, and if that amusement was to be indulged in, it would be dreadful to be out of the way when the others started, for it was still possible that walking with the shooters did not necessarily begin when the shooters began walking. Indeed she remembered having seen that ladies "joined the shooters at lunch." That might easily be intended.

At last there were signs that the house was not left unto her desolate. In the hall below was Maud, looking among letters for possible property of her own. She hailed her with delightful cordiality.

"Dear Aunt Cathie," she said, "are you going out already? How energetic! I was going to be lazy till lunch: it is the nicest house to be lazy in that I know."

Aunt Cathie gave a great sigh of relief.

"Oh, how nice to see somebody," she said. "I didn't know where to go, or where anybody was. Went into the drawing-room; windows open. Supposed everybody had gone out or was still in their rooms."

Maud laughed.

"You are too grand for words," she said, "wanting to sit in the drawing-room in the morning. There's the library, and the morning-room, and Lucia's sitting-room,

and the loggia all at your disposal. Do wait for me, anyhow, till I've had breakfast. Isn't it dreadful? Half-past ten, and I've not breakfasted. Or come and sit with me will you, and give me countenance. Lucia wanted me to ride with her at eight, but I absolutely declined, and sent Chubby instead. They'll be in soon, I expect. But probably we shan't see Lucia till lunch. I hear there's a rehearsal of 'Salome,' and she is certain to be there. So let's spend a quiet morning, you and I. Or what would you like to do? We might motor out and have lunch with the shooters."

Aunt Cathie glowed at this. Certainly it would be very pleasant to spend a quiet morning, but she felt like a child at a fair, who must see and do all there is to be seen and done.

"I should like that," she said. "But if we don't see Lucia, how can we go out in a motor?"

Maud laughed again.

"Oh, I drove down in mine yesterday," she said, "and we'll go in that. Or if Chubby takes that, we'll take another. It's a grab-house, you know; we all grab what we want. I grab you."

Maud still spoke slowly, evidently meaning all she said, and Aunt Cathie somehow felt much more at home with her than she did with Lucia, even when the latter came and sat and smoked in her bedroom before dinner the night before. Maud was in no way different from what she had been when she stayed with them at Littlestone, whereas—the feeling was instinctive only—Lucia seemed now to have sat with her last night instead of doing something else. Maud gave the impression of having nothing else to do, or at least as if to grab Aunt Cathie was to do what she liked best. But as she opened the dining-room door a sudden sound of laughter and voices came from within. Lucia was there, in riding habit, having breakfast with Charlie, while Mouse stood by the fireplace, with the *Morning Post* in her hand, smoking a cigarette. And instantly Cathie felt herself shy and self-conscious again. Lucia apparently did not.

"Morning, Maud," she said. "Not breakfasted yet? What a lazy! Charlie and I started out at eight, and rode for two hours. Ah, Aunt Cathie, you late too? What would Brixham say if they knew you came down to breakfast at a quarter to eleven?"

"Oh, I breakfasted long ago," said Cathie. "I breakfasted excellently."

"That's right—just what I'm doing," said Lucia. "No, Chubby, I understand Salome doing that perfectly. Imagine—oh, you can't, as you're a man. But, Mouse, imagine being desperately in love with a prophet who wouldn't look at you, and kept shouting out curses on you and your mother. He was very rude to Herodias, you

know. Why, of course, you would say, 'Off with his head,' like the Queen in 'Alice in Wonderland.'"

Chubby was drinking tea, but put down his cup quickly, in order to get a word in. It was necessary, he found, with Lucia, to speak at once if you were going to speak at all. Otherwise she did.

"Yes, you would, Lucia," he said. "We all know that you would, because you have a pagan and a barbaric nature. You are a throwback to some savage ancestor. Mouse isn't. She's—she's just a lady."

Mouse rustled her paper to command attention.

"Lucia, you are a snob also of the worst class," she said. "Why, oh, why, put your parties in the *Morning Post*? Listen: 'Lord and Lady Brayton are entertaining a shooting party,' etc. There we all are in a row. I shall write to say I wasn't there, but that you asked me."

"Oh, that's Edgar," said Lucia. "I'm not a snob. Nor is he really, but he's a prig, if you don't misunderstand me. Not what you mean by a prig, but what I mean by a prig."

"What do you mean by a prig?" asked Charlie. "I mean the same, Edgar. I have often told him so."

Lucia put both her elbows on the table.

"I mean—what do I mean? I mean a man who thoroughly appreciates all that is beautiful and interesting and artistic and improving, and knows that he appreciates it. He likes other people to know it too; he never, for instance, appreciated you, Mouse, till you wrote that dreadful book about the slums, which bored me to tears; but, having appreciated that, he likes the world to know that you are staying with us. You give tone to our party—most of the party are full of tone. We are extremely alive and intellectual. In fact, there is hardly anyone here, except perhaps Maud and Chubby, who haven't done something. Oh, and you, darling Aunt Cathie. And Edgar likes the world to know there is plenty of tone in his house. I have tone, you know; you needn't think it, but I have. We never pause for a remark in our house—again I except Maud, who always does—something happens, somebody says something, whether the Dante Society are dining with us or what Mouse calls the Amen Khyam Club."

"I never did," said Mouse.

"Perhaps not, but it would have been characteristic of you if you had."

"Then that would have been dull of her," said Charlie, "because if anybody says or does what is characteristic, it might as well never have been said or done at all. It was expected; it was only what you knew already."

Lucia looked at him quickly.

"Oh, Chubby, that's nearly a new idea," she said. "With a little care it might be made quite a new idea. It's quite true. Nobody is of the slightest interest as long as he behaves in the way you expect. He's like a punctual train that gets to the stations when Bradshaw tells it to. Give me the South-Eastern, now. There's romance for you!"

Mouse looked scornful.

"We gave it you neatly written out when you came to us in July," she said, "and you motored instead."

"I suppose I was in a hurry," said Lucia. "You have to be at leisure to be romantic. Haven't you, Aunt Cathie? Brixham has heaps of leisure, and anything more romantic than the conduct of the Dean's wife at the performance of 'La Rouille' here I never saw. I love romance. You can only really get it in a country house and in the plays of Mr. Shaw. Neither bear the slightest resemblance to real life. That's what romance means. Heavens! It's eleven, and I told them not to begin the rehearsal without me."

Aunt Cathie was standing by the table when this stream of foreign language began; then she saw that that was awkward and sat down. Upon which a footman offered her poached eggs, and brought her a little service of coffee. That was even more awkward, and she got up again. She was not precisely self-conscious, though she had acute moments of that distressing complaint. In general it was mere bewilderment that she felt. And Brixham was romantic because it bore no relation to life—what did it all mean?

But Lucia got up at the end of the last inexplicable remark and came across to her, drawing her away with an arm entwined in an arm toward the window. And the others went on talking, just as if it was a stage, and an aside had to be conducted.

"Dear Aunt Cathie," she said, "I do hope you are enjoying yourself, and of course you'll go out and have lunch with the shooters, and flirt with Charlie, or do anything you choose. Have you seen all our volumes of photographs that Edgar and I brought back from abroad? They are all in the library neatly labelled, and so numerous and large that you will see them at once. Or would you like to spend a quiet morning? Maud always does, and Mouse is going to ride, but you don't ride, do you? But to-night you know, after dinner, we are going to have 'Salome.' It's an opera by Strauss, and I'm sure you'd think it dreadfully ugly, unless you studied it first. So don't come, if you don't want to be bored. It's all screams and whistles and explosions, you know, like a railway accident. And perhaps you wouldn't quite like the story, if you hadn't been accustomed to it. Wasn't it dear of Edgar? He thought

of that, and told me to tell you. But now I must fly; I must go to their last rehearsal. Lunch? No, if you go out to have lunch with the shooters, you won't see me. Till dinner, then; and pray don't come to the play, if you feel like that about it. But do go and look at the theatre; I made Edgar build the stage last year, and it opens out of the loggia by the drawing-room. They all say it's wonderful for sound. And to-night we shall dine in sort of tea-gown things. You really mustn't wear that beautiful puce silk again. What a nice dress you have on! So suitable for walking. Oh, what delicious amber beads. Don't we talk a dreadful lot of nonsense? Mind to look at the travel-volumes. All about Egypt and Japan with lovely photographs. And Switzerland too: snow mountains."

There was no need for Aunt Cathie to reply, and indeed no opportunity. Lucia pressed her arm, just over a somewhat rheumatic place, but Lucia could not be expected to know that, and next moment was almost shaking Charlie from his chair to come to the last rehearsal of "Salome."

Lucia dragged her prey off with her, leaving the door wide open, and Mouse came across the room to Aunt Cathie.

"Darling Lucia lived with you for years, did she not?" she asked. "Do tell us what happened. It is quite too interesting for anything. Why didn't Brixham explode, burn with a blue flame, go up like a sky-rocket?"

Aunt Cathie knew she was being asked questions by a duchess. It is idle to say that the knowledge did not gratify her, but she would have been even more gratified if she had known what to say. She wondered also if she ought to bring in the phrase "Your Grace," just once, to show that she knew. But she felt she would say it awkwardly; it was better left out.

"Lucia did just what we did," she said. "Played tennis sometimes."

Mouse drew her down on to a chair.

"It is too interesting," she said. "She just leaped, didn't she—sprang to the top of everything? Fancy coming straight out of that sort of——"

Mouse paused in momentary confusion. It was only momentary.

"But I want to know secret history," she said. "Did she lie *perdue* and pounce? Did she make her circle there? She came out so full-blown, didn't she? Like the beautiful lunch you have on a train that comes out of—oh, well, out of a little sort of cupboard behind the door."

The language was still rather foreign, but Aunt Cathie got a sudden clearness about it. She became stiff, but not at all embarrassed.

"Lucia lived our quiet life," she said, "in our very little house. She always was very full of spirits. I think she did not find it disagreeable. She had her little duties in

the house. We led a very simple life, as I and my sister lead now."

Maud suddenly turned her chair round towards the speakers and laughed.

"Ah, well done, Aunt Cathie," she said.

That was more puzzling. Cathie was not conscious of having done anything well. She simply knew that at one moment she was talking to a duchess, no less, and at the very next that she was talking to a slightly impertinent person. She had talked, she hoped, quite suitably to each.

Mouse looked at her a moment, with her chin supported on her hand.

"Ah, how *grande dame*," she said quietly. "Lucia isn't, you see. I beg your pardon."

She got up from her chair, made a little gesture of her head to preface her leaving the room, and—left it.

Aunt Cathie turned a wild eye to the moulded ceiling.

"Oh, what have I done?" she asked. "Have I been very rude? What does it mean? And she called me—what was it?—a *grande dame*. That must have been most sarcastic. But I don't see what cause I had given her for being sarcastic."

Maud got up.

"It wasn't in the least sarcastic," she said. "It was as straightforward and true as what you said to her. Now let us go out, Aunt Cathie."

Cathie gave a little wail of dismay, pressing her two long bony hands together.

"I feel as if I had done something dreadful," she said. "But it's all so strange. One hardly feels to know what they are all talking about."

"Dear Aunt Cathie," said Maud, "you are not sorry you came, are you?"

Cathie turned a solemn face on her.

"I wouldn't have missed it for two rheumatic shoulders," she said, "or for a hundred pounds."

Later in the day Cathie again found herself in an empty house. She had had a long stroll with Maud in the morning, which was delightful, and they had lunch with the shooters at a farm some mile or two from the house. But after lunch the splendour of the morning had given place to a threatening sky, and Maud had recommended her to go home in her motor, instead of walking with the shooters and risking a wetting. This she had done, and, arriving back about four, had made her way to the library, where she found with difficulty the volumes of travels and photographs which Lucia had spoken of. But they were a little heavy to hold, and she herself was inclined to be sleepy after her walk in the morning, her swift drive home in air which was becoming chill with imminent rain, and with the warmth of the room in which she sat. So instead of following the travellers to Japan, she dozed in

her chair, and from dozing passed into sleep.

The room where she sat was of gallery-shape, seventy feet long, and broken up by big screens, so that groups could be formed round the piano in the centre, or by either of the fireplaces, which stood at the two ends of the place. At either end was a door, the one communicating with the hall, the other with the drawing-room. It was at this end, comfortably ensconced behind a screen, that Cathie had settled herself.

She slept for half an hour or so, and woke to find that it was growing dark. She was quite rested by her nap, but sat a moment longer without moving, looking at the firelight flickering on the book-cases and panelled walls. It was all Lucia's, too. Then a little distance off, on the other side of the screen which sheltered her, she heard a woman's laugh. Then somebody, a man, spoke.

"Anything diviner than the crisis about the Mayor's daughter I never heard," he said. "She told it all over again at lunch. If is really like a page of 'Cranford.'"

The voice was very distinct: it was Harry's. She hardly grasped the meaning at once.

Then a woman spoke.

"Dear Lucia is quite furious," she said. "She told me she did all she could to put her off, but Edgar wouldn't. Oh, and she tried to be diplomatic about the puce silk, and thought she had succeeded. Not a bit of it, though. She thought of telling a footman to spill something on it, something moist and green, so that it could not appear again. How heavenly that people should have aunts like that!"

She recognized the voice; it was Mouse's!

"Yes, most heavenly, but it is important that other people should have them, and not oneself."

"Quite so. Harry, I must get the story of the Mayor's daughter once more, and I do hope she will wear the puce again. It killed Jiminy's pink quite, quite dead. The pink gave one sigh and never moved again. And Raikes tells me she has the most wonderful maid, about eighty, who appeared in the room last night in white braces and an apron like the parlour-maid in a play. And the bridge! Didn't you hear? She said she didn't know it, but would like to learn. All the same, I was rather inquisitive to her this morning, and she 'upped' and answered me back."

The whole thing had only lasted a moment. Then Cathie got quietly up, bitterly blaming herself, poor dear, for not having done so sooner. The door into the drawing-room by which she had come in was close to her, and she could escape through that, provided she could open it noiselessly without betraying her presence. She had heard more than enough: she could not bear to hear more.

She went quickly up to her bedroom, and found it comfortably prepared for evening. The curtains were drawn, the fire prospered in the grate, and she sat quite quiet for a moment, but that her hands trembled a little. Sentence after sentence of what she had heard repeated itself in her brain. They were going to get her to tell the tale of the Mayor's daughter again; Lucia was furious; Lucia had not wanted her to come; it was good that other people should have such aunts; Lucia had thought of getting something green spilled, on her dress. It was not that the dress outshone them all, it was that the dress was ridiculous, that she was ridiculous. There was no question about that.

Cathie did not cry easily, but a couple of small, difficult tears rolled down her cheeks. She had—in spite of the strangeness—been enjoying herself so much: it was so exciting and wonderful, and, as she had said, she would not have missed it for a hundred pounds. And she had thought that she and the dress and the story had been such a success. But it was all a mistake; Lucia was furious, and had never wanted her to come at all.

But what was to be done? One thing she knew was quite impossible: she could not meet Lucia and her guests again. Cathie had her share of courage, but that ordeal was unfaceable, she could not consider the possibility of it. Nor could she even tell Lucia she must go away; somehow she had to get out of the house without Lucia's knowing it. Perhaps she might write a note to her, which should be delivered after she had gone. Then gradually a plan began to form itself.

Before very long she rang her bell for Arbuthnot. She, too, it seemed, was as curious a figure in the room as her mistress was upstairs, though the braces and apron were quite new. She appeared in them now.

"Jane," said Cathie, "I find I must get home at once. I am going to put on my things, and I shall walk to the station. We seemed to come up in a minute or two last night: it cannot be very far, and the walk will do me good. Then I shall send a cab back for you and the luggage. You will begin packing at once, and when the cab comes get somebody to put the boxes on it. Whoever it is, give him half a crown, and give the butler five shillings from me, saying I have been called home suddenly. And give him the note I am going to write, and ask him to let Lady Brayton have it an hour after you have gone."

For a moment Jane's face brightened; that was on her own account. Then she thought of her mistress.

"It's begun to rain, miss," she said.

"I am sorry for that," said Aunt Cathie.

The note was rather hard to write. Lucia received it when she went up to dress, for dinner was earlier to-night in view of the play. It ran as follows:

> "My Dearest Lucia,
>
> "I think I made a mistake in coming to see you when you had a big party with you. I am not much accustomed to big parties, and it made me feel strange. I am sure they all thought me a little strange, too, and so you must forgive my rudeness, for I think I have done the best I could in going home, as it would have been the same thing over and over again. Dearest girl, it was such a pleasure to see you in your beautiful house with all your grand guests. Pray forgive me, and make some excuse for me; you will easily think of one. And you promised, do you remember, to come and stay with us sometimes, and I shall take it as a sign that you forgive me, for I do not think I could bear to talk about it.
>
> "The sooner you come and the longer you stop, the better Elizabeth and I will be pleased.
>
> Your affectionate aunt,
>
> "Cathie."

Lucia hurried to Aunt Cathie's room. The fire had burned low, drawers were open and empty. She rang the bell furiously. After a long pause (it was only Aunt Cathie's bell that rang, not her own), a supercilious housemaid appeared. She ceased to be supercilious when she saw Lucia.

"What does it all mean?" she asked, "Where is Miss Grimson? Has she actually left the house?"

"I don't know, my lady."

"Well, don't stand staring like that. Go and find out what has happened, and come to my room."

The Lord hardened Lucia's heart, even as of old he hardened Pharaoh's. She was angry, not sorry, and that of her which was not angry felt justified. She had known all along that it would be the greatest mistake to ask her to the house with a big party.

Soon the same housemaid, scared but not supercilious, gave the news. She had left nearly two hours ago.

Lucia felt thoroughly annoyed. Edgar—it was one of his ridiculous plans—had announced his intention of taking Aunt Cathie in to dinner to-night. Pompously, so said Lucia to herself, he had remarked that it would please her. So the tables must

be arranged all over again. That, however, she did not propose to do herself.

She took a sheet of note-paper.

> "Edgar" (she wrote), "Aunt Cathie left the house two hours ago, because she didn't like it, as far as I can gather. I send you the letter she left to be given me. I had arranged, as you desired, that you should take her in. Will you please settle whom you will take in now, and make all necessary alterations in the tables.
>
> "Yours,
>
> "L."

But no compassion, no sense of pathos or pity touched her. What had occasioned this she did not trouble to think. She felt, indeed, outraged and ill-used. She had made herself charming to her aunt, and this was the result. However—at this moment Lucia's eye fell on the emeralds she was going to wear that evening—however, any difficulty about 'Salome' was solved. And the last rehearsal had gone excellently. Perhaps it was all for the best: and she almost repented of the tartness of the note she had sent to her husband. She dismissed Aunt Cathie completely from her mind.

It was at about the same hour that a cab drew up at Fair View Cottage. At the moment from within there was the sound of the Indian gong, which announced dinner. The door was opened, and Cathie and Elizabeth met in the hall.

"Good-evening, Elizabeth," said Cathie. "I have come back. Please don't ask me about it. My fault, nobody else's. I have got rather wet. Shall be down in a quarter of an hour. Don't wait for me."

CHAPTER XIV

It was a warm, still night early in May, and the electric light over the cabstand at the end of the square cast on to the pavement and dusty surface of the dry roadway the elbowed and angular shadows of the still leafless plane-trees in unwavering lines, as if they were made of some dark marble cunningly inlaid into a grey ground. The dried seed-balls of last year still hung there, and the air was only just sufficient to stir them, so that they oscillated gently to and fro, swinging from side to side in the light breeze that was not strong enough to agitate the twigs and branches that bore them. But in other respects, apart from the merely atmospheric, two houses at least had evening parties going on, and at the end of the square opposite the cabstand there was a dance, and rows of carriages and motors were employed in endless procession in unloading their occupants opposite the strip of red carpet that ran across from the curbstone of the pavement to the step of the house. The drawing-room window of Number 36, next door to the fortunate house with the carriages and the red carpet, was open, and in the window-seat sat two women. The talk had been intimate; it would be intimate again; but for the moment Lucia took it to the surface.

"Yes, it was just in this place," she said, "and just on such an evening four years ago, it must be, that we sat and talked, Maud. And the Lewisohns were giving a dance next door, as they are to-night, and though it was heavenly to talk to you, I wished I knew the Lewisohns and that they would ask me to their dances. And now that woman has left cards on me three times this year, and I have returned mine punctually next day. Here we go, up—up—up. That's me. And to-morrow I go down—down—down. What a bore it is! Of course it's delightful to be going to have a baby, at least everyone tells me so, but why couldn't it happen in February or March? As it is I have to spend these precious weeks in the country. Edgar really is too absurd. He makes—positively makes—me go down to Brayton three weeks before anything can possibly happen at all, because he says that if I stopped here I should go flying about and do things that are bad for me. He thinks more about the baby than me. I told him so yesterday, and he was hurt. So I kissed him, and said I didn't mean it. Oh, what a liar I am."

Maud gave a long sigh.

"Oh, Lucia, how can you say such things?" she asked. "Fancy minding about going down to Brayton. Why, I would go and live at Clapham Junction for a month if it would give my baby an ounce more health, an ounce of better chance. What a strange romance it all is!"

“You and me, do you mean?” asked Lucia.

“Yes. We’ve always gone parallel, haven’t we? Up at Girton first of all; then we fell in love—at least I did a little and you a great deal—with the same man. And now, within a few weeks of each other, less perhaps, we shall give our husbands our first-born child. I do want a boy so much. Do all mothers, do you think?”

“I imagine so,” said Lucia. “Fancy what a nuisance a girl would be in eighteen years! How my daughter will hate me, if it is a daughter. Because I shall still be going to balls, and giving them, and making everybody run after me, and I shall be so jealous of her, because she’s younger. Oh, I’m not nice, I know that. But it’s me, thank God. If she falls in love with some very attractive young man, I know I shall cut her out, and take him for a devoted slave, Number whatever it happens to be.”

“Oh, Lucia, don’t talk such nonsense!” said Maud.

“Maud, you’re a darling,” said Lucia, “and it’s dear of you always to tell me I am talking nonsense just when I am saying the things that are most essentially myself. They are very sensible; they are not nonsense. And, as I said before, I’m not filled with rapture at the thought of having a child. I’m not, I’m not. And think of all the waste of time that will never come again. How much nicer if one was a hen, and just laid an egg, and got another hen to sit on it, or put it in a Turkish bath, incubator—whatever they call it. I do think it would be an advantage. And I suppose you say that’s nonsense too.”

Maud laughed.

“I don’t think there is any need,” she said. “Oh, I remember so well when we sat here, you and I, four years ago, you talked the most awful nonsense. You were just making the most tremendous discoveries——”

“I always am,” put in Lucia.

“But they were more tremendous than usual that night. You discovered that you didn’t like men, and that you didn’t want to marry, but that you wouldn’t mind having some nice old man to be kind to you and kiss you. Immediately after which you fell head over ears in love with Edgar. My gracious! how you have changed since then, and how I have.”

Lucia at that moment did not want to talk exclusively about herself. Maud’s remark that immediately afterwards she had fallen in love with Edgar was one that had better be let go by.

“I don’t think you have changed in the least,” she said. “You are just what you always were—kind, and quiet and wise.”

Maud gave a little sigh, half closing her eyes a moment as the head lights of a motor coming up the road outside flared into them.

"But I feel absolutely different," she said. "I should not know myself for the same person. I look back on myself then as—as a girl lying fast asleep, not even dreaming."

"Ah, that may be," said Lucia, "all girls are asleep, I think. Then somebody comes and pinches them, and they awake. But they are the same girls. I was asleep, too, but I used to dream a good deal. And when I woke up my dream came true."

Lucia paused a moment; she felt a certain undertow going on in her mind, some submerged current of regret, of disappointment. This was very unusual to her; she had not generally either leisure or inclination for such thoughts.

"But I'm not sure that the dreams were not even more vivid than the reality," she said, "and they certainly had that fiery, absorbing quality which is characteristic of dreams. Dreaming, you have no before or after; it is a series of burning moments. But reality—there is so much repetition about it. The burning moment burns itself out, and you have to clear up the ashes. In dreams there are no ashes. Dear me, I seldom think of disagreeable things. I wonder if I have eaten anything that has disagreed with me."

"I don't think so," said Maud. "Do go on; I'm disagreeing with every word you say."

"That's a comfort. Whenever people agree with me it is probably because I have said something hopelessly commonplace. Indeed what I'm saying now is. Surely the anticipation of a pleasant thing is keener than its fulfilment. One enjoys the moment the lights go down at 'Tristan,' before the overture, more than the thing itself. Tread softly—what idiot said that—tread softly, because you tread on my dreams! Such nonsense; dreams are more durable than oilcloth. Tread softly, because you tread on the facts of life, would be a far more sensible command. The facts of life are the things that go into holes, that crack and let you through into ice-cold water. Dreams bear all right; life doesn't."

Lucia laughed softly.

"Decidedly I must have eaten something to disagree with me," she said; "but I'm getting rid of it emotionally, am I not? Oh, I'm not at loggerheads with life, I'm only at little loggerheads with myself. Years ago I planned to get everything. Well, in a sense I have got everything. I meant to climb out of that wayside ditch at Brixham, to rise out like the larva of a dragon-fly, to spread my wings, to climb, to soar. And, indeed, I've got everything I can think of. I am at the top, you know; it is no use denying it. And it isn't a mere smart top; we think, we work, we are tremendously alive. But what next? Oh, Maud, I must think of something next. I've got to go much higher than this. But—this, to be exact, is what I am afraid of—I am afraid that

wherever you get to appears to be dead level. I really must take out my spyglass and find another mountain peak. Now you say you disagree—disagree."

"But easily, eagerly," she said. "Don't you see, Lucia, you are only dissatisfied with quite the minor things of life. That I can understand is possible, though I don't realize it yet. But when love is yours, when, to crown it, you and I are going to bear children to the men we love, how is it possible not to be far more than content, not to be divinely unsatisfied? That happiness, that divine uncontent, it seems to me, must always rise from height to height. There is no top to it; it joins straight on to the infinite."

Lucia laughed with a sudden harshness of sound.

"Ah, mine does not," she said, "there is a considerable gap."

She rose quickly, giving herself a little shake.

"And I am using all these words to express what can be expressed in half a dozen," she said. "It's a little fit of the blues that I've got. Really, one makes much ado about nothing; that is the worst of having a mind that insists on working. 'Arry and 'Arriet—the mental ones—never wonder and guess about things. If they feel depressed they say they've got the hump, and leave it at that. I leave it at that, and change the subject with startling suddenness. Where's Chubby? I really came here to see him and not you, and he isn't here. Do you allow him to stop out just as late as he chooses? I shouldn't. Chubby has a charm that might lead him and others into temptations."

Maud got up and followed Lucia into the room.

"Yes, I let him stop out just as late as he chooses," she said. "Fancy not doing so!"

Lucia was walking up and down the room in a fit of restlessness. Here she stopped for a moment, looking rather keenly at her friend, then she dropped her eyes and continued her pacing.

"Oh, I've caught it from Edgar," she said. "He always quarter-decks if he has anything on his mind. But as long as you catch your husband's tricks it's all right, isn't it? Chubby: yes. Oh, Maud, what shipwrecks men can make of women's lives. What brutes men are! And the train of thought that suggests this seems to be Chubby. Poor Chubby! Do tell him that the mention of his name instantly made me think of domestic shipwreck."

A serene smile spread over Maud's face.

"Yes, I certainly will," she said. "That's the kind of childish joke that amuses Chubby and me. But again I disagree with you. Nobody can make shipwreck of your life. If a man behaves disgustingly, and you don't love him, it is no shipwreck;

you are sorry; it is very sad—but, after all, you don't love him. And if—if the man you loved behaved like that, I don't see that even that, Lucia, could touch your love. Love is so much bigger than anything a person can do."

Maud paused a moment, lit by her own phrase.

"Yes, just that," she said. "Deeds, actions cannot touch it. At least, so I think and believe. God forbid it should ever be tested."

Lucia had stopped again when Maud said "nobody can make shipwreck of your life." And as Maud went on she stood there very still. It seemed that she almost stopped breathing, for the gold sequins that were sewn in an Oriental pattern on to the bodice of her gown no longer twinkled and scintillated, as with the stir of her rising and falling bosom the light caught now one and now another. She had come here from the Opera and wore many jewels; but they too, both the tiara on her head and the three rows of diamonds round her neck, were still also. The lights in the stones winked and shifted no longer; they blazed steadily. Then, though she still stood without movement of foot, some tremor must have held and shaken her, for the lights were a galaxy of shifting colour. Then she moved, and moved quickly to where Maud stood.

"Ah, that is big, that is fine!" she said. "God grant it may never, as you say, be put to proof. I must go, Maud. It is late. Chubby would be an utter brute if he did not love you. Tell him so, also, from me."

Then she completely shook off that which had caused her moment of absolute stillness, and had broken it again with that sudden tremor.

"And another coincidence," she said. "Again I go down into the country to-morrow, just as I did four years ago, when we talked here. But that is the end of the chain. Otherwise I should have to go up to my bedroom and have my hair brushed out by you, which wouldn't do, as I imagine that room is Chubby's dressing-room. Oh, and in an expansive moment, a week ago, I asked Aunt Cathie to come and stay at Brayton for the momentous days. The old darling is rather lonely, I think, since Aunt Elizabeth's death. Edgar suggested it. I hope it will be a greater success than the occasion on which he last suggested Aunt Cathie should stay with us."

Maud winced.

"Oh, don't," she said; "it was so dreadful and so hopeless."

Lucia looked at her with a sort of soft reproach. At least, there was the identical expression in her eyes which is generally attributed to soft reproach.

"You still think it was partly my fault, you know," she said. "How could I help Mouse and Harry talking about her? It must have been that. I had been charming to her. Well, I shall be again. Good-night, dearest."

Maud went out with Lucia on to the landing at the top of the stairs. Something, perhaps, of Lucia's blues had infected her, for, though not naturally imaginative, she was very conscious, as she stood there, watching the shining, graceful figure of the friend she loved, stepping downstairs, of a deep, dim uneasiness, not exactly anxiety, not exactly fear, but of the fiery quality which Lucia had said was characteristic of dreams. Step by step she descended; then, just before the stair-rail hid her, she looked up and back.

"It wasn't my fault, darling," she said. "Good-night."

Maud stood there a moment after Lucia had passed out of sight. Then she heard the opening of the door, and Lucia's voice spoke. She could not hear the words; probably she said good-night to the footman, for she was always charming with servants. Certainly a man's voice answered her, also indistinguishable. Then the motor throbbed and whirred outside, and then came the thud of the front door.

It was already late, but she felt no desire for sleep, and went back into the window-seat where she had sat with Lucia. Some faint fragrance, some reminiscence of Lucia, still lingered there, a fallen petal, perhaps, of flowers she had worn, though it scarcely needed that to send her thoughts coming back to her. Somehow, when Lucia was with her, she was incapable of coming to conclusions about her; all judgment, all possible criticism, all appreciation even, was dazzled by her presence. If Lucia gave vent, as she sometimes did, to an abominable sentiment, Maud quite honestly labelled it as nonsense. But now, as sometimes before, when Lucia had gone, she could look at her, as through a smoked glass, and regard steadily what was uncriticizable when she was there.

A hundred times during this last year Maud had checked herself from doing this, but now and then Lucia so puzzled her that it was necessary to sit down and think, after she had gone, what she meant. One of the things, for instance, which she had thought about before to-night was that disastrous visit, and more disastrous disappearance, of Aunt Cathie from Brayton. Maud could be convinced, on this point; she knew that if Lucia had been really glad to see her, Aunt Cathie would have been blissfully happy—absurd, perhaps, because it was the old darling's nature to be absurd, but happy. Whatever she might or might not have overheard—it was known that Mouse and Harry had discussed her on that wet afternoon, and the door into the drawing-room from the library had inexplicably opened and shut—Aunt Cathie would never have fled the house had she felt that her hostess welcomed her, was glad to have her there. In self-justification Lucia pointed out that she had sat with her the evening before in her room, had said not a word to her on the subject of the

puce dress, had warned her ever so gently on the subject of "Salome," but Maud's instinct still shook its head to those arguments.

And (this question about Aunt Cathie was an affair of detail, though the detail was consistent with the main idea) Lucia seemed to Maud to have coarsened somehow during this last year or two. She had become hard, she had lost compassion, she had grown tolerant of, even curious about, things that were not worth study, or, if studied, only merited intolerance, were only worth knowing in order to condemn them without qualification. It was not so long ago that they had had what to Maud was a rather agitating talk on the subject. Lucia had railed, with some bitterness, about the double law, the law that allowed a man so much license and a woman so little. She had been advocate on behalf of greater indulgence for the woman. She spoke theoretically, of course, but her scheme of justice was that of completer liberty. In the eye of the law, no less than in the conventional judgment of society, a man might do really what he pleased, so long as he was not cruel to his wife, and paid her certain attentions; while a woman was a chattel, a dog led by a string, a bond-slave. It was from the social verdict particularly that Lucia rebelled, the legal one did not matter so much, for, so she said, if you are fool enough to be detected you must suffer for your folly. But a man, socially speaking, could play about as he chose, and be socially untarnished, whereas a woman could never play at all.

About this Maud's verdict was that Lucia talked nonsense; the trouble was that she talked so much nonsense, and always said that it was when she was essentially herself that the charge of nonsense was brought against her, in mitigation no doubt of what should have been her sentence, but mistakenly. She had said it so often that Maud wondered whether there was some truth in it. But she could not bear to think that Lucia meant all she said. It had always been her way to say more than she meant; she felt intensely; she felt subtly, too, and announced with banner and trumpets the opening of some tiny little *cul-de-sac* that led nowhere and was not meant for human passage, as if it had been some regal thoroughfare—a royal road for all mankind to traverse.

Maud went back over what she had said to-night. Her baby that was coming; what ludicrous things she had said about that. By her own account she was almost sorry that this was to be; she could in any case weigh the disadvantage of having a baby in June with the greater convenience of lying by in February or March. It was like—it was like grumbling that you had received a bad half-penny in your change for a sixpence, when a cheque of a million pounds, certainly negotiable, had been just given you. How could she weigh this infinitesimal thing in scales where the infinite

was piled?

Madge, too; she talked of men making shipwreck of the lives of women, instancing her. But what had been the truth of that story? Had not Madge for years consoled herself for the lack of that which she did not trouble to look for at home? Was it not notorious that Madge—— And yet Lucia talked of there being one social law for the man, another for the woman! Of course Madge was Lucia's greatest friend; she was right, immensely right, to ignore all that was said about her, and sympathize only with her in the public crash that had resounded through London. But was Lucia so utterly ignorant, so utterly innocent, as not to know what everybody really knew about Madge?

Yet—here again the remembrance of Lucia dazzled her—it was glorious of Lucia to utterly shut her ears to it all. She had said it did not concern her; she had had a really serious disagreement with Edgar on the subject. She had refused to hear things that were dropped from the garret into the gutter, even though they fell on the heads not of those who sat in the gutter, but were leaning out of the choicest windows on the first floor. Oh, it was a fine attitude; but—but was it an attitude?

Maud's thought had rather run away with her, and when thoughts run away with their owner, he often does not quite realize how far they have borne him. But here she looked round, so to speak, and saw a very unfamiliar landscape, a spot from which Lucia was banished. If these thoughts were true, she could have no abiding place here in Maud's heart, and that was inconceivable. It was inconceivable, not only because Maud could not imagine it happening, but because from the quality of the love she bore Lucia she knew that her friend could not, in the immutable nature of things, be cut off from her. Whatever Lucia thought, she must think it in Maud's heart. That was what love meant; it implied the negation of a separate existence.

How lucky she was! Many, how many, passed through life separate from all their fellows, all those who have never got into the heart of the world, who, though they may have married, happily, even, have never penetrated to the gospel of unity with another, who have always known, always wondered, at the moments of isolation that they sometimes experience. She was luckier; at this moment she could throw away all her criticism of Lucia, deep-felt though it had been, and go deeper yet. She had but wondered, and criticized with her mind; her love lay unvexed still, unperturbed, imperturbable.

She was luckier still; though it seemed that there could be nothing better to be desired or to be had than her love for Lucia, there was something better which she both desired and had. And she got up, moved by some tremor of an inner life within her. It was her life that faintly stirred; it was Charlie's also.

The clock on the stairs chimed twice, surely a mistake. But the mistake was endorsed by another clock in the room. How late he was, and how right to be late if he chose. For her, anyhow, it was bedtime. She welcomed that. It implied the awakening to another day—a day nearer.

Maud must have sat thinking for close on an hour, for it was scarcely past one when Lucia went downstairs. Her motor, which had brought her from the Opera, was waiting, the front door had already been opened, and she was just stepping into the porch when she met a man on the doorstep, who was coming in.

"Oh, Chubby," she said, "see me home. I go away to-morrow."

"I'll see you anywhere," said Chubby.

The motor whirred and buzzed, and the front door of the house was shut again with a soft thud. The windows of the car were shut. Lucia put the one next her down.

"Air, air," she said. "I want air. There isn't enough air. I should have made lots more if I had had the making of the whole thing. Oh, Charlie, she is a pearl—a pearl. Do—do be worthy of her."

Lucia felt immensely exalted at that moment. She felt it was a fine thing to say, a loyal thing to say, one that should certainly rouse his best feelings, his sense of duty, his love for his wife, his realization, if all was told, of her own nobility. The fact that fifteen seconds ago she had asked him to see her home did not trouble her in the least. It was a perfectly natural thing to do. Had Maud been on the door-step, she would have added her vote; she would certainly have wished Charlie to go. But she had not said originally, when she met him on the doorstep, "She is a pearl, Charlie; good-night." She had asked him to see her home, and said it *en route*. She knew the distinction herself, but she cut it; she refused to recognize it.

"Yes, she is a pearl," said Charlie. "I have always known it. And—and it was that, was it not, that made our intimacy? We made friends through her——"

The motor checked at a corner, bubbled to itself, and licked its lips again.

"Oh, my God!" said he.

Lucia's heart suddenly leaped within her. Her own side of the affair she knew thoroughly, but till this moment she had never really known what it meant to him. They had been intimate, in a purely innocent sense, being brought often and much together, each conjecturing in the other something of the nameless positive, the nameless complement, that all men and women seek. Whether he had actually found it or not she did not know. But when he said, "Oh, my God," she knew. What would be the practical outcome she did not think; she knew nothing except that his interjection meant that he had found. There was the world of regret, of duty, of

affection, that yelped behind it, but the true cry, tragic though it was, rose up through it. And even in this moment, which she knew to be supreme in its sensual sort, she could not be honest. Yet she could still mend matters, she could still say, since they pulled up at this moment at Prince's Gate, "Thanks so much, Charlie, for your escort; they will take you back of course. Good-night."

Instead she went a step further. She said, "Oh, come in for ten minutes. The motor will wait and take you back."

That, the motor waiting, was her semblance of an anchor. She did not mean to drift; the chauffeur would be waiting.

She was on the near side of the car, and paused on the pavement for him to follow. He followed, but for a step only.

"I think I'll go back at once," he said hoarsely, "I shall be keeping Maud up."

Lucia turned round. The lights stirred again in her necklace and her tiara; they winked in the sequins and they blazed in her eyes. He had resisted; therefore she would fight that resistance. It was not tolerable that he should resist her. Besides, she knew well in what spirit his resistance was made—the spirit of loyalty to Maud, fighting desperately. That fed her vanity, and ministered to her insatiable desire of conquest. And even in the same moment as she knew that she told herself, so amazing was her capacity for self-deception, that his resistance was insulting to herself. Surely with the wife of his cousin, with the greatest friend of his own wife, such scruples were as absurd as they were unjustifiable. It might be loyalty to his wife, for fear of some distant incredible conclusion that prompted resistance, but that same resistance was not loyal to Lucia.

"Oh, as you please," she said. "But we go into the country to-morrow, and shan't be back for ages. You might just talk to Edgar and me for five minutes."

Now Charlie believed that Edgar had left town that morning. He deliberately chose to forget that. He must indeed be mistaken after what Lucia had said. He leaped at it.

"Ah, yes. I want to see Edgar," he said.

Lucia smiled at him.

"You are too humiliating," she said. "You will come in to see Edgar, but not to see me. However, come in on any terms. Yes, wait, please," she added to the chauffeur. "Mr. Lindsay will drive back in ten minutes."

She was radiant; she had won; and as he came into the hall she looked at him, just shaking her head at him.

"You silly boy," she said, "I wanted you just to keep me company while I ate one mouthful of supper, and you make all this fuss. Go into the dining-room, and—

and talk to Edgar. I will follow you in a moment; I must just look at these telegrams. I never come home without finding telegrams."

The room was empty, but a small table was laid for two, and a servant was just bringing in a tray of supper. Lucia hated letting herself into a dark house, and having to fumble for lights and food, and a couple of weary footmen had always to be up at whatever hour she returned. Then Charlie heard a peal of laughter from the hall, and Lucia entered, waving a telegram.

"Chubby, it's too funny," she said. "You will think me such a liar. But whom do you suppose this telegram is from? It's from Edgar; he's down at Brayton. He went to-day. I quite forgot. Don't you believe me? Look—there are places for two."

Charlie pulled himself together; he knew, poor soul, far too well how hopelessly he had fallen in love with Lucia, but it would be doing her a monstrous injustice to suppose that she had any suspicion of it. Had she known, she would never have asked him to come in like this, except in the belief that Edgar was there. She had spent all the evening, too, with his wife. She could not know. Yet words she had said, phrases she had used, came back to him. Only this evening she had told him what a pearl Maud was: that he must be worthy of her. To his secret sense that had so tremendous a meaning that it seemed incredible that to Lucia it should mean only just that which it said, that it should but bear its obvious significance. But to doubt that was to doubt her, and for the present, anyhow, he laid it all aside.

"Well, his place will do nicely for me instead," he said. "Otherwise, if he had been here, I should have insisted on another being laid. And you're really off to-morrow? London *will* be dull, you know."

"Oh, I do hope it will," said she. "I hate going away from a place and feeling that everybody gets on excellently without me. I am glad you will be dull: Mouse said she would be dull, too, which is satisfactory. Oh, 'Tristan' was quite splendid to-night. How big it all is! And how very small most people look—small and mean like kitchenmaids, when they are making love to each other in real life. The sight of Mouse to-night flirting quite abominably with Wolfstein suggested these reflections. And Mouse is bigger than most people in these respects. She didn't go to the back of the box or hide behind the curtain, but sat right in the middle at the front, in a blaze of light, just opposite the royal box."

"Publish a small manual," said Charlie: "'The Child's Primer of Flirting.' It would have a great success. You must tell me how to make love on a big scale."

"Oh, it's the singing," said Lucia. "I feel sure it's the singing—that, anyhow, in conjunction with publicity. We must all learn to sing, and put notices in the paper,

‘Count Wolfstein will court’—what a beautiful word—‘will court the Duchess of Wiltshire from half-past six to a quarter past seven on Thursday next, by the Achilles statue. The Queen’s Hall band will accompany her Grace.’ Did you sing to Maud? Edgar never sang to me.”

It was by well-calculated design that Lucia was flippant and bubbling with nonsense. She saw that Charlie was excited, shocked, perhaps, at the knowledge that he was in love with her, which had this evening only fully burst upon him, and the situation required delicate handling. It required also that she should not detain him long, should soon dismiss him. Yet she felt very unwilling to do so; he was delightful in this new character, silent rather, and shy but extraordinarily attractive. For more than a year now they had been the greatest of friends; he was so quick, so ready with laughter, so boisterously high-spirited. But to-night all that was changed; she knew why, and she found the change adorable. How good-looking he was too; really Maud was a very lucky person.

Lucia went up to bed immediately after he had gone. All evening, up till that moment of meeting Charlie on the steps of Maud’s house, she had been rather oppressed with the sense of the futility and repetition incident to life; but now all that was dismissed. For the last six months she had wondered what was to be the outcome of this very close friendship between Charlie and herself, and of late she had been inclined to class it among the futile repetitions. But to-night, in a single moment, all that had been changed; he would never look at her again with the frank eyes of an admiring comrade. He would look at her either not at all or with the mute glance of love. She felt sure she was right about it; there was no mistaking it. And—it had happened just as she had meant.

She had dismissed her maid, for she wanted to think this out, and she could only do that in solitude. She was not in love with him, but she had led him on—led him on, putting forth all her power to charm, to intoxicate, and she had accomplished her plan. What did she mean to do next? Was she merely a flirt, one of those wretched, poisonous butterflies which four years ago she had so sincerely condemned in a talk she had had with Maud? Yes, she had condemned them then, but she was not so sure that she condemned them now. It was—it was such fun making the strong man bow himself just with a touch of her slender fingers. It was an exercise of power, an assertion of one’s own individuality, which was the supreme pleasure in life. Perhaps she was just a flirt, then. Certainly she was not in love with him. But he had been intensely attractive to-night in his silence, his forced speech, his sudden shyness with her.

Then a sudden wave of repulsion at herself swept over her. She had done a hideous thing to-night, and for a moment she knew it was hideous. If only she had been in love with him, there might have been some excuse for her; it would, anyhow, have been under the stress of temptation that she had acted thus. But there was no such palliation for her. She had done it in cold blood, because she liked to exercise her power over men. And the very fact that it was Maud's husband to whom she had done this had, she knew, added a certain piquancy to it. It was a supremely devilish piece of work.

Yet even then she was not quite sure that, had fulfilment of a wish been granted her, she would have wished it undone, for she would then have to go back to the rather jaded appreciation of life that had of late been growing upon her, life with its repetitions that were becoming monotonous, even though it was a remarkably brilliant thing that was being repeated. And though what she had done was devilish, it was very interesting. There would be developments of some kind now: nothing, especially when a summit had been attained, stayed crystallized. What they should be she could not conjecture. She was not in love with him—at least she thought not.

So, consoled by these interesting reflections, she went to bed.

Lucia had mentioned to Maud the fact that Aunt Cathie was going to stay with her at Brayton; what she had omitted to mention either to her or to her husband was the real reason why she wanted her there. This was simply in order that she might not be alone with Edgar. His power of boring and irritating her had taken immense strides lately, and with the wisdom and forethought that characterized almost everything that Lucia did, she was sensible in avoiding a long period of solitude shared only by him. Lucia was well aware that solitude and retirement did not suit her, and now more especially she knew how irksome she would find it to leave London and the season at its midmost, and bury herself in the country, while every day brought nearer to her an event that she dreaded. That was the truth of it; since it had to be, she faced it with perfect calmness and courage; but Maud's happiness over a similar anticipation—a happiness that was beyond all speech (even if she had been good at expression)—was as inexplicable to her as a language of which she did not know the rudiments. Woman though she was, it seemed as if the very elements of maternity had been denied her; she had nothing whatever in her, except the physical power to bear a child, out of that huge passion that makes, after all, the essential difference between the sexes. She had less sense of motherhood—in anticipation, at all events—than has the natural child that nurses her doll, and pretends it is her child. All she knew was that a physical trial, more or less severe, was in front of her, and when that was over, if all went well, there would be a child the more in the world.

The fact that it would be hers meant nothing to her.

And before this brilliant consummation was attained, there were to be weeks of quietness down at Brayton, while she was missing all that she most loved in life. Futile though she might find its repetitions, she infinitely preferred those repetitions to those undesired weeks in the country. Edgar had said the country would look charming; well, Piccadilly looked charming, too, and she found a better music at the Opera, or even in the clip-clop of horses' hoofs over the wooden pavements, than in the song of birds. She envied the birds, though; they could lay eggs.

Edgar welcomed her at the door. She had motored down from town, and he at once began to be tiresome, directing the chauffeur to bring the car quite up to the step, so that she might get out more easily. He offered her his arm, too, up the flight that led to the front door, behind which, gleaming in the light of the setting sun, Lucia saw the spectacles of Aunt Cathie.

"My darling, and you have made the journey without fatigue, I hope," said Edgar. "Not got chilly with the car open? I wish you had shut it. And I have had the punt repaired; you can float about on the lake, as you used to like to do."

This was worse than Lucia had expected. He had a bedside manner already. But for her own sake she meant to make the best of things.

"Ah, that is charming of you," she said. "And Aunt Cathie has arrived. Do let us have tea at once—I am so hungry. Ah, dear Aunt Cathie, how nice to see you."

Lucia congratulated herself anew that she had thought of this tender, charming plan of getting Aunt Cathie to stay with them. She was so lonely in Brixham—and Edgar would have been quite dreadful if she was alone with him. Even now he was distinctly trying; his eye sparkled when she said she was hungry.

"Oh, dearest, have an egg with your tea!" he said. "They will boil one in a minute."

"Then it would be quite raw," said Lucia. "Dear Edgar, do—do pull yourself together. What's the matter? Pour out tea, Aunt Cathie, will you? It is quite like the Brixham tea parties when Edgar used to motor over and stop for dinner."

Aunt Cathie's face made a sudden odd contraction. Instantly Lucia remembered. There had been four at these tea parties. But why—why make a face months afterwards, when it was only by indirect reference that the spectacle of the tea-parties was recalled? Besides, Lucia felt sure that Aunt Cathie had been much happier really after her sister's death than she had been for at least a year before. Elizabeth had always been querulous and tiresome; she had in her last illness, which was also her first, become unspeakable. Lucia had gone to see her once—no, twice—and she had complained, complained, complained the whole time, blaming Lucia

for giving her an attack of hay-fever, for playing lawn tennis before the alternate Tuesdays, for marrying, for giving parties when she should have been sitting with her aunt. And she had been just the same with Cathie. Yet now, months after her death, Aunt Cathie "made a face"—that was the only way to express it—because Lucia said that having tea this afternoon reminded her of having tea at Brixham, whereas Aunt Elizabeth had been there then and was not here now. She began to wish she had not asked Aunt Cathie, but then, looking at the solicitous face of her husband opposite, she came to the conclusion that she had chosen the lesser of two evils.

Then having already told Edgar to pull himself together, Lucia began to perceive that she wanted pulling together herself. If she was going to look out for annoyances, she would, without any difficulty, find quite sufficient to make these weeks intolerable. To do that would be inflicting additional punishment on herself, and surely she had quite enough to bear already. It was much wiser to see the ridiculous, the humorous aspect of things, if that could be discovered. Everything had its humorous aspect to the diligent inquirer, and Lucia determined that no effort on her part should be lacking in the search for it.

As always, honest effort had its reward, and after dinner she found much more amusement in observing Edgar showing Aunt Cathie those immense tomes of foreign travel, copiously illustrated with photographs, than she had often found at the play. She herself was reading, or rather dipping into a new book which had the reputation of being both witty and improper, but she dipped more and more rarely as this matchless demonstration proceeded.

"Yes, from there we went to Palestine," said Edgar, "and travelled right through it. See, Lucia put on the title-page of the section 'From Dan even to Beersheba.' We often thought over the text."

Lucia had a little silent spasm of laughter. That had been a fine and subtle idea of hers. But surely it was difficult to think over the text "from Dan even to Beersheba." You sat down to think it over; what thoughts came?

Edgar proceeded.

"And then, you see, I gummed in a little piece from one of the cedars of Lebanon. Lucia, dearest, we do not disturb you, do we? Do you remember the afternoon on Mount Carmel?"

"Oh, well," said Lucia; "it was a glorious day, and we had tea there."

"Fancy!" said Aunt Cathie. "How vivid it all makes it! Fancy having tea on Mount Carmel. 'The hour of the evening sacrifice.' I remember my father once preaching on that text."

The expedition went on to Egypt, and, on seeing an immense photograph of the Great Pyramid, and hearing the date of it, Aunt Cathie most justly observed how it took one back. The Pharaoh of the oppression took one far forward from that, and yet even he was quite at the beginning of the Bible. Explorers had not found any statue of Moses? No? Well, it was hardly to be expected. And the travellers left for Greece.

Aunt Cathie had always particularly wanted to see Greece; she could not say why, unless it was Lord Byron, and Lucia again quivered with inward laughter at the idea of Aunt Cathie and Lord Byron as travelling companions. Oh, how right she had been to get Aunt Cathie to come here! She could picture to herself with great vividness how deplorable she would have found the evening if she had been alone with Edgar. But it was a rich entertainment to observe the two: he delighted to pour out funds of information, historical, geographical, and artistic; she understanding some quite negligible fraction of what he was saying, but ejaculating at intervals, "Dear, how interesting! I had no idea Pericles was as long ago as that. And to think that all these beautiful temples were put up to heathen deities! And you really had lunch on the Areopagus, perhaps on the very place where St. Paul preached. I'm sure I couldn't have eaten a morsel."

All this Lucia drank in with secret glee. But there was very little kindliness or tenderness in her appreciation of it. She saw only the ridiculous side of it, that Aunt Cathie showed this strange but perfectly genuine interest in photographs of places she had never seen and accounts of people whom she had never heard of. But the pathos of it, the humanity of it, in that she, already stumbling in the mists of the grey years, should still be so interested in lives and places so distant from her, so alien to her, quite passed Lucia by. Yet for a moment she envied her aunt, who could feel real pleasure and interest in this dreary recital, so that for many evenings to come, when she sat by her solitary fireside at Fair View, she would try to place this evening among her pleasant reminiscences, and again try to disentangle the Egyptian Thebes from the Thebes in Greece, and place Epaminondas in his native country. That Lucia envied—the power of taking pleasure in infinitesimal things like this. Why should Aunt Cathie have that gift, and not she? Fancy being able to like looking at photographs! If so mean a form of entertainment pleased her, she felt she would be happier than the length of summer days.

Another thing, too, she envied. Aunt Cathie was so much gentler, so much less abrupt and brusque than she used to be. The passage of the years, like the hours of summer suns, seemed to have mellowed her. And Lucia was conscious that no such mellowing was taking place in herself; she knew herself to be harder than she used to

be, less indulgent of people who were tiresome, less easily pleased.

And then she remembered that new interest which had come into her life yesterday. She was sure that Charlie loved her. What a dreadful situation! And how intensely interesting!

CHAPTER XV

Parliament sat late this year, and, owing to the impious and almost profane attacks that were being made on the House of Lords by the infamous Liberal party, Edgar had felt that it was his duty to stand by his order and be in his place every day in the gilded chamber. Since this was an affair of duty, it followed that Lucia's arguments on the other side of the question were powerless to move him.

"I really think it is rather hard on me," she said. "I missed three-quarters of the season in order to carry out successfully my duty in giving you a son and heir, and as soon as my duties are over, it seems that I have to sit and hold your hand while you do yours. Can't you, can't you pair with one of these newly elected peers, whom nobody ever heard of? I'm sure you could find out the name of one of them if you made inquiries in the proper quarters."

Edgar threw back his head with a great shout of laughter. For the last six weeks, since the birth of his son, he had been a different man. Though maternity appealed so little to the mother, paternity seemed a tremendous thing to him. "In fact, he takes the entire credit," Lucia had once remarked to Mouse. And with this great ambition gratified, his spirits had been almost boisterous.

"Ah, capital, capital," he said. "You cut so neatly, my darling, a conversational surgeon. But pairing—no, no. One must be in one's place. Dearest, I regret the necessity; nothing would please me more than to start to-morrow, all alone with you and baby, and go on and on in the yacht for ever. You priceless one!"

This was not exactly what Lucia meant.

"I don't ask you to come on for ever," she said. "I only want you to come to Cowes. Oh, Edgar, I have been so good. And I can't entertain alone, I don't really feel up to it. I think you might come."

Edgar became solemn.

"A wave of Socialism and Radicalism is sweeping over the country," he said. "It must be actively resisted, not passively. As you so neatly said, as far as voting goes, if I found out the name of one of these new peers, and paired, the result would be identical. But there is more at stake than that. We, the old land-owners, the territorial magnates, represent more than some very worthy gentleman, whose name at present is unfortunately unknown to us, though very likely we use his soap."

"Then do you want me to broil in London all August, because you sit in the House of Lords for ten minutes on three afternoons in the week?"

He shook his head at her.

"There is a Whiggish smack about that," he said. "I protest; I must protest. But

as for your broiling in London all August, I never contemplated that. Go up to Scotland if you like; pay some visits. Take the yacht, or go to Brayton. That is what I personally should like you to do. I could then get down on Friday, and see my—my goddess and my child."

Lucia thought this over.

"I should like Cowes best," she said. "But Cowes is a little formidable if I am entertaining alone. But perhaps if I could get a few people to come and vegetate with me at Brayton, we might be a not unhappy cabbage-patch."

This idea had been put into practical form, and at the end of July, after a fortnight in town, Lucia moved down to Brayton again. She had secured some half-dozen people to save her, as she said, from dry-rot, and among these were Charlie and Maud and their child. Mouse was there also, Harry was there, and one or two others; but before she had been at Brayton a week, it seemed to Lucia that everybody else had become of infinitesimal importance, had retired to the vanishing point, except Maud and Charlie. On Fridays Edgar appeared, and took up a large part of the horizon again, but he vanished also on Monday morning. And with him, it must be added, vanished all thought of him until on Friday afternoon he reappeared again, having motored down from London a shade under the speed limit, so as to be quite on the safe side. And he always caused the horn to be blown at any cross-road, whether the driver could see it was clear or not. He never took risks. And at the thought Lucia drew a long breath, quickly, impatiently. He never took small risks; that was what she believed him to mean. He could see small risks, and provide against them. But he never appeared to see big risks. He could not see beyond his nose, or beyond the next corner. Little as she wished him to, it was yet a cause of irritation to her that he did not.

People had come and gone from Brayton during this month of August. People had also come and gone, and come back. Mouse was among these; she had given her husband leave to wander where he liked, provided that she might wander where she liked, and she had been at Brayton during the first week in August, had gone away for the second, and had just come back for another ten days before she went up to Scotland to make open house for September. Lady Heron had been in and out also, Harry had appeared from time to time, and disappeared and appeared again. A succession of people came for a Saturday till Monday, or from a Monday till Saturday, since to all those who were anchored in town till Parliament broke up Brayton was a perfect godsend. But two—three guests remained there without moving—Maud, Charlie, and their baby.

Little as maternity had proved to mean to Lucia, these weeks showed her with the significance of the writing on the wall what it might have meant, showed her, perhaps, what it should have meant. The truth came to her in ironical flashes, so to speak. The flash lit up the scene of what might have been. It never lit up the whole scene; it lit it up in sections, but before long she was able to piece the fragmentary illumination together, and form a fair idea of the whole. Sometimes such fragments seemed like unlocalized pieces of a puzzle, but even they gradually settled down into their places. She tried them in various ways before they all seemed to fit, but a little ingenuity soon made homes for them all.

One day, for instance, she was floating about on the lake with Maud. The punt had nosed its way into a Sargasso Sea of water-lilies, and it was really impossible to proceed. So Lucia laid the dripping pole lengthwise on the boat, and sat down by Maud.

"We're anchored," she said, "as regards further progress. I shall sit down and rest, and then we'll go back."

Maud edged to the side of the boat, to give Lucia room.

"I wonder if you ever do rest," she said. "You are so like—like something, the Flying Dutchman, if you will, that has to go on and on. But you like going on and on," she added; "you are not driven by a curse but by blessings."

Lucia felt the simile, in so far as it was concerned only with going on and on, to be admirably applicable.

"Ah, we all want new things—new things," she said. "When we know a thing we cease to care for it. 'The glory of going on!' Who says that? St. Paul, I should think. But you seem to find such rapture in the satisfaction of standing still. Oh, yes, darling, you are a cow; I think we settled that long ago. Do give me the recipe. How to be a cow! I wish I knew. Maud, I could shake you sometimes with pure irritation at your content. If you only were a fool, I shouldn't mind, for I should say that you were contented because you were a fool. Oh, talk and tell me."

Maud raised herself a little on her elbow.

"But how could I not be content?" she said. "I can't wish for more than I have got. Perhaps I have no imagination. Very likely that is so. But God seems to me to have a wonderful imagination. I think He has imagined His very best for me."

Lucia again felt slightly impatient.

"Oh, I don't dispute it," said she; "but that isn't enough. One has to have something in oneself in order to appreciate one's happiness. In the courts of heaven that may be all done for one, but in the meantime we are here in a punt on a lake in the county of Hampshire. Try to be less celestial. Tell me why I, who have so much

more than you—I have really, darling; I am much cleverer and richer and more *répandue*—tell me why I want, while you have got. Talk about things by their names."

Maud sat up.

"Well, Charlie is my husband," she said, "and he has given me, or I have given him, a child. I have friends, and a friend who is sitting by me."

Lucia tapped the side of the punt with a tattoo of fingers.

"But what then?" she said. "What next? More children, I suppose, and more friends. Oh, it is repetition. I know what friends mean, I know what a child means. Is that all? My God! is that all?"

Then, with her quick instinct, she divined that Maud was hurt.

"I have a friend sitting by me, too," she said, "but I don't want another. That is sufficient. For nobody will ever be to me what you have been and are. Oh, Maud, you are good; I expect that's it. If you lived in a cottage on fifteen shillings a week, and Charlie tied bootlaces below his knee and went out to dig potatoes, and called you his 'missus,' I believe you would be happy. It's your temperament to be happy. My temperament is to want to be happy. Go on, please; tell me about your life. Tell me what makes you happy, and—and I shall order some. Be domestic. Say what Charlie is, and what you are, and what Philippino is. Be philosophical, if you like—yes, do be philosophical, and explain the principles of domestic happiness."

"For me or Charlie?" asked Maud.

"Both," said Lucia, and settled herself to listen.

Maud drew a long breath.

"Oh, it's so hard to explain," she said, "but it is so clear to me. Let's take Charlie first. Well, here he is, Lucia, and he and I have been here close on three weeks, and Charlie said last night that he proposed to stop till you turned him out. Doesn't that mean content? The darling doesn't know what it is that makes him so content. But it's Philippino and me. It is really. He says he doesn't want to go to Scotland, he wants to stop here, and catch one fish in the morning and one in the afternoon, and play halfpenny bridge, and—and do nothing. Ah, isn't that enough to make one content? It sounds quite common, doesn't it? for I suppose it is just love that makes me content. Yet you've got it, and you still want. How queer! It makes Charlie content, too."

That was a flashlight; there was a large area illuminated then. At one moment she felt that it was impossible that Maud should not see what his content signified, at the next she felt that it was impossible that Maud should.

A more searching flashlight, a light that, pierced through the very flesh, was bull's-eyed upon her half an hour afterwards. They backed out of the clump of lilies, went alongside the wooden landing-stage, and strolled up to the house for lunch. On the terrace walk were two perambulators, being wheeled parallel the one to the other. Maud's nurse pushed one, but the other, containing Lucia's baby, had just one long strong hand on it, while the other saluted them as they came up from the lake.

"All else has failed," shouted Charlie, "and I'm being apprenticed for the post of nurse."

He had taken the perambulator from the hands of Lucia's nurse, and she was walking a little behind, with giggles and glances at the other, and an occasional "Lor, Mr. Lindsay" at Charlie's preposterous conversation. The two baby-carriages were axle to axle, and just as Lucia and Maud got on to the terrace, Lucia's baby, with a gurgle of delight, stretched out a plump, dimpled hand towards the man who pushed his carriage.

Then came the flashlight. Lucia looked at Maud's baby, and there shot into her mind the knowledge that it was Charlie's; Charlie looked at the dimpled hand of Lucia's child, and remembered that it was hers. Then the eyes of a father and a mother met, and Lucia knew that into her mind had come the thought, "If he was the father of my child, I should understand."

And what she would understand was that which shone in Maud's eyes and smiled in her mouth as she looked at her child, which was Charlie's.

She knew then what she had missed. But Edgar's child and hers put out dimpled fingers towards the man who pushed it. She knew again, and more distinctly, what she had missed. But the thought of stale and endless repetitions left her; the flashlight hinted at something new, something she had seen and observed, but never yet experienced.

Late that evening, after dinner, they all went out on to the terrace. There were some dozen people in the house, and it was by accident, as far as Lucia was concerned, that the man who let himself down from the seat on the terrace wall just as she came out, last of her guests, arm in arm with Maud, was Maud's husband.

So Maud put her disengaged hand into his arm, and all three stood there together, she in the middle between Lucia and Charlie.

"And so here we are, all three," she said; "but for the moment it is going to be all two, you and Lucia. Blessed Philippino has been crying, and I must go up and see what is the matter. Don't come up, Chubby. I shall be down again soon."

Maud went back through the drawing-room where the servants were beginning

to put out card-tables, leaving the other two on the terrace. The rest of the party, all intimate, had strolled on a little ahead, and the noise of their talking and laughter came in gradual diminuendo. But they would be back in a few minutes, for bridge, now that Edgar was not here to keep up the tone of conversation, was the vague order for the evening. They would be alone for only the briefest space. Then Lucia spoke.

"Maud is altogether wrapped up in Philippino," she said. "She doesn't ever give a thought to you now, Chubby. I should take steps about wifely desertion, if I were you. Edgar is just as bad. He comes down from Saturday till Monday only, as you see. What a heavenly night! Where has everybody gone? We seem to be left friendless and alone, you and I."

Lucia knew what she was doing. Though she spoke with her light, quick voice, she was aware that her words would have a double-edge for him. Then she heard a sudden little creak from his shirt, as if he had drawn a breath rapidly.

"Yes, quite alone," he said. "Maud upstairs, the deserted wife and the deserted husband here, and the rest of them——"

She laughed.

"What a discreet pause!" she said. "So discreet that you really must go on. What are the rest of them doing?"

"Oh, making love, I suppose," he said impatiently in a voice that Lucia hardly knew. There was revolt in it, rebellion and—envy.

The light from the open windows of the drawing-room shone out very clearly on to them, illuminating his figure, as he stood there, tall, eager-eyed, unconscious of himself, but very vividly conscious of her. And Lucia knew that she was playing with fire, knew also that she was running the usual risk of those who do such things. But she told herself that she had not been in the least burned yet; the fire was only delightfully warm. And she took a couple of steps out of the square of illumination into the dusk, drawing him with her.

"And why not?" said she. "Surely everybody who is at all alive is making love all the time to something or somebody, to an idea if not to a person. The moment you cease to be in love you cease to live. And the worst of it is that you have to go on living just the same."

"Yes, that is damnably bad," he said.

There was a sudden fierceness about this which enchanted her. The heart of the man had suddenly leaped into light, and Lucia wanted but little intuition to guess from that how fierce a struggle was going on within him. It was dramatic; it was one of the wonderful ironies of life that things should happen like this. If it had been anyone

else, the husband of a stranger, of an acquaintance, it would be the stale old triangle over again. But about this there was something biting; the scene was luridly lit.

That flashed in and out of her brain in a second, and it was left filled with the reality of what was happening, not with the sense of its artistic interest. And it was more than the mere reality of it that made her raise her eyes to him, that drew her a step nearer him, that made her mouth tremble for a moment; it was the exquisiteness of that which suddenly flamed within her, the surprise and wonder of it. She thought no more of Maud; not even in the most remote cells of her brain did the memory of her friend linger; she thought not even of herself; she thought only of him. It was as if a great warm wind, full of the odour of the flowers above which it had passed, full of their colour even, had swept into the passionless calm chamber of her soul, filling it, vivifying it, making it sing. At that moment she knew she was in love with him.

"Ah, do you find it damnably bad—too?" she asked.

Never had that final little monosyllable been charged with a message so significant. It shouted, it trumpeted its unmistakable meaning to him. But, to do him justice, he made one desperate effort to stifle it.

"No, no; it's dreadful, it is abominable," he said. "I—I had better go away. Maud, your friend. Philippino——"

Again, as when Lucia walked across the pathway leading to the cricket-field, it was in her power to choose. Her tongue waited its orders from her brain, it would do as it was told, it would say certain words or certain other words. But short as had been her struggle then, it was shorter now; indeed, it was no struggle. All her life she had lived for her own amusement, her own greed of pleasure, and at the moment of crisis it was not to be expected that she would decide in a way that opposed and contradicted the whole trend of the million thoughts and impulses that had gone to make up the history of her grasping days. Never in all her life had she been unselfish or loyal, even when the cost of such dealing was light; it was not humanly possible that now, when the cost was heavier than any that had yet been demanded, she should act in a manner that was so unnatural to her.

But—here the calculating, scheming part of her brain spoke to her again—she saw that the impulse that made him speak like that was strong. The struggle that in her was non-existent was desperate for him, and while one word from her to encourage his loyalty, to help him in these sore straits, would have ended the matter, the wrong word to encourage the other side might end it too. That which he longed for, and struggled to reject, might revolt and disgust him into loyalty. She had to appear to be torn by the same firm forces that were rending him. She, who was so immeasurably the stronger of the two, had also to appeal to him, womanlike.

Again she drew a step nearer him, and laid her hand on his arm.

"Yes, dear, it is dreadful," she said. "But the situation has made itself; we haven't made it. We must—we must be sensible, and try to look at it calmly, now it has come, not lose our heads. For instance, if you went away to-morrow, what would Maud think? Only to-day she was saying to me how happy you were here. That is not to be thought of. Besides, Charlie, I ask you to stop for my sake. I—I don't know what I should do if you went away just now. I might do something mad. And what conceivable harm can come if you stop? Besides, now that things are—as they are, we must think what to do, not act rashly, not—oh, Charlie, Charlie, it is dreadful, but it is wonderful. I never knew till now, never, never."

It was done. At that moment the essential Rubicon was passed. He had known perfectly well that the only possible thing for him to do, if he intended to be an honest man, was to leave at once, on any excuse or on no excuse. He knew also that the situation was one about which any argument, any weighing of the possible advantages of this course or of that, was futile. No amount of reason plunged into the scale ought to affect the balance by a featherweight. And he yielded (and knew it) not to the reasons she gave, but to her. The reasons were specious enough to appeal to common sense, and he told himself that it was to these he yielded. But he knew it was not so; he yielded to his own desire and to hers.

"Yes, yes, I see," he said. "We must think over it, talk over it, see what is wisest. Lucia——"

She raised her face towards him, in a manner that admitted of no misinterpretation, and he kissed her.

They stood apart and in silence a little, then voices and laughter from the dark came a little nearer.

"Come," she said quickly, "we must come and meet them. We must be quite natural; oh, Charlie, how easy! I am so gloriously happy. Just say you are happy too."

She had won; she had broken down the main defence. For the moment she had banished Maud from his mind as utterly as she had banished her from her own.

"No, not happy," he said. "Not that."

It was little more than an hour afterwards that Lucia was alone in her bedroom, and, having dismissed her maid, she once more, as on a night at Brixham she had lit all the candles she could find, turned on every light, controlled by a whole board of switches, that the room held. Ordinarily, even for purposes of reading, it was sufficient to light the row of concealed lamps that lay out of sight behind the heavy

cornice of the ceiling; those she lit now; she lit the single lamps that illuminated the half-dozen pictures on the walls; she lit the lights by the bed, the lights on her dressing-table, the lights on the table where she wrote. Above the washstand another blazed; two more blazed by the chimneypiece; above her sofa there blazed yet another; and on each side of the pier-glass was one. And the sun, the central illumination, was herself, beautiful as she had never been before, triumphant as never before she had been, less content than ever, and for that reason immeasurably happy.

For she loved; she had never known that before, and the splendour of it made the galaxy of stars burn dim. She knew what it was to be loved; well she knew the symptoms and stress of passion in another, but never until now had she herself burned with that noble fever. For months now she knew that she had been sickening for it; it was that, she felt sure (and was right) that had made the whole world and her success therein seem stale and without worth; and now, like some swift and prodigious plague, it had fired all her blood. To be loved had meant so little to her; now she understood why, and it was because she, the essential she, had had no part in it. She had but yielded herself, and that no more than physically, to alien transports, but now the memory of them even was kindled within her, since in the light of the dazzling knowledge she could guess what it all meant. She knew now, a thing that had been unintelligible to her before—how her presence, her proximity, affected Edgar, how her word, her smile, her touch held promise for him of the ineffable. She knew how she had finished for him, according to what had seemed to her at the time mere idle babble, the symphony of Schubert; she knew why he looked at her with burning eyes, why, when he proposed to her first on the empty beach at Littlestone, she had been momentarily frightened at what seemed to her a savage thing. Yes, savage it was—she understood that now—savage and incomparable. All else was tame in comparison with it.

For the time—for this hour, at any rate—the consciousness that she loved, and was loved in return, was sufficient. Even though this great illumination lit the past passages of her life for her, so that she knew and saw all she had missed, she did not just now look forward to all that the future might mean. Life at last had opened its ultimate doors; her imagination no longer dropped back, as it had done so often of late, because it could invent nothing further than the endless repetition of what she had already achieved; it dropped back now because it was dazzled with all that was laid open before it, at all that was undoubtedly hers. And if at the moment when she had chosen, when she had hesitated as to whether she should let friendship, loyalty, all those *bourgeois* virtues, be a feather of weight in the turning of the scale, and had

found they weighed not even that, it seemed now that the very existence of such motives helped but to kindle the fever with which she burned. At this moment it was the very fact that Maud was her friend, that Maud was the sweetest, kindest soul in the world, that heaped fuel on this conflagration of herself. That Edgar loved her was but another faggot, that she had a child by him enkindled it, and that now in the house was Maud's child, Charlie's child——

That was fresh material, different material. Till that came into her mind she had but thought of Maud as a nonentity, though a thing to be burned, to be used as fuel. But at this she took a different view. Maud, in her thought, became an enemy, one who had got possessed of what should have belonged to Lucia. She had dared to love that possession, she had dared to use it. Lucia was not jealous of her—the time for jealousy was past; jealousy had dropped dead the moment she had just beckoned to Charlie out there on the terrace after dinner; it was absurd to be jealous of one who no more than imagined she had a treasure in her keeping. Yet she was the nominal possessor of that treasure, and for that reason Lucia hated her. Hate, at least, was in her heart, but she covered it up. She let it lie there; it did not matter. It was so unimportant compared to that which really concerned her. All else was unimportant likewise, though again she felt a certain vague hostility when she thought of her child. For it was Edgar's.

The hostility was not quite over yet, and she wanted to be done with such emotions. But the next subject was of graver import, for it was Edgar. It was no trouble to forgive Maud for what she had done in defrauding herself, the rightful owner by the title-deed of love, of Charlie, especially since now her pilfering—for so it was—had proved so abortive, but it was a different matter with Edgar. He had acquiesced in Lucia's cheating herself, had made her suppose that love held nothing beyond this parody of married life which she had shared with him. For three years he had led her to think that this was all, that love was no more than these stale satisfactions. She had believed him, too; that made his crime, not her credulity, the greater. And what had he done for her in comparison with what she had done for him? She had given him a child, she had given him the position he was powerless to win for himself, as a centre of all that was most intelligent in this stupid life; she had given him the realization of his utmost ideal of love. And to her now that was like the cracking of an empty eggshell, for there was no meat within. And in return for all that she had done for him, he seemed to have done so little. Once he had said that he wished he had been a stone-breaker opposite Fair View, for if that stone-breaker had been he, they would have been man and wife. In the light of the new knowledge, Lucia wished she had married a stone-breaker, provided only that she loved him. At

the moment, she would have sacrificed all she had won, all she had striven for, to be the wife of the man she loved. She would cook the dinner, she would darn the stockings, provided only that—that she could suckle his child. She had never known what that meant, though she had done it. She had done it in somnambulism, as it were. But Maud knew, and again she hated Maud because Maud had what she had missed.

And the irony of it! What a superb farce, as remote from reasonable reality as was the life she had led at Fair View. For the moment she felt that destiny must be playing some trick with her, making her dance like a marionette on wires of her own imagination. And then she knew that the truth was the direct opposite of what that image conveyed; she knew that all the rest of her life up till now had been the dance of a marionette, of a wooden jointed toy. She had danced to tunes that had no melody and no rhythm. She had listened to a music that had no heart behind it; she had grinned in answer to smiles that she did not understand, had given tender and soulless replies to whispered words that meant nothing to her. But now she was awake and understood. All that had been tuneless and senseless was made melodious and intelligible; instead of masks she saw the faces beneath, and a meaning leaped like a lightning flash into those ardours which had seemed so abortive, and the thought of which now grew suddenly insupportable.

The tingling ecstasy which had possessed her slowly subsided at the thought of this; she wanted the blaze of the electric light no longer, and she moved swiftly across to the door, and put out the whole of the illumination she had made half an hour before, so that the room was left in darkness but for the faint remote light that filtered in through the window from the starlit sky. Outside the winds were still, and the moon not yet risen, made dove-colour in the East. To the south an amber-coloured light showed where lay the hollow in which Brixham nestled, and just above it, though low on the horizon, was a layer of thundercloud, from which every now and then there winked a flash of very distant lightning. But the storm was far away, no faintest rumble of thunder was audible. Here, too, from the house itself, no sound disturbed her vigil; the lights in the drawing-room below, which, when she came into her room, had thrown their oblong of illumination far out over the terrace, had been put out, though it was still nearly an hour before midnight. And, parenthetically, she wondered why everybody else had gone so early to bed; probably the men had not. Very likely they had moved to the smoking-room. Charlie, at least, always sat up late.

Yes, insupportable. Knowing now what love meant, it seemed to her that she had been acting some dreadful parody all these years, acting it like a child, without

knowledge of what it was that was being travestied and degraded. Base enough, from all standards of loyalty and friendship, as had been her acceptance, her wooing of the love of her friend's husband, it did not seem so base as the acceptance of the love that was legitimately hers. And at that moment had Charlie come in, and simply told her to come away with him, it is probable that she would have cast all considerations aside, with scarcely more effort than it had cost her to cast the thought of Maud aside, and would have gone. For the sake of this love, base and treacherous though it was, she would have done a desperate thing, which, though heaven knows it would not have made it one whit more justifiable, would at least have had some of the spirit of sacrifice in it.

But morning brought cooler counsel, infinitely more sensible, infinitely less fine, for it was only for a little while in the first wonder of love that she was capable even of such fineness as is necessary to run away with a friend's husband. For a little while last night she had forgotten that she lived in the world, a charming place, but in which it was not possible to live, if you chose to do these splendid and romantic things. That which appeared insupportable the night before would have still to be tolerated; it was still just as necessary as ever to make her husband believe that the love he lavished on her was returned. He must never suspect—we are following Lucia into the profundity of her shallowness—he must never suspect that she failed to find all he found in their marriage; still less, of course, must he suspect that she had found what he was powerless to give her. And soberly and literally it was true that in this resolve she was able to detect a sort of heroism. She would not wreck his life, she would not wreck Maud's, by acting up to what she called the finest instincts of her nature. What she did not add was that she was unprepared to wreck her own life by so emphatic an assertion of the paramount claim of love.

Already she felt as if it was a fine thing to do this, and though she very seldom cried, her eyes grew dim at the thought of her own heroism.

But she did not renounce the love that had thus suddenly dawned on her. It would be wicked—to herself she used that identical word—to crush all that was finest in her nature. Self-deception, it may be hoped, touched bottom there, and her self-deception was triumphant.

It is hard to follow the working of so superficial and trivial a soul. A hero, though most of us are cast in no heroic mould, is easy to understand; he casts all but the worthiest aside, and follows that. Nor would it be difficult to follow the frankly worthless, those who have never the slightest impulse towards a level that is higher than their normal one. Nor, till now, was it difficult to follow the uniform selfishness of our poor climber. But at this moment the puzzling and the inevitable thing happened;

love, the finest impulse she had ever known, drove her, by force of these years of self-seeking, into the meanest course that she had yet pursued. She did not, in justice to her, plan an intrigue, but for the sake of love she planned to deceive those who best loved and trusted her, in order that she should not be compelled to sacrifice anything. Of the love that recognizes the stern validity of a moral code she was, of course, hopelessly incapable; of the love that will reck nothing of the moral code, defy convention, stamp on friendship, repudiate obligations, she had been capable, though only for a moment. What she was completely capable of was a projected course of careful deceit, in order—though she made no plans—to give love a chance. She did not put it so brutally to herself; indeed so brutal a statement of the real state of her mind never occurred to her. She said only that she would not wreck the lives of others. And even that to her microscopic soul appeared an immensity. She deliberately, because she was so self-sacrificing, saddled herself with no end of difficulties and obstacles. And at this moment, when she was meanest, she appeared to herself to be more heroic than she had ever been before.

Above all, then, it was important to be careful, to make the insupportable appear the desirable, to make treachery robe itself in the garb of loyalty and friendship. On the whole, after a cup of tea, she felt up to it. Madge was coming down to-day, too. Madge knew so much; Lucia would try to learn about these things.

Her bath was waiting for her next door, and she got out of bed to go to it. She always took her bath dead-cold, whether summer blazed or winter froze, for there was nothing so sane, so invigorating as that cool plunge. Sometimes on hot mornings she would stand by her bath, delaying the delightful moment, and looking at the wavering reflection of herself in the water, and this she did to-day. The window of her bathroom was wide open, and the warm breeze that entered was exquisite to the skin. Edgar always had a hot bath in the morning, even in Egypt, in obedience to medical suggestion. That was so characteristic of him—so warm, so comfortable. He had taken to a hot bath after an attack of lumbago some years before; during the few days in which he was incapable of movement he had read the greater part of Plato's "Republic." And, with a sudden little laugh, partly of derision, partly of impatience, she stepped into the long white bath.

She almost sang to herself in the briskness and rejuvenation of the moment. How good her sponge smelled, with the reminiscence of the salt still in it! How good was the rough towel, and the glow it brought! How delicious the cold marble floor of the bathroom. And how warm she was, how vigorous, how competent. Indeed, it was little wonder that Edgar loved her; it was little wonder that she too loved. She was made to love and to be loved, this young, vital, exquisite thing.

It was necessary, of course, to have a long sensible talk with Charlie, since it was for that reason (among others) that she had made him stop here, instead of following his notion that he had better go away. No doubt the night would have brought better counsel to him, as it had to her, and he would see that they must be calm and sensible and—just see what happened. It was always necessary to wait on events; circumstances might occur, circumstances might occur. . . .

And then the whole falseness, the unreality of such imaginings, burst upon her. There were no circumstances or events to wait upon; it was no good to make sensible plans, to be calm and judicious. She was in love, and he loved her. Other people, no doubt, would have to be deceived, but where was the use of attempting to deceive herself over the central fact of the situation? The one absolute necessity for the time, indeed, was that both Edgar and Maud should be deceived. Otherwise—here Lucia's reflections were completely characteristic—their lives would be wrecked. And with this convincing and comfortable piece of hypocrisy she went down to breakfast.

The day passed without any opportunity for a conversation, sensible or otherwise, with Charlie, for he had a golfing engagement which took him away directly after breakfast. She had, indeed, but a couple of words with him, and that quite in public, when he said to her across the table:

"It's too hot for golf; Lucia, do be clever and invent an excuse for me, so that I needn't go."

Her eyes met his, and she read that which underlay the commonplace inquiry. She shook her head.

"Never," she exclaimed. "You must always keep little engagements. Big engagements are another question. But little trivial engagements are sacred. It's like taking care of the pence, and leaving the pounds to take care of themselves."

Her answer was trivial, too, but it was not difficult for him to read into it the significance she meant it to bear. And quick as lightning the love glance shot from eye to eye.

Edgar sent a telegram that morning to say he would be able to get down earlier than usual, and Lucia, in the spirit of keeping little engagements—though indeed she had made none in this particular—drove down to Brixham to meet him, as his train did not stop at Brayton, and was on the platform when it got in.

He flushed with pleasure on seeing her.

"But this is too delightful," he said. "Have you been shopping in Brixham, dear?"

Lucia smiled charmingly at him.

"Indeed I have not," she said. "I came in simply to meet you. Does that seem to you such strange conduct?"

"It is perfectly charming conduct, anyhow," said he. "And I bring you good news."

"Oh, what? No, I can't guess. Tell me quickly."

"The House is going to rise, after all, next week. I shall, indeed, have to go up only on Tuesday. Then I am free."

It was perhaps a good thing that Lucia did not try to guess; she would never have thought of that as being good news. But she simulated a suitable enchantment.

"And we must make our plans for the autumn," he said. "The reports from the moors are dreadfully bad; there will be next to no shooting. What shall we do? Shall we stop quietly here? Or shall we go on the yacht? We have never yet been north in it. You would like to see the Norwegian fiords, would you not?"

"Ah, you are too good to me," said she. "You are always thinking of what I should like. Let us anyhow stay on here a little. It has been the greatest success. Nobody wants to go, and Charlie has announced that he isn't going unless turned out. Then in November I should really rather like a few weeks in London. I'm sure I could make quite a gay little informal season. You see, I missed a good deal of the summer."

"And the Infanto?" said Edgar. "Surely the country is better for a baby."

"Oh, yes, we would leave the Infanto here," said Lucia.

This somehow rather took away the pleasure Edgar had felt when he found that Lucia had come in simply to meet his train. He had often felt that their child was not to Lucia even that which it was to him; the fact of being a father was greater to him than was the far more tremendous affair of motherhood to her. But Lucia, who had spoken thoughtlessly and genuinely, saw her mistake before his silence had become long.

"You see, the Infanto would not have to come on the yacht with us, if we adopted your plan," she said, with excellent common sense, "and indeed"—this was a bright idea—"I should not like to be cut off from news of him as we should be if we made a cruise. Oh, he is getting too adorable. He hates ugly things already; he is your true child, dear. He can't bear nurse, and he adores the nursery-maid, who is charmingly pretty. Oh, the Infanto is beginning early; there are many signs that he will flutter the dovecotes. I do hope he will; I should like my son to break every eligible heart in London."

This was not a strictly moral sentiment, but it served to interrupt Edgar's rather serious train of thought.

"So that he will be a true child of yours, too," he said.

Lucia always appreciated any tribute to her charms, whoever offered it.

"Oh, Edgar, don't flirt with me," she said. "I fluttered one—what is the masculine for dovecote? And was not that sufficient? And here we are at the dovecote I allude to," she added, rather neatly, as they passed through the lodge-gates.

But his responsible mind went back to what she had said before.

"You talk the most delicious nonsense, my darling," he said, "and you talk it so well that it seems as if you meant it for sense. For instance, when you said you hoped he would break every eligible heart. True, I replied in the same daffing strain. How excellent some of these Scotch words are, though that, curiously enough, is a Saxon root! But, to stop daffing, what a responsibility is ours, what a sweet and serious responsibility!"

Edgar was looking straight out in front of him, and Lucia made the archdeacon face all to herself. She knew there was more to come; when Edgar's periods began like that they were not soon overpast. Often before to-day she, who had the most excellent memory, would repeat them to Charlie, and being excellent in mimicry also, she often made him speechless with appreciative laughter. But now she could never again laugh with him at these pomposities; she could not even laugh herself. They were among the insupportable things, which must continue to be tolerated.

Edgar cleared his throat; he had made an admirable speech in the House only yesterday, but he felt more deeply on this subject than on the question of small holdings.

"I have sometimes wondered, my Lucia," he said, "if you ever really see the responsibility which our love has entailed. Nothing affects a man's subsequent life more than do the earliest impressions of his childhood, and as soon as the boy begins to receive conscious impressions from outside, it will become our sacred duty to see that those impressions are all noble, all fine. Beauty, not only physical, natural beauty, but moral beauty, must surround him. Harsh temper must never come near him, nor meanness nor falsity. How our horizons have extended since that wonderful day in June when our child was born to us! How tremendous have the issues of our love for each other become! We must often talk of these things, for they fill my thoughts continually. Indeed, I have planned a little dialogue, which I have begun to write, called 'The Child.' The two speakers, of course, are the father and mother, both of the class to which we belong, the class, that, however much Socialists rave, creates the nation. They just sit and talk, as evening falls, over the future of their

child, which so largely depends on their upbringing of it. The dialogue should begin lightly, as our dialogue began just now, and deepen till it strikes roots to the very heart of things. We shall be able to show that we, at least, realize our responsibilities. For the England of thirty years onward will be the England that we parents of to-day make it. You must help me, dear, with the writing of this. Give me the quick, vivid touches that you can so perfectly supply, and it should have an enormous circulation. The proceeds I would give to some home."

This was the best that Lucia had ever heard. She felt she must tell somebody—Madge, perhaps, who was coming that evening, and in the company of Madge even Charlie might be allowed to hear it. But there was more yet. She could not make the archdeacon face again, for Edgar turned and looked at her.

"Well, blithe spirit?" he said.

That was inimitable. But it was also almost insupportable. She had to summon her scattered forces.

"It is too interesting," she said. "You plan it magically. Oh, Edgar, shut yourself up all afternoon, and begin. Or have you begun?"

"Ah, not without your help," he said. "You must tell me all that a mother feels, you can tell *me* that. And that must be instinct, underlying all the mother's part of the dialogue. I don't think the idea has ever been tried before."

They had arrived at the house.

"Never, as far as I am aware," said Lucia. And the deadliness of it all closed in round her. She was incapable of the humorous view at that moment; the tragic reality swallowed up all else.

Evening brought a few more people, coming to stay from the Friday till the Monday, but all that had hitherto stimulated Lucia seemed to have failed her. It appeared of little consequence who came and who did not; the coming and going was of the stale old order. It was so easy now to set a party going, to make all her guests enjoy themselves; a little leaning on the table with her elbows, a little shouted talk to right and left, with a cheap epigram or two thrown in did all that. She—and her reputation for saying brilliant things was not entirely undeserved—had now only to say that Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony was a deplorable performance to find someone else who would back up this or any other preposterous criticism; she had only to say that Sargent painted hands more wonderfully than hands were even painted yet, to make a focus of eager talk, in which Edgar joined from the other end of the table. She herself had just been painted by that artist, and she had before now likened the presentment of her hands to bunches of bananas. But it answered just as

well to say that his chirography was inimitable. Edgar liked critical conversation and discussion, and she wanted to please him in little things, and in particular she wanted him to be content, at ease. But what she said signified nothing. Nothing signified except that young merry face of the man who sat two or three places away. He, too, was doing the right thing, talking eagerly, nonsensically. Occasionally she caught a sentence of his, he occasionally caught one of hers, and each listened only to the other.

"Hands—yes, hands," she was saying; "and people say 'only hands.' Why, hands are the first things one judges by in one's estimate of a person. Eyes, mouth, face are really much less characteristic."

At the same moment Charlie finished some ridiculous remarks.

"So if you don't draw the line somewhere, where are you to draw the line?" he asked dramatically.

Then their eyes met, and for one second each was conscious of nothing except the other. Everything else reeled into nothingness; only one thing was real. She had seen nothing of him all day, had but interchanged one word with him at breakfast. She leaned forward.

"Charlie, you deserter," she said, "I haven't set eyes on you. But you appear content with life, so I suppose you won at golf. That makes a man more fatuously cheerful than anything else."

"Cheerful I am," he said; "fatuous I object to. Anybody would. Am I fatuous?" he asked Mouse.

Edgar looked about him with an air of pleased proprietorship. His guests, the conversation, the general air of the evening, were all very much to his taste. And it seemed to him that there was a new splendour in his wife's face to-night, a radiance that outshone herself. He could not quite catch what she said to Charlie, nor did he hear Charlie's answer, but he, too, was kindled beyond his wont. And then the moment afterwards each of them shot a quick, stealthy glance at him. He scarcely knew that he noticed it; it was only afterwards that he remembered having done so.

The barbarous English custom, or so Lucia called it, of men remaining in the dining-room to drink wine after dinner did not prevail in her house, and she had but just got into the drawing-room when Charlie strolled up to her. She welcomed him with a smile.

"Well, deserter?" she said.

"But I have come back," he said, "voluntarily. Am I to be punished?"

"Yes," she said, "you are condemned to take a little stroll with me. Will you?"

Then quite suddenly she heard that her own voice was trembling and barely

audible. Edgar was standing close, and he looked at her.

“Is it wise to go out?” he said. “Have you not a little hoarseness to-night?”

“Oh, grandmamma, grandmamma!” said she. “Come out, Chubby. I love walking in the dusk. One never quite knows what is going to happen. Something may jump out upon you from the bushes.”

As so often before, she took Charlie’s arm, and talking and laughing, they went out into the night. Though more often than not, as last night, many of the party strolled out of doors after dinner, it so happened that now nobody followed Lucia and her companion. It had been oppressively hot all day, and with sunset a bank of clouds had begun to rise out of the south, and had spread over the whole sky, so that but little light filtered through. It was just possible to see the grey glimmer of the garden walk and distinguish it from the darker hue of the grass; it was possible, but scarcely more than that, to distinguish the black outline of the trees against the sky. And as they stepped out of the light into the hot thick darkness, it was as if they had stepped into another world altogether, where there was no one but themselves. All thought of Edgar, of Maud, all remembrance of other things faded; all that had any significance was out here in the darkness.

“We must not stop out long,” said Lucia, as they stepped from the terrace on to the path. “Edgar will wonder.”

Then the darkness enfolded them, and Edgar’s wonder troubled her no more. And neither of them spoke again, they who were so ready with quick speech. In absolute silence they went gently up the walk past the long lighted house, past the rose garden on the left, from which there came the heavy fragrance of sleeping flowers, past the lake with its islands of water-lilies, up to the gate at the end which gave on to the fields. Surely there was some excitement abroad that night, the presage of thunder perhaps in the air, for by the gate the cattle were standing huddled together, when they should have been asleep, and stirring uneasily. Both of them noticed that, yet still neither spoke. It was senseless to speak of trivial things, and there was no need, no cause, to speak of anything (for there was only one) which was not trivial. And in the silence and in their speechlessness and proximity the spell worked, growing every moment mightier, the divine and infamous spell that bound them—divine because love cannot be other than that; infamous because it implied treachery and deceit to all that to both of them should have been most sacred.

Mightily it worked, and yet no word passed, no hint even of a word, and no caress. Once Lucia gave a great long whisper of a sigh, and to answer it she felt his arm tremble. Yet, though nothing was said, every moment the sequel grew toward

inevitability. Force that was potent established itself in hearts that were but too willing to grant that it was inevitable. He, it is true, had struggled to some extent, had known, anyhow, an impulse that was not wholly base. But no such thing had dwelt for even the shortest moment in Lucia's heart.

They stood there at the end of the walk for a few seconds, hearing rather than seeing the agitation and movement of the cattle, and then, as by one will that went through them both, they turned and walked back towards the house. Still no word passed between them; for him the light pressure of her hand on his arm meant more than could be said; for her the sense of the arm beneath his coat was sufficient. It was he; she could not get closer to him by speech.

Again by silent consent they stopped just outside the oblong of light cast through the open French window of the drawing-room on to the path.

"Ah, it has been divine, Charlie," said she. "But—but we must talk about it. It can't go on like this. I can't bear it."

"I can't bear it," said he.

Swiftly she drew his head down to hers.

"We must go in," she said.

Edgar was sitting in a chair close to the window as they stepped into the light. For one second, as a farewell to that long silence of love, they looked at each other. Then Lucia saw him, saw, too, that he was looking at them, and her face utterly changed, became like herself again. But what he had seen was the face of a woman he felt he had never seen before.

"Ah, it is hot—hot," she said. "Charlie and I are exhausted. The sky has come down to the earth. Something is going to burst; I feel it must burst."

Suddenly the huge still blackness outside was resolved into a great sheet of flame. For a moment flower-beds, trees, grass, the lake, the great downs, were presented with more than the vividness of noonday. Simultaneously the thunder cracked and bellowed with an appalling reverberation.

For a moment Lucia held her hands before her eyes, dazzled and blinded by that hellish glare; then she ran into the drawing-room.

"Ah, I am frightened!" she cried. "It had been so still, so silent!"

CHAPTER XVI

"But a miracle-worker, no less than a miracle-worker," said Madge. "I always knew that you would astonish our weak minds. I feel like the Queen of Sheba."

Lucia laughed.

"I am sorry for that," she said, "because the Queen of Sheba was rather paltry. She got carried away by a Semitic and ostentatious display of wealth. But you haven't explained why you feel like her."

"Because there is no need. But if you like explanations the month is November, and we ought all to be tucked up in our horrible country-houses, being priviledged to dine every evening with a lot of sleepy men who have been shooting or hunting all day, and want to go to bed. Instead, here we all are in the most civilized place in England, behaving exactly as if it was June, though luckily it is not so hot. It is a miracle, and a very nice one. Pheasants, or rather the necessity of killing them, have been the curse of my life. It is so like England to perpetuate a breed of creatures merely for the purpose of slaughtering them. It is like bringing murderers and would-be suicides back to life, that they may be up to being hanged. Foxes also. Don't let us start for the play just yet. Let us miss the first act and talk. I have things to say."

"I too," said Lucia quickly.

"Then you shall say them next. But I must pay my tribute money. For years we have all got dreadfully bored in the country in November, and knew it. But we sat there and were bored without attempting to remedy it, except by going to London first thing in the morning and returning to dinner. Sunday in the country, too! What a deplorable day. Heron always insisted on everybody going to church. And the chants invariably gave me a bilious attack. Now you, for this year anyhow, have changed all that."

"Ah, I may only have precipitated it," said Lucia. "You told me once that I had not made a set, but precipitated it."

"I remember, but I think I was wrong. Anyhow, you have changed the autumn; you can't precipitate an autumn, or—what would happen? I suppose it would become winter. But there must be now in this nice town at least fifty people who would not have been here except for you. And to move fifty people, especially when they are those who matter, is remarkable."

Lucia nodded her head in frank appreciation of this recognition.

"Tribute money is delicious," she observed.

Lady Heron never flattered anybody, never, at any rate, said insincere things because they would please. But she was notable for seeing what there was to praise

in a world that a less clever woman might have thought but mediocre, and she was always quick to praise it.

"The tribute money is willingly paid," she said, "for it is beyond doubt that you have done what you meant to do, which is a royal attribute. You found November dull in the country, and so came to town. And we sheep came too. We also, and for years, had found the country dull in November, but we didn't come to town for fear we should be quite alone there. Probably we should have been, too. Oh, Lucia, I really envy you. You built a pinnacle yourself, and proceeded to sit on the top of it. It must be such fun building and then climbing. I never did that. I found a pinnacle built—yes, I am on a pinnacle, though it is lower than yours—and just went and sat on it. I have had enormous fun. But I never could do what you have done already. It is a question of vitality, I think. Your vitality is a little higher, or a great deal higher, than anybody else's. Don't lose it. I envy it, but I rejoice in it."

The two had dined alone and early, meaning to go to the play. But having abandoned the thought of the first act, the question of the play was dismissed for the time. The night before Lucia had given a dance, a November dance, a thing as unheard of as a December rose, and it was this, and the success of it, that had started the question of the tribute money. And Madge Heron had done no more than render unto Lucia the things that were Lucia's. She had left Brayton in the last week of October, and settled herself firmly and squarely in Prince's Gate. As usual, people were passing to and fro, sleeping a night at a hotel before going on somewhere else, but when she had given the lead, a change came. Half a dozen people came to stop a week in town, instead of flying up and down, and they found it pleasant after the three months in the country. Then the movement was really started. Houses reopened; people came at first to spend the week-end in London, just as in the summer they spent the week-end in the country. Then the week-end in town lengthened itself; then it became clear that with all this leaf on the trees it would be time enough to begin pheasant-shooting in December, and by the middle of November there were at least fifty of the people who mattered, who were friends, who had come to stop in London for the present. And last night Lucia had given a dance to inaugurate the new movement. Royalty had been there, quite big royalty. It was, as Lady Heron said, just like June. It certainly was an astounding achievement. And the personality of Lucia, who had always interested her, was absorbing to her now. As a rule she did not like women; she was not even sure that she liked Lucia, but she loved the quality that made for success and domination. Certainly, at any rate, she was more interesting than the play.

"And where will you climb to next?" she asked. "I think of you always as some

wonderful figure going up and up. And you never seem to stop, whereas all the rest of us climb to a certain level, and then go on doing the same things again and again. You filled a south-country house in August; you fill London in November. What next?"

Lucia cast a sudden flashlight of memory back over the time, so short a while ago, when she had envied Madge Heron, had resolved to study her. And already it was with the same sort of incredulous wonder with which she looked back on the dreary blank years at Brixham that she thought of herself as having ever had anything to learn from dear Madge. She had, as a matter of fact, learned very much, but what she had learned she had assimilated so completely that it formed an indivisible part of herself, and could no more be traced to its origin than can a muscle of the human frame be traced back into beef or mutton that once, in the form of oxen and sheep, grazed in a field. But she was not sure that she had not more to learn yet, although what she had already learned was no longer capable of being thought back to its origin. And by coincidence, perhaps, or more likely from intuition on the part of the elder woman, Madge instantly spoke of what Lucia was thinking of.

"You have suddenly grown up, too," she said. "You used to do your feats in a sort of childish unconsciousness. I believe you had your child when you were asleep. Then about August last you awoke, you sleeping beauty."

That was intentional; it was flattering with a purpose. All London rang with certain rumours, and though, as a general rule, Lady Heron paid as little heed to rumours as Lucia had once professed to her husband that she paid, yet the coincidence of such rumours, with an undoubted change in Lucia, could not but interest her. And, looking up, she saw that Lucia was now attending to what she said with a closer interest than she had shown even in the matter of the tribute money.

"I awoke in August, do you say?" she asked. "How interesting! I hate talking about myself, but I wonder why you think that? How did I become different? And what made the difference? What wakened me?"

Madge did not reply at once.

"I have no idea," she said at length. "That was what I wanted to ask you. Did I conjecture? Oh, certainly I conjectured. I thought that no doubt maternity had awakened you."

Lucia could not help laughing. The idea genuinely amused her; it was amusing also that anyone as shrewd as she knew Madge to be should be so hopelessly astray. And her amusement rather put her off her guard, though, indeed, with Madge she had no cause to keep her point up.

"Ah, guess again," she said. "You are not even warm."

“You admit the awakening, then?” asked Madge.

Lucia hesitated. But she saw that she had already given that away. Her answer had admitted the awakening. But there was no harm done; indeed she had often been on the point of telling Madge all about it, and why she had not done so she scarcely knew. It must be supposed that it was some remnant of self-respect that had deterred her.

“Yes, I admit the awakening,” she answered. “I did awake. And I found I had awoke from a nightmare. Yes, a nightmare. Being awake, I knew it was that. And the nightmare goes on now.”

She had not meant to say quite as much, but her tongue had obeyed not her judgment but an instinct that lay below and beyond it. As far as judgment and quiet thinking went, she was without fear and quite without scruple. Only something very deep within her was afraid. It was that secret fear that made her say what she had said.

But having said it, she saw at once that it was better to say more, to explain, to tell Madge that which she felt others might suspect, though she had no reasonable cause for supposing that anybody suspected anything. Only it seemed incredible that what was real to her, that which was her life, should be non-existent for others. She wanted to be assured that it was so; that nobody else suspected anything.

“Tell me,” she said. “Are people talking about me?”

Madge Heron laughed.

“They are talking about no one else,” she said. “You are the theme; it is to the theme I have paid my tribute money.”

Lucia swept a place clear for her elbows; they were still sitting at the dinner table, though a full quarter of an hour had passed since the servant had told her the carriage was at the door.

“Oh, I don’t mean that,” she said. “But domestic affairs are the only things that really interest the public. So—are they talking about me?”

“Oh, yes,” said Madge.

“I understand; so do you. Charlie is supposed to be in love with me, is it not so? And am I supposed to be in love with him? It is that that matters. God knows why, but in this higgledy-piggledy world it is thought quite nice that heaps of men should be in love with a woman, but if that unfortunate woman is supposed to be in love with any of them, there is talk—talk—talk. I” (even Lucia stumbled then) “I am not in love with Charlie. Do they say I am?”

Madge again felt what she had not felt for the last year or so, that she was immeasurably ahead of Lucia.

"Oh, yes, they say that," she said. "But what does it matter? You can get anybody to say anything."

"I would give a great deal to get anybody not to say that," said Lucia.

"Yes, but it is impossible to give enough to make people hold their tongues," said Madge. "Twopence-halfpenny or less will set tongues wagging. But there is only one thing that will stop them!"

"And that?" asked Lucia.

"Giving them nothing to wag about. That, and taking no notice when they do wag. It is not sufficient to pretend to take no notice; you have really to take no notice."

"But if people say things to Maud or to Edgar?" asked Lucia. The play was completely forgotten.

"What does that matter," asked Madge, "since you are not in love with him? Lies, slanders are always still-born. It is the unfortunate circumstance of guilt that hangs people. You have only got to do nothing and—and before long there is a quiet little funeral of all such gossip. Nobody attends it; it is no longer interesting. And even if you are guilty, you must remember you have to be found out before they hang you."

Lucia again cleared a broader space for her elbows, knocking a wineglass over that broke into splinters on the cloth. But she was quite unconscious of it; she knew only of some deep-seated uneasiness of mind that suddenly felt lonely and called for companionship.

"Yes, but this isn't lies," she said quietly. "I said it was. One always does at first, I imagine. Didn't you?"

Lady Heron got up with rather a terrible look in her face that frightened Lucia.

"You are rather strange and mysterious," she said. "At one moment you tell me you are not in love with Charlie; at the very next you say you are. And then you proceed to ask me whether I have not done the same under similar circumstances."

Lucia tried to interrupt, but Madge stopped her by a little contemptuous gesture of her hand.

"I assure you I don't care in the least what your relations with Charlie are. But when you assume that I have been in the same position, and have—well, equivocated about it, you commit a gross impertinence. You have never asked me about my life; I have never spoken of it to you; and it is obvious you have been listening to gossip about me, and believing it, assuming it was true. You may do that to your heart's content, but it is a little too much that you should refer to it to me. Now I am older than you and I give you a word of warning. You have done

wonderful things in London; you are right up at the very top; but so far from that making you safe, it makes the greatest care necessary. I am not speaking now of your private relations—or the absence of them—with Charlie; I am speaking of what you have just said to me. It was a great mistake to say that; it is the sort of thing that wrecks people. It's lucky it is to me that you said it. Do you understand? You may be Messalina, if you choose, but—I am going to speak very plainly—you must not be a cad."

Lucia listened at first in mere astonishment and bewilderment, then gradually it dawned on her that Madge was quite right. Those two little words "Didn't you?" she saw to have been quite horrible. And she received these very plain remarks with a rather touching gentleness.

"It was disgusting of me, Madge," she said. "I ask your pardon."

Lady Heron had in a very notable degree the bigness of nature which Lucia so utterly lacked. And though she did not withdraw or repent of a single word she had said, she did not mean to quarrel with Lucia of her own initiative.

"My dear, of course you have it," she said. "And now, what shall we do, as we are on our feet? If we are to see anything of our play we must go, or we shall not be in time even for the fall of the curtain, which is very often the best thing that happens in an English play, and it would be a pity to miss it. But if we don't go I will send my motor away, and tell it to come back later."

"Oh, let us stop at home," said Lucia. "I want to talk to you. Somehow I am nervous and uneasy. I don't know if I have cause for it or not."

The motor was sent away, and the two went into Lucia's private sitting-room. Madge established herself near the fire, but Lucia stood in front of it a little while in silence.

"Sometimes I think Maud knows," she said at length.

"Knows what? How much?" said Madge. "Whatever Maud knows, I know nothing."

"I think she knows that Charlie and I are in love with each other," said Lucia.

"Why do you think so?"

"I can hardly say. Sometimes if you know a person very well, as I know Maud, you have intuitions which you cannot quite explain. But let me try. I am sure she is unhappy about something, and I can think of nothing in the world that could make her unhappy except that."

"But she has said nothing?"

"No, but she looks—I can't tell you what she looks like. She looks unhappy, and oh, so dreadfully sorry, and I feel that she is hoping I shall say something to her.

And Charlie sees it too; it makes us both wretched!”

It made them both wretched! The egoism of this was colossal. There was something almost sublime about it.

“Ah, if you are right, there is only one thing to be done,” said Madge quickly. “You must give it all up at once. It is too perilous; that is the way smashes come. And we can’t afford that you should go smash, dear Lucia; you are too precious.”

Lucia threw her hands wide.

“But I can’t give it up,” she said. “I can’t! I could as easily commit suicide. Besides, you don’t know Maud as I do. I believe that she could not do anything that would injure me. She is the finest woman I know—the most generous.”

Calm and controlled as Lucia usually was, a sudden agitation began to shake her hold over herself. Certainly she had woke up last August, and she had woke to find herself a woman who knew forces that seemed stronger than herself. As a matter of fact, it was only the full power of her own temperament, which had slept hitherto, that then gripped her, but it seemed as if the force came from without. And since, in spite of her transcendent selfishness, she had not absolutely lost sight of something a little finer and better than the life she led, though, like some distant mountain-peak, it was unscalable by her, there were still moments when she could see the horror of her doings, and pour bitter irony on herself for those things which even in the same breath she would declare to be resistless.

“And what a fine friend I have been to her,” she said. “It was always the same; whatever Maud had, I wanted and got. It was like that at Girton when I knew her first; all her things were mine. She told me that, and she meant it. And I’ve taken them all. She had a sort of girlish attachment to Edgar, you know. So I cut her out, and took him myself. If it had not been for me, I think it very likely he would have married her. I never loved him, never for a single moment. I just wanted what he could give me. And got it. Then Maud got Charlie, so I took him, too. That’s me.”

Lucia’s beautiful mouth was curled in scorn of herself, and the words came with the sharpness of hammer-blows on a steel anvil. Then she went on more calmly, but still with the egoist’s passionate interest in herself.

“I have always been greedy,” she said, “and greedy people always go from bad to worse. Their greediness coarsens even that in them which might have been fine. Even things like love, which are supposed to ennoble, get infected by their coarseness. For them there is no such thing as the light of love; there are only lumps of love. And they eat them up, and get stouter. I am huge, let me tell you, bloated, monstrous. I suck out the juice from everything, and leave dry skins behind.”

Madge found herself suddenly wondering how much of this was genuine. She

need not; it was all perfectly genuine. Lucia felt what she said; it was honest criticism of herself. But she was not shocked at it, she was only interested. She told herself that there were forces against which it was idle to struggle, and did not propose to do anything so useless.

"And it is all so utterly mean," she said. "I, we, deliberately take advantage of Maud's immense generosity, and, though I have begun to doubt it now, her incapacity of thinking evil of those she loves. Yet I don't really doubt that; I think she knows that we are in love with each other, and is merely dreadfully sorry for us."

"Ah, then I expect that you are dancing on a volcano," said Madge. "I know Maud too, and know that she is the soul of generosity and kindliness. But, dear Lucia, I know Woman, the genus, better than you, and you are taking an impossible view of things. A woman can no more give her husband up, if she loves him, to another woman, than she could throw her baby on to the fire. The situation is one you must put an end to. And Edgar? If Maud has seen, are you sure he has not? He loves you, you know, as Maud loves Charlie, and there is a terrible clairvoyance about love, which enables it with startling and disconcerting penetrability to see straight through a brick wall. And this isn't a brick wall. It is more like a pane of plate glass, which we can all see through without any clairvoyance at all."

Lucia still retained a great deal of respect for her friend's wisdom. She had certainly managed her life—though Lucia did not intend to ask any more questions about that—with extreme tact, and though a moment before Lucia had declared that to give anything up was impossible, she felt she would like a little more advice on the subject.

"What would you do, then?" she asked.

"I'm afraid it will sound unpalatable."

"Advice usually does," said Lucia. "Good advice, anyhow."

"Well, I know my advice is good, and it answers the test of being unpalatable. You must act with great *finesse*, because, if you seem suddenly to quarrel with Charlie, a construction will be put by both Maud and Edgar on to your late intimacy which it is your whole desire to avert."

"Ah, that is wise," said Lucia, finding some prospective comfort.

"Yes, dear; of course it is, because I am not a fool," remarked Madge. "You must let your public manner to him be still a shade on the near side of friendship, as it has been lately. It is that, I may tell you, that has been so universally remarked."

Lucia frowned.

"Ah, what a horrid world!" she said. "As if one mightn't be friendly with one's husband's cousin."

That again, considering the actual state of affairs, was colossal. Lucia was shocked at the horrid world for putting the right construction on what she was doing. But Madge only wore the faintest smile.

"Horrid or not," she said, "it is the only world with which we have to deal, and if you want it not to be horrid to you, you must make the concessions it insists on. Maud, you see, has been horrid, so you think, too. Perhaps Edgar also."

Lucia considered this. It was wise, but not being so comforting, she did not applaud it.

"Yes, dear Madge," she said.

"As I say, I should continue my very friendly public manner, and have—no private manner at all. Don't see him privately at all—for a time. Give suspicion no scent to follow. For a time, until they whip it off and take it home to its kennel. They are only—only cub-hunting at present. They go home early."

Then an impulse of tremendous inconsistency visited Madge, an inconsistency which every now and then, like some bolt from the blue or sudden earthquake-shock, comes to tempt, or, on the other hand, to trouble those who deal most singly with life. She had lived herself with astonishing singleness of purpose, and had consistently taken all that life could be made to give her that was to herself desirable, without considering too closely the cost to others or even distantly what her own soul paid for it. These spiritual cheques were easily signed, and they went to a bank that seemed never to worry her with letters that warned of an overdraft. But now it seemed a pity that Lucia should take the same path that she had taken. The world offered her everything. How good it would be to see the rejection of the forbidden fruit! Yes, it was forbidden; and whether she herself had fed or not on forbidden things, even to the extent of making a diet of them, seemed for the moment not to matter. Dimly and almost dumbly, till the words broke through the barrier of the sense of her own utter inconsistency, she longed to urge Lucia to do as she herself had not done. It might have been but a whet to a jaded appetite to see herself in the rôle of preacher, but she cared not whence the impulse came. She wanted to see some one of her own corrupt world shining with the lambent vitality that was Lucia's, living purely, walking unstained and enthusiastic through the rainbow mud of life.

"It isn't only that," she said, speaking quickly and nervously; "what I have said to you is only the wisdom of the commonly prudent. Oh, Lucia, I beg you, as an inestimable personal gift, to do so much more. I and—I needn't mention who else, but people who are our friends, amuse ourselves tremendously, but they and I behave as if we lack all moral sense. And when you get older—you are so young, you know—you will see what that lack means. Before you are forty, you will find

that you have run through everything, unless you put up a 'Trespasser' notice in your soul. That, too, is only an extension of the wisdom of the commonly prudent. But can't you—can't you go much higher than that? Show us the big good life, instead of the big bad life. Yes—good, bad; you think I am using obsolete terms. But when you are older you will wonder whether, after all, they are obsolete, and when you are older again you will know, too late, that they are not. How sickeningly stupid is the proverb that says it is never too late to mend! Of course, sometimes it is too late to mend, for the time comes when you remember the desire to have mended quite clearly, but you no longer know what it means."

She got up, taking her fan from the table.

"I suppose that is what they mean by hell," she said. "It is nonsensical, otherwise."

She had done her best; she had tried to put into words all that she was capable of feeling. But she did not wholly know of how utterly inferior a nature to herself was she to whom she was speaking. She had been in deadly earnest; every word she had spoken was quite true, as far as she knew, but she was speaking to one to whom the only reality was her own gratification, and who could not really grasp another point of view. Lucia could say of her own conduct that it "was so mean," but she said it merely as an actress might criticize the part for which she was cast. She did not feel abased because it was mean; she felt only that the playwright had given her a mean part, and that, even as she was acting it, she could stand aside and criticize it.

She replied with a silken quietness.

"What has come to you, dear Madge," she said, "I mean the sense of its being too late, has already come to me. Thank you for your counsels of prudence; I think they are quite—quite excellent. But supposing you could put the clock of years back, and live your life over again, do you suppose you would do differently?"

The allusion to Madge's past life went unnoticed by both now. Lucia had not, in spite of the severe handling of an hour before, thought of any embarrassment that might attend its reintroduction.

"I suppose I should not do differently," said Madge; "but when I was forty-two again, I suppose I should be again sorry for not having done differently. And—and you may be sorry before," she added.

"You mean I am not as clever as you?" asked Lucia.

"I mean nothing of the sort. I mean you may be better than me. And I tell you—worldly disaster may be avoided; if you are clever you will probably avoid it. But there is damage beyond that. You can maim and scarify yourself, the essential you. I

have done so, and when that is brought home to me, as somehow it has been to-night, I hate myself as David hated the blind and the maimed. I hate my soul. Don't laugh at me till I have gone. Even then I shall feel it all down my back."

Lucia smiled at her quite untroubled.

"I shall not laugh at you at all," she said. "On the contrary, I think it is all rather sad, and you have given me just a touch of the blues. And I am dreadfully sorry for you. It must be dreadful to feel, when you are only just forty, that you wish you had acted consistently otherwise, and that it is too late. Can't you get over that, put it behind you? It can do no good; it must be both unpleasant and useless, so that there is no excuse for its existence. And it was dear of you to have warned me. I think some of the things you said were excellent—quite excellent. I shall follow some of your advice. I might even go for a short cruise with Edgar in the Mediterranean, all alone. That would be a splendid insurance policy, would it not?"

Madge did not answer directly. But she gave a little shiver, and drove the poker into the heart of the fire.

"It is cold to-night," she said.

Lucia's dramatic sense was always quick, and she received a very poignant dramatic impression at these words. Poor Madge! the fire was beginning to burn not so warmly in her life, and, alas for her, there was no possibility of making it blaze afresh by prodding at it, as she was doing to its material counterpart on the hearth. It was too late; she felt it herself. But it had not been very amiable of her to try to envelop Lucia also in her own chilliness. No doubt (it was very reasonable) she felt just a touch of envy of her before whom so many fiery years yet lay. Poor Madge: she was so clever, so tactful, so full of wisdom, and already that was availing her nothing against the coldness that was beginning to creep over her. And surely, at forty-two, it was yet early to begin to think about your soul, and to hate yourself. Lucia proposed not to indulge in any such qualms till she was much older than that. Yes; it was quite a dramatic moment, with Madge kneeling there by the fire, with her wit and her wisdom all as powerless to console her as her pearls and her really exquisite high evening-dress, saying only that it was cold. But it was not quite kind of her to have suggested these things; despite herself Lucia felt a little prickle of goose-flesh. It was certainly better, after appreciating the dramatic, to dismiss these chilly thoughts.

"You have been charming to me to-night," she said; "and how much more interested we have been in ourselves than we should have been in any play. I am going, for a time, to be a model of discretion and piety, so the Archbishop and

bishops will probably ask my permission to canonize me, and I shall certainly let them. They would think it so strange if I refused, and might begin to suspect something, which is obviously undesirable."

Madge got up.

"I feel warmer," she said, "and I must go. Do remember we can't afford to have you smashed. Good-night, dear Lucia."

Lucia never did things by halves, and having made up her mind that Madge was right, and that it was important—for a time—to behave with extreme prudence, she spent no regrets over this unwelcome necessity, and, though sleepy, waited for Edgar, who had been dining with bimetallists or some strange sect, to come home, so that she might proceed to put her plan into action at once.

"Dear old boy!" she said, as he came in; "but how late you are. Were the bigamists or bimetallists so fascinating? Madge dined with me, but she has been gone hours—oh, hours! We meant to go to the play, but stopped at home and talked about ourselves instead. Do you remember once, well, criticizing her rather severely, to me? You were so wrong. She is very serious and struggling, really. I never knew it before. It was rather a surprise."

Edgar was capable of a certain dryness.

"I do not wonder at your surprise," he said. "It was perfectly natural. But how late you are, Lucia! You said you meant to go to bed early."

"I know, but I thought I would sit up for you. Is that quite unheard-of conduct? And I wanted to have a chat. Since we have been in town I have not set eyes on you. Have you been wearing the cap of darkness?"

"No," said Edgar. "The cap of invisibility fits you, not me. At least, you have been visible to so many people that I have seen nothing of you. We have not met all day, have we? I hope you were pleased with your dance last night."

"Ah, it was the greatest success," said Lucia. "In November, too. No one had ever thought of it before. And it is such fun not only hearing about, but doing, some new thing."

"You are a true Athenian," said he.

"Thank you, dear. That is a great compliment, for certainly they realized both the beautiful as well as the intellectual value of the world better than any race before or since."

"Ah, you separate the two," said he. But it was clear that he had no thoughts of a discussion; indeed, he seemed a little distant and preoccupied. Lucia had noticed that for the last month or two such a mood seemed to have grown rather common

with him.

He sat down on the sofa opposite her.

"And what are your plans?" he asked. "How long would you like to stop in town?"

"I, too, was going to speak of that," she said. "It is getting rather chilly and foggy, you know, and we have had our ball. And my bones rather long for the sun; there is nothing at this moment I should like so well as to sit and be baked in it for a week or two."

"I am told they are having charming weather on the South Coast," he said.

"Yes, but it is a second-rate sun at the best which is obtainable in England," she said. "Oh, Edgar, why shouldn't we go Darby-and-Joaning in the yacht for a fortnight? We might join her at Marseilles and have a cruise up the Riviera coast. Oh, think of it, on a day like to-day, when it was so foggy and muddy! At the best, the sun was like a new penny. And you don't have your first shooting party till the second week in December, do you? Do take me on the yacht. Just you and I."

Something that had slumbered in Edgar's mind since the night of the thunderstorm at Brayton suddenly stirred and lifted its head.

"Let's ask Charlie to come with us," he said. "Maud of course wouldn't; she hates the sea."

And he looked across to his wife, watching her narrowly. He saw her bosom heave suddenly, and there was a perceptible change of colour. And when she spoke, her voice, for a sentence or two, was not quite steady.

"How nice of you to think of Charlie!" she said. "Of course, he is a dear, but do you think he would be a good third on the yacht? I'm not sure that I do. How horrid of me, when Charlie is such a friend! But somehow I don't see him and you and me together. Let us ask half a dozen people, if you will, and let Charlie be one, but otherwise let us go alone."

Lucia got up; she felt that Edgar was watching her, and for that reason forbore to look at him, for she knew that hate, hostility, must come into her face if she did. But again and again she asked herself why he had suggested that. Did it mean anything? Did he say it with purpose? And why was he watching her? Already that one moment of ungovernable emotion which had seized her at the very unexpected suggestion was past, and she wondered if any sign of it had escaped her. That she could not tell; she knew only that her heart had suddenly begun to beat very quickly when the suggestion was made. But it got quiet again quite soon.

"I cannot fail to be charmed by your preference for my undiluted society," he said, "and I think that even you would find it hard to get half a dozen people to come

with us at so short a notice as this will have to be."

Again she wondered if anything lurked below his words. It was the sort of sentiment, slightly pompous in expression, that was quite characteristic of him; but was that all? And then, with a want of wisdom that would have made Madge wring hands of despair, she thought that even if there was something below, she could easily disarm it, instead of which she but gave it a weapon the more. Had she jumped at the idea of asking Charlie to join them, Edgar, given that there was anything sinister in his suggestion, would have concluded that his suspicions were baseless. But her rejection of a companionship that he knew she liked was a thing that required explanation far more than her acceptance of it would have done. The one was quite unaccountable; the other would have been perfectly natural. And the thing that had lain slumbering in his own mind, and had just now raised its head, did more. It opened its eyes, and its ears were pricked.

Lucia gave a long, elaborate yawn.

"Quite true," she said, "though not complimentary this time. But I allow that to get half a dozen people to come to the Mediterranean at a few days' notice is beyond my probable powers. Mind, I only say probable. So let us go alone. You are angelic to me, Edgar; I do so want the sun. Let us make arrangements to-morrow. I am sleepy, sleepy. Are you going to bed?"

"Not yet," said he. "I have things to do."

She kissed him.

"I always foresaw that bimetallism would wreck our lives," she said. "But it is a good thing to get rid of pennies and half-pennies. At least, I hope you keep silver and gold as the two metals. Am I talking nonsense? I hope so; it shows I shall go to sleep at once."

The "things" that Edgar had to do appeared, when his wife left him, to be of an inactive character, and as far as action was concerned, required only that he should frown at the fire. He did so for a considerable period.

CHAPTER XVII

The two met next day during the morning, and half an hour's discussion was sufficient to enable Edgar to fill a half-sheet with notes of things he had to do, with regard to this little cruise in the Southern sea, and to leave him with the certainty that nothing had been omitted. The yacht, which was at Southampton, was to start for Marseilles as soon as it could get its coaling and provisioning done, and on receipt of a telegram that it had arrived there, he and Lucia would leave London and travel overland. They might, in fact, hope to start in ten days' time at the outside. But these ten days would be rather full: bimetallists and small-holders clamoured for his presence on committees; there was also an inside-of-a-week visit which should be paid, and it was necessary for him, at any rate, to go down to Brayton for a night or so, to collect the photographic apparatus and the guide-books, without which visits to foreign lands were shorn of half their potential profit. Lucia had laughed at such an idea: what was simpler than to send to Brayton for all the guide-books and all the photographic apparatus? But Edgar had used a phrase that she knew well to be final —"One feels safer if one sees to things oneself." But this visit to Brayton was hard to work in with the other visit, and, in the upshot, Lucia was to write an apologetic letter to Mouse, saying that she would come, but that Edgar would not. As a matter of fact, this adjustment seemed to her almost ideal, for, as she heard from other sources, Maud was laid up with a cold that resembled influenza, and Charlie was going there alone. She felt she would like to see Charlie before they left, for she would not see him again for some time. They were giving a couple of shooting parties at Brayton, but he and Maud had been unable to come to them. And before Christmas the latter left for St. Moritz, where they would spend six weeks.

Lucia came out from her husband's room, when these arrangements had been talked over, and went slowly upstairs. It was her part to see to the movements of the servants, and though, in general, she was extremely rapid in domestic dealings, she sat on this occasion in long consideration. Yet they appeared simple enough. At Brayton, for instance, at the present time there were only the caretaker and his wife, who cooked in a plain manner, and her own child and the nurse and nurserymaid. She must therefore send down a *marmiton*, anyhow, to give Edgar eatable dinners, a housemaid, and a footman; they, with his man, would make him comfortable. When they came back from their cruise they would go straight down to Brayton; the rest of the London household, therefore, could move down after they had gone, and be on board wages there. It all seemed simple.

But there was this also. On the day Edgar went to Brayton she herself was going

to stay with Mouse, and would rejoin him in town the evening before they started to go abroad. That night, according to Edgar's invariable custom, when leaving London in the winter to go to the Continent by the morning train, they would spend at the Grosvenor Hotel at Victoria, so as to run no risk of missing the train owing to a fog. Once, years ago, he had missed the eleven o'clock train from this cause: since then he chose to run no risks. She would, then, not require any servants except the caretaker in Prince's Gate from the day she left town to stay with Mouse. They might therefore just as well leave town then and go down to Brayton at once. Yes, that would be more convenient; Edgar would be better looked after also. It was all quite reasonable, quite natural.

But none of these excellent arrangements were accounted for in her own mind by the reasons that made them so accountable. Lucia, from several causes, had not slept well last night, in spite of the fact that she had told her husband she was so sleepy. Madge's conversation with her after dinner had merited and had received due consideration, and Lucia had made up her mind that Madge was right, that extreme caution—for a time—was necessary. But that was not all, nor nearly all. Edgar's manner in their subsequent talk had a little disquieted her at the time, and on thinking it over after she had gone to bed, it disquieted her very much indeed; it became of the quality of nightmare. She felt sure that something had lurked behind the suggestion, for instance, that they should take Charlie with them: it was certain also that, having made that suggestion, he observed her, watched the effect of it on her. Decidedly, it was very disquieting.

Then for a little while she would tell herself that she was disquieting herself in vain, and suspected that others were suspicious, merely because she privately knew that they had cause for it. But this failed to encourage her for long; she felt she was right to be nervous. It was this that was the real cause of her thinking over domestic arrangements so carefully. She wanted to be prudent, over-prudent if necessary, and it was over-prudence that made her arrange that the house in Prince's Gate should be shut up on the day she went to stay with Mouse. Inconceivable and monstrous as such a suspicion would be, she wanted to make it impossible for Edgar to suspect that she was not going to Mouse. Such an idea would be wild and utterly baseless, but Lucia had observed that people who are in a suspicious frame of mind do imagine wild and baseless things. What a terrible thing suspicion was; it poisoned everything!

There was another precaution that ought to be taken, but it was harder to make up her mind upon that. Edgar probably knew that Maud was laid up and would not be going; he might, in his present state of mind, think over the fact that Charlie would

be there. In that case, Charlie must not go. He must stop with Maud in town. That again was quite natural: he did not like to leave Maud.

Lucia scribbled a hasty note to him:

> "Charlie—Edgar is not going to stay with Mouse, and as Maud is laid up it will be wiser for you not to go either. Come to lunch here to-day, and tell Edgar this, and leave again directly after lunch. I will arrange to see you somehow before I go abroad—we are going for a short cruise, E. and I, in about ten days—and tell you all about it. I am rather frightened.
>
> "Lucia."

Lucia had this sent at once, and sat down again to consider whether it was in her power to do anything more to add further security. She felt that somehow suspicion had come into his mind, and that it had there grown and waxed fat, and it was necessary firmly and instantly to starve it to death. That cruise on the yacht was surely of the nature of starvation; so, too, would now be the days that must elapse before they set off. On the day he went to Brayton she would now necessarily be with Mouse, since the Prince's Gate house would be servantless, and Charlie, he would know, would not be there. Prudence and discretion could go no further.

She went down to Edgar's room again in the course of the morning, and told him casually, so she believed, that she had arranged for the household to leave London as soon as she went to stay with Mouse, and that the town house would be shut up. But to a man who is suspicious there is no such thing as casual information. He believes all information to be significant, though perhaps at the time he cannot guess its significance, and what this information conveyed to him was not so much that the house in Prince's Gate would be shut up when he went to Brayton, but that Lucia wished him to think that it would be. What that meant, he had no idea; he merely believed it to mean something. But above all things, he did not want Lucia to see his suspicions, and he was casual too. And his casualness, likewise, Lucia read by the light of her own uneasiness. Each played a secret part in the ghastly, bitter little farce.

Her plans met with his approval.

"You think of everything, my dear Lucia," he said. "It is far better to leave the servants in the country, and, as you say, they have nothing more to do when we leave the house on Monday. You and your maid will join me, then, on Friday at the

Grosvenor Hotel, and we start on Saturday morning."

Lucia continued the prudent course.

"Yes; I wish you were coming to Ashdown, though. Mouse will be sorry not to see you. Can't you manage to come for one day?"

"I fear it is impossible. I see that my time will be very fully occupied as it is. But I shall be able to get up on Friday night."

Lucia put in what she thought was a fine piece of work.

"If you don't," she said, "I shall quite refuse to wait. I shall telegraph to Charlie and make him come instead. He is going to be at Ashdown."

"So you told me. Well, I must go out now."

"You will be in to lunch?"

"Yes. You have not got a party, have you?"

"No; as far as I know we shall be quite alone. Not that I expect it; somebody always drops in."

Edgar knew well when first he began to watch his wife and Charlie, and to do him justice, knew how stern and loyal a struggle he went through with himself before he definitely admitted suspicions into his mind. Suspicion was an ugly thing, and he knew it, but as often as he thought he had got the better of what he had first told himself was quite unfounded, some little fresh incident occurred, some fragment more of what was now a complete pattern. Sometimes it would be a few inaudible words, sometimes a look that passed between them; sometimes it was the feeling that inwardly Lucia winced at his own touch, at his very proximity. It seldom happened that she showed this, for she was on her guard, but now and then the truth of it was forced upon him, and what made the truth more patent to him was that whenever she had betrayed this, however slightly, she immediately afterwards was demonstratively affectionate to him. But he was by no means a fool, also he was still in love with her, and he could distinguish very well between a tenderness that was diplomatic and a tenderness that was spontaneous. Then, by degrees, with a growing bitterness and hardness, he thought over all the history of their marriage, and asked himself whether she had ever loved him, or whether she had even from the first only tolerated him. And that question, and the answer which he feared to give to it, stung him into anger and resentment that made his heart iron to her. How far she had seen this he did not know; but it was with an added sense of humiliation that he saw her relief at the growing rareness of his caresses, and at their ultimate cessation. He was naturally proud, and the position was intolerable, while his very pride prevented him from speaking to Lucia on the subject. Slowly through these weeks his suspicion had

deepened into certainty, and now he was watching her, not with a sense of the unworthiness of doing so, but with the sense that it was his duty. It was no wonder, then, that Lucia's expressed desire to go yachting with him alone, to the exclusion of Charlie, failed to disarm his suspicions. What that meant he did not know for certain, but it seemed probable at least that she had become aware of them, and was attempting, with what now seemed to him transparent futility, to convince him of their groundlessness.

But, as has been seen, he fell in with her suggestion that they should cruise alone; for, since he had loved her, and in love there is something immortal, so that the utmost wounding cannot quite do it to death, he still had hold on the desperate hope that he had been wrong throughout. If he considered that with his reason, it seemed a possibility not to be dreamed of; but since he had loved her, his past love still dreamed of it. Away, alone with her, in the solitude of another honeymoon, he would be able to test that. But in the interval suspicion blackened and embittered him. Everything fed it: the fact of the empty house fed it; the fact that Charlie would be at Ashdown fed it. It is always feeding time for suspicion, and suspicion is omnivorous, and knows no quenching of its appetite.

Later in the day he was sitting in his room with a report he had to master, but with a mind that persistently wandered from it. Several people had come to lunch, and among them Charlie, who brought not too good an account of Maud. She was still a good deal pulled down by her attack, and though she was up, she was depressed and weak. It would be so nice of Lucia, he said, to go and see her, and convince her that he was right in having telegraphed to Mouse to say that he must throw up his visit and stop with his wife. Maud did not want him to do so; she said it was quite absurd, and wished him to go. Lucia had broken in at this.

"Oh, Charlie, I am sorry," she said, "but I entirely agree with Maud. I know exactly what influenza depression is, and it is really much better to leave a person alone. She doesn't want you. Poor Maud! I will go and see her this afternoon, if I can squeeze it in."

Charlie caught Lucia's eye.

"Oh, well, then, don't go and see her, if you mean to say that," he said. "I want you to back me up, and not her. I'm not going to Mouse; that is quite settled."

Lucia had seen Madge again that morning, who had condemned her rejection of Charlie as yacht-companion. Lucia had seen the point when it was shown her, and here was a heaven-sent opportunity to repair the error. To urge Charlie to come to Ashdown would be the correction of any inference Edgar might have drawn last night.

"But it's too disappointing," she said. "I was reckoning on your being there. Edgar and I are going off at the end of the week, and you will have gone to St. Moritz before we get back, and we shan't meet for two thousand years. Oh, do come!"

But Charlie had remained firm. He had also left the house immediately after lunch.

It was this that got between Edgar and his book. This morning it had been the fact that Charlie was going to be at Ashdown that had been food for suspicion. Now he was not going to be there, and still suspicion fed and fattened. He did not know what it meant, but soon it would fit into its place, if he thought about it. And then quite suddenly and quite securely it fitted into the poisoned map that his mind made. Next to it came the empty house. How it fitted he did not quite know, but he felt the edge to be flush and firm.

And then for a moment he cast the map aside, telling himself, as was indeed true, that he was doing Lucia a hideous injustice. This, at any rate, was causeless—absolutely causeless. Whatever she did he turned into edible form for his poisonous brood: last night it was the fact that she did not want Charlie's companionship that was capable to him of only one explanation; to-day the fact that she did appeared equally suggestive. Again, that he should go to Ashdown when Lucia was there fevered him; now, that he should not go to Ashdown had the same effect. Frankly, he acknowledged to himself the unreasonableness and the meanness of his thoughts. But he could not expel them; they came back and back, swarming like brown evil flies over carrion.

Three days later Lucia was sitting over her fire in her bedroom before it was time to dress for dinner. There was a huge party in the house, a party that should have been very amusing—at any rate, the same party, more or less, that amused her immensely on other occasions. All the right people were there, and, what made more difference, there were none of the wrong ones. But Lucia, in the twenty-four hours that had elapsed since she arrived, had not been in the least degree amused. Yet she had not been bored; her thoughts had been desperately busy.

It was Tuesday. On Friday night she was to go up to town, join Edgar at the Grosvenor Hotel, and go off with him next day. They would cruise in the Mediterranean; then they would be busy with their shooting parties, and before they were over Maud and her husband would have started for St. Moritz. It would be weeks—months—before she saw Charlie again, and there were things she must tell

him—he must know the reason for her guardedness, else he might think she wanted to break with him. It was that thought which was intolerable, which obsessed her, which prevented her enjoyment of this thoroughly congenial society. And it never left her; her laugh would wither in mid-air, dropping dead. She would be in the middle of a sentence, and the sentence would go lopped and maimed. And people, she felt sure, were beginning to notice these things. She was not herself; anybody could see that, and what lay between her and herself was this difficulty: she could not conceive how, with the prudence she was determined to exercise, she could see him again before she left England on this deadly and necessary trip.

All that was honest enough; it was all there, but much more was there which she refused to acknowledge. It was the pith of the whole which she disowned—namely, her overwhelming desire to see him. Intolerable as was the thought that he might imagine she had wished to bring an end to their intimacy, it was more intolerable that she should be unable to see him just once again and tell him that it was not so. She had decided that he should not come to Ashdown while she was there, since Edgar was not with her nor Maud with him. That had been a hateful necessity, but necessary. More imperative now was the necessity of seeing him. But how? How?

There were many possible ways, all faced by some grand impossibility. Mouse, for instance, would be charmed if he telegraphed Maud's improvement, and suggested he should come here for a night or two. But grand impossibility faced that; if she had been right—and she felt sure she had been—in prohibiting his visit at all, she would be terribly wrong in getting him to come now. Things got into the papers; two lines to say that Mr. Lindsay had joined the Duchess of Wiltshire's party at Ashdown was a sufficient match for the powder-magazine of Edgar's mind. That clearly would not do. Slight though the risk was, it was still a risk, and Lucia, that hunted soul, wanted no risks.

Or, again, she might go back to town upon Thursday, stay at an hotel, and get him to dine with her. At the Carlton, for instance, under the blare of the band, she could tell him of the danger. She could also see him again, which was a more instant need. Yet that would not do; a chance paragraph might again wreck all. It was possible that Edgar might take up a paper which recorded that she had dined at the Carlton one night when she was supposed to be staying at Ashdown. It might even say, in case Charlie was recognized, who dined with her. Explanation, of course, would be simple: she had shopping to do in town, and since the house in Prince's Gate was shut up, she dined and slept at the Carlton. Certainly Charlie had dined with her; why not? Maud would have, but was still laid up. She had asked them

both, but Maud had not come. What did anybody mean?

Then in a flash Lucia saw that which had been a subject of suspicion, though meaningless, to her husband, a few days before. The publicity of a hotel was impossible; it was impossible that she should get Charlie to come to Ashdown. But there was an empty house in London, which was hers, and no one except the caretaker and his wife would know she had been in town. What if she made a perfectly reasonable excuse to Mouse on the ground of shopping, and went to town on Thursday. Chops were possible even in dismantled houses; she could dine there, if chops were dinner, see Charlie there, and speak to him very strongly on the subject of discretion. It was so important; he must be brought to see that. It was impossible to explain things by letters, and letters in themselves were so dangerous. Also letters were so hard, so wooden. But with him beside her she could make him feel how she loathed and rebelled against this forced, this necessary, surrender to what prudence dictated. It was only temporary.

The consistent falsity of her life came to-night to its logical conclusion. For years she had deceived others—those who most trusted and loved her—whenever she could suck but a small advantage therefrom, but she had not deceived herself. But now, in a matter so supreme as this, she achieved this crowning result, and when she told herself that it was in order to explain the policy of discretion to her lover that she was going to meet him, she believed it. She reined her imagination in; she would not let it spring forward to forecast the details of their meeting, its setting in the shrouded house, his arrival, the picnic dinner they would have together, the long talk which would burn up the hours of the evening like fire. All that she hid even from herself.

The moment that her plan flashed into her mind she executed the things that were necessary for its realization, and wrote at once to the caretaker, saying that she would be coming up for Thursday night, would want the plainest of dinners for herself and a friend, and—that she would not bring her maid. It was better so; she should come up with the big luggage on Friday, and go straight to the Grosvenor Hotel. A couple of lines to Charlie completed the arrangements.

Only one thing remained for consideration, and that was what excuse exactly she should give Mouse. Shopping was a poor reason; everybody said shopping when she meant something else; it was not solid enough, not convincing enough. Then—the evening post having just been brought to her, she thought of something much better, and went to seek her hostess. But to-night she felt there would be no more withering of her laugh in mid-air, no lopped and maimed sentences. The joy of life

had come back to her, the rage for love and living.

"Dear Mouse," she said, when she found her in her bedroom, "Edgar is too tiresome and worrying for words. Having carefully settled to start on Saturday, he now proposes to start on Friday. What am I to do?"

Mouse drew another chair up to the fire; it was a frosty evening, and the exhilaration of the cold had entered into the blaze. Exhilaration, too, so she thought, had entered into Lucia, in spite of this tiresome proposal.

"Do?" she said. "Don't. It is a woman's prerogative to change her plans at the last moment, not a man's. It seems to me that men are invading our provinces. They have headaches and drink tea. Don't go, Lucia. Be calm and firm."

"But I'm not; I'm furious. He really must think he is Providence, upsetting things in this way."

"Shall I telegraph to him," asked Mouse. "I will with pleasure, just saying that if necessary you shall be kept here by force."

Lucia laughed.

"I wish you could," she said, "but Edgar wouldn't see that you were serious. He would think it was a joke. How annoying he is! But you must remember that I have to spend a fortnight all alone with him on the yacht. If I simply refused to go a day earlier he would be so very polite and dignified, which I can't stand. I abhor dignity."

"Well, it all depends, then, on what you abhor most," said Mouse, "dignity or having your arrangements upset."

Lucia poked the fire viciously.

"Oh, dignity is the worse," she said. "I shall do as he wishes. It's so unfair, though, for unless I do it with the best grace in the world it will be as bad as not doing it at all. Yes, I shall do it, and pretend it suits me perfectly. No one can say that I don't do my duty. What an angel was born into this malicious world twenty-five years ago! Sometimes I am so good that I am almost afraid I shall die in the night."

"Oh, be very careful," said Mouse. "But, really, you are too amiable. You will have to leave us on Thursday, then? Edgar's Grosvenor Hotel plans are quite too funny for anything. I wonder he doesn't get leave to sleep in the carriage that will form part of the train next day."

"For heaven's sake don't suggest it to him!" said Lucia. "He would certainly do it, and wonder he hadn't thought of it before. Dear, dear! how nicely we should all get on if it wasn't for our husbands!"

"That is a profound observation," said Mouse. "But then, on the whole, it is possible to get on fairly well with them."

Edgar found plenty to occupy him at Brayton, but it was that which he brought with him that occupied him most of all. Day and night there sat in its dark corner of his mind the grey form of his distrust and suspicion. Sometimes, even now, though it had become so solid and real, he could make it, so to speak, close its eyes, and doze, but it was only by the strongest effort on his part that he could thus lull it to rest, and even then it did not quit its corner, it still sat there, though for the time it might be quiescent. It was chiefly when he was with his child and Lucia's that these moments of its quiescence came; with that chuckling, crowing atom which was bone of her bone, and contained life also that was in him, he could, though by an effort, make himself believe that he had made a gross and well-nigh unforgiveable mistake, that it was her due that he should ask her pardon abjectly, imploringly, humbly for these weeks of poisoned thought that had so incessantly and causelessly wronged her. And at such moments it seemed to him that a wraith of himself stood by him and reproached him, that wraith of his true self which had loved her, and was, indeed, save that it inhabited his flesh and bones, an entity which no longer had anything in common with that which made up his present consciousness. Then, even while the spell of their child's presence was with him, the wraith of his true self would vanish again, and he would ask himself what this child who was so much to him had been, or was, to its mother; whether she had ever shown sign that she knew how this living link was that which made her unity with him.

But there had no such sign been shown. Neither to him, since the birth of their child, nor to it had she given that spontaneous abandonment of herself that is what wifehood and motherhood mean. And the eyes of the grey form that sat in the dusk were open again and fixed on him. It seemed to have moved a little nearer, too, and the darkness that enshrouded it had lifted a little.

Step by step he went back over the road which they had walked together since their marriage, once so strewn with roses. Stately and splendid it had been as he trod it with her; they had walked to the sound of flutes, and the beauty of all that was lovely in the world of art had been brought to adorn it. But looking back to-day it seemed that all he had thought lovely was blackened and grimed, and the hoofs of Satyrs, leering and diabolic, had trodden the roses into the filth over which they had been laid. From the beginning there had been nothing true or real about it all; he had worshipped a monstrous thing, and its monstrosity had infected all that had come near it.

And then for a moment he would look on that sunbeam of a child again, and he would tell himself that there was nothing monstrous except his own stupendous

disloyalty to Lucia.

These nightmares of thought came like repeated attacks of some nameless fever. But each weakened him; after each it was more difficult to rally, and he felt that he would go off his head altogether unless he could arrive at some certainty. Yet how was that to be done? Whatever Lucia had done, whether the truth was that he by his suspicions had so sinned against her, or whether it was she who had sinned against him, there was nothing that would satisfy him in the wounded and incredulous anger that must be her answer to any direct question of his. Since he entertained those vile suspicions of her, he necessarily would not be convinced—the evil part of him that suspected her, that is to say, by any indignant and fiery denial of hers. It could not be through her that his distrust must be set at rest; he must convince himself independently of her. He must frame to himself a definite suspicion, and—test it. Yet how mean, how abhorrent! What would be his own feelings if he found that Lucia had ever spied on him?

But the idea recurred and recurred again. He often put it away, but as often it came back. And he found by degrees that he was not putting it so far away as he did when first it presented itself.

He was busying himself the morning after his arrival at Brayton with that which had formed part of the cause of his coming, and was overhauling his photographic apparatus. He was more than a mere amateur at photography, and his equipment was singularly complete. There was a big full-plate camera, which he used chiefly for time exposures in interiors; he had made some extraordinarily fine photographs of the bronzes in the Museum of the Acropolis with this, and as he was considering whether on the Riviera there would conceivably be a use for it, there came into his mind a day he and Lucia had spent on the Acropolis on their first tour. It was with the vividness of a thing actually seen with his eyes now and here that he recalled a particular moment when she had come into the room when he was photographing.

"Oh, Edgar," she said, "it is spring, and outside 'blossom by blossom the spring begins.' Do let us go out on to Pentelicus this afternoon, instead of spending it photographing. If you must photograph, you may photograph me. I will pose on a bed of asphodel and moly."

And suddenly his breath caught in his throat.

No; there would be no need for taking this big time-exposure camera. Whatever photography he did would be in the open air. Yet Lucia had asked him once to photograph her "dear cabin" on the yacht, and, not having a plate to spare, he had not done so. Very likely she would ask him again; it was worth taking the camera,

then. It had a wider lens than the other; nothing else at such close quarters could take more than a section of the cabin. By using the widest stop, he could take the whole side of it with this. There was her bed along one side, a table which she called "Utility," because she wrote at it; another which she called "Florodora," because she had nothing but flowers on it. No; it was he who had suggested those names; hers had been the delighted acceptance of them.

He took hold of his mind again, and shook it up. These thoughts would lead on to other thoughts, and his present business was with cameras. There was a focal-plane camera which was supposed to work at a fifteen-hundreth part of a second. But when he used it last it struck him that the shutter did not move quite as quickly as it ought. It would be well to test this, for in the bright glare of the Riviera its fastest pace was not at all too quick. If it was still working sluggishly, it must be looked to before he went South.

Edgar had the films handy, and put a roll in; then, with it in his hand, he went to the window. Outside the brilliance of the morning rivalled the Southern sun, and he only wanted some quickly moving object on which to test the shutter. It happened to be focussed, he saw, for six yards, and even at the moment there came the crunch of gravel outside, and round the corner in the perambulator came his son. The child knew him, and opened his mouth in an ecstatic "Daddy," which for him comprised the English language ("Mammy" he had never learned), and Edgar pressed the air-bulb which worked the shutter. If the camera was in good order, the child's mouth ought to be quite sharp.

He said a word or two to the nurse, said also that Daddy was busy, and went back to develop the photograph. The shutter was beyond doubt very badly out of order. It must certainly be seen to. That ought to be done at its maker's in town; one could not trust these provincial people. But he would only arrive in London on Friday evening, and they were to start on Saturday morning. It was a pity to send those things by post; they often got jarred. Perhaps he could manage to go up to town a little earlier. He might manage to get up on Friday morning; there were sure to be other little jobs to be done. Or even earlier than that; a whole day in London before one went abroad always meant a full day. But the Prince's Gate house was shut up; the servants had all come down, according to Lucia's admirable arrangement. He would have to stay somewhere else; there was nothing so cheerless as a solitary night in a disbanded house.

And then, suddenly as the lightning-flash, other pieces and ends of thoughts rushed together and joined themselves to this. There had been in his mind causeless suspicion of that empty house; that came side by side with the question of the

defective camera, and was joined to it. There had been the necessity for finding out, in some way other than that of asking direct questions, the truth or falsity of all that poisoned him; that was there in the same flash. He had found himself a specious excuse for doing what was mean and abhorrent. A call at Prince's Gate was more than reasonable; indeed, he had left an aquascutum there, which he really wanted to take abroad with him. No doubt his valet might fetch it, but it was better to see to things oneself.

This lightning-flash of connection between things hitherto unconnected was brief enough, and it had passed almost as soon as it occurred. But, in the mysterious alchemy of the human mind, it is ordained that a thought once entertained has easier access when it calls for the second time than it has had when first it presented itself. It has written its microscopic little wrinkle or dot on the brain; when next it passes that way that wrinkle will nod and beckon to it.

Edgar had things to be seen to in Brayton that afternoon. It was true that his presence there or personal interviews were not necessary, but in this hell of fears and suspicion and suspense he wanted and longed for employment. There were so few days to be got through; could he but hold himself in hand till he and Lucia were safely off from Victoria, speeding South, alone and together, he felt that some certainty would come. He tried by business and employment to root out from his mind the crooked course that had already indicated itself, that had done more than that, and had insisted on its being the only satisfactory course. And it was his very best self—the best self, too, of which any man is capable—that tried to scare away the bat-like shapes that hovered round him, by refusing to allow his mind to recognize their existence. He wanted to do anything rather than be at leisure to perceive them. Whatever else was foul or fair, they were foul. Foul he had been in entertaining them, in being at leisure to receive them all these weeks, and now that they suggested a practical plan, he could at least refuse to give it consideration. Only a few hours ago he had longed for certainty at whatever cost; now, when the definite idea of testing his suspicion of the empty house occurred to him as practically and reasonably possible, he tried to put it away. Already he had strayed far; how much better to have gone with Lucia to Ashdown, and left the damned photographic apparatus to be in order or not, just as it pleased. Yet for a while his suspicions had been at rest when Charlie himself announced as a new plan that he would not go down to Ashdown, but stop in town with Maud. Or had suspicion ever been wholly at rest! Had he not instantly connected Charlie's presence in town with the empty house?

The rows of well-ordered villas streamed by him. There was Holywell and Holyrood and Laburnums and Cedars, all with their inhabitants, all with their possibilities of tragedy or rapture, all so much smaller than himself as regards that which the world recognizes as the possibilities of life, but all quite as large as he, to say the least, as regards the possibilities of those things which make life a thing that is raised just a little higher than existence. He had meant—Lucia had ardently backed his desire—to turn some sort of cultured sun on to these suburbanly provincial residences, to speak to them of fireworks and Botticelli, and God knows what. But what if, after all, the majority of these decayed and effete old ladies and gentlemen possessed that which he now found he prized above all else and had missed? What if in the Laburnums an old General and his rheumatic spouse dwelt together in quiet content, and were yearly cheered by the visit of that darling naval officer in the King's service, their son? What if the last Mayor but two, a man without an "h," found in the Cedars a tranquillity and happiness that was lacking to those who looked at Corots, and saw slightly doubtful plays acted beneath that superb vault of the theatre he had built at Brayton? And then——

Next the Cedars was Fair View. The car had passed it before it could slow down to the pace that was necessary to enter the narrow gate and take the ellipse of the "carriage sweep," but with a little hooting and grunting it backed its way into the gate labelled "Out," which Aunt Cathie had caused to be repainted. There were no other chariots in the carriage sweep; the possible difficulty of compelling them to back into the road was non-existent.

Edgar got out and rang the bell. It was not so far off that the twitched wire caused the jangle, and standing there on the doorstep, it was no longer "here and now" with him, but here and on a day that seemed so long past that it had, till the bell scolded in the basement, no existence at all. But that sound conjured the past up again out of the well of the relentless years; it was almost with expectation that he was silent for the whistle from above that should recall Schubert's "Unfinished" to him; it was almost with conviction that he looked at the sill of the drawing-room window, thinking to see there the broad-brimmed rush-hat, with the scarlet bow. Yet, simultaneously, sickness and ache of heart was his; whether it was she, the same she who had come downstairs to greet him who now was staying at Ashdown, he dared not think. He but knew that somebody else, not the he who had heard the jangling bell before on a day of brilliant sunshine, stood here now waiting for the bell to be answered. Another being usurped his envelope; somebody not looking eagerly forward, but looking hopelessly back; somebody sick at heart, tired, tired with a struggle that made him momently weaker, who found the present intolerable instead

of finding the future bright.

There was an irony in external things. He remembered that flies buzzed on the wall; in this sheltered November sunshine they buzzed there now; flowers had been bright below the windows, and to-day the scarlet salvia still showed traces of its bravery, and chysanthemums blazed and smouldered. But the quality of the sun was changed. It had been June then.

He had stopped the car, told the chauffeur to back into the narrow gate instinctively; but as he waited, while still the bell had not ceased to jangle, his instinct translated itself into purpose that could be stated and reasoned over. Not much reasoning was necessary; simply he wanted to get back into the atmosphere that had once been radiant. Some brightness might linger here, when he saw the little dingy hall, the confined little sitting-room and perhaps the tiny veranda that looked out over the lawn and the railway embankment. His heart ached for the Lucia of those days, whether she was real or false then; he wanted the belief that she was real. That might help him now; she might be on his side, phantom though she should prove to be, to fight the deadlier phantom that sat at home with him underneath the Corots.

There succeeded to the clangour of the bell a long silence. Then from upstairs came the sound of descending feet, and the door was opened. It was not Arbuthnot who opened it, nor the godly Mrs. Inglis, who performed such functions when Arbuthnot had her afternoons out; it was Aunt Cathie. She saw him, and threw the door wide.

"Why, if I ever!" she said. "Dear Edgar, if you had only told me! And I'm not fit to be seen. Lucia is not with you?"

"No, Aunt Cathie; she is away. I am at Brayton for a day or two before we go abroad, looking out photographic things."

Aunt Cathie was still in crackling black of the nature of bombazine, though it was over a year since Elizabeth had died. But the crackling black was worn and brownish; the magisterial precision which had been so characteristic of Aunt Cathie was lacking in her now, both as regards dress and address. She seemed softened, faded.

"But how nice of you to come and see me," she said, "though the most dreadful thing has happened. There is nobody in; I am quite alone in the house. My servants"—her voice stumbled and faltered a moment—"are all out. It was such a fine afternoon. But I will give you some tea."

The ghosts of past days were on the wing now, fluttering, dancing, laughing, calling to him out of the time when it was dawn with love. He could not but

remember that it was thus that Lucia had received him at Littlestone; the servants had been out, and they had had tea in the kitchen with an infinity of tender mirth. With the true history of that day he had never been made acquainted, for the effect of its narration on Maud was not such as would encourage Lucia to make further confidences about it. But to-day, when the situation, so infinitesimal in itself, was so strangely repeated, it was not with mirth that Aunt Cathie announced it. She was evidently agitated and preoccupied.

"But let us have it in the kitchen," he said, "just as Lucia and I did at Littlestone. It will remind me of that day, and I want to be reminded."

They had passed into the drawing-room, and Edgar, still beckoned to by the ghosts of past days, looked round for the things that were so familiar. But the piano, where the "Unfinished" had stood, was no longer there, and bookcases gaped with empty shelves.

"But the piano," he said, "and the books?"

Aunt Cathie drew herself up with a quiet dignity.

"I was cluttered up with things," she said. "It was more convenient to part with some of them. There is no inconvenience in not having a piano, especially when you can't play. And as for books, what is the use of dusting what you don't read? And now, dear Edgar, the kettle is boiling, and the tray is outside. Might I trouble you to bring it in, while I run down to the kitchen and see if they have sent in the cake I ordered. If not, you must be content with some bread and butter."

It required no unusual perspicacity to put these things together, and while Aunt Cathie was downstairs he went with purpose and looked out of the glass door into the garden. It was even as he suspected: the grass of the lawn was tall and matted and rank; the bed that had been the famous "blaze of colour" was but a jungle of neglected herbage. It was clear beyond doubt that Aunt Cathie had had some pecuniary loss, and it was infinitely foolish and brave of her to have kept it to herself and told neither Lucia nor him. But at that another suspicion came into his mind, which he felt he must have satisfied at once. He knew very well that no word of all this had reached him. But he had to be told that no word of it had reached Lucia.

Aunt Cathie came upstairs again. The cake had not come; it was tiresome of the tradespeople.

Edgar shut the door after her and came and sat down beside her on the sofa with its decoration of headrests.

"Now, dear Aunt Cathie," he said, "you know I am not impertinent or inquisitive, I hope. But I cannot help seeing what all this means, your parting with the piano, the servants being out, the neglect in the garden. But why, why didn't you tell Lucia or

me? I don't think it was kind of you."

There came a sudden jerk in the muscles of Aunt Cathie's throat. But she overcame it bravely.

"Lucia, I am sure, was very busy," she said, "and it was no wonder she forgot. I did write to her, but I felt I couldn't write again. And I have a servant. Surely one old woman can be looked after by one servant. Many people have none at all."

And then very gently, though with a sickness of heart at what she had told him, he got from her the story of what had happened. Elizabeth had urged her to put the bulk of their money into some Russian oil property that yielded a higher percentage than did their present investment, and three months ago, when the half-yearly dividend was due, it had not been paid. She had received the report of the meeting, and it was quite clear that this embarrassment would only be temporary, and that the payment of dividends would soon be resumed. But in the meantime it was better to sell the piano, and do without a gardener.

Aunt Cathie could not go on at once.

"I don't mind about that," she said, "and it is very wicked of one to mind about anything else. But when I think of Lucia forgetting all about it, sometimes I do feel hurt. I don't mean to, I don't want to. I know she loves me, and we all forget things at times. I never had a good memory myself."

Then suddenly she recovered her ancient spirit, blew her nose violently, and became astonishingly brusque.

"Hope you're hungry," she said, "because if I am good for anything, it's cutting bread and butter. And the kettle's boiling. Now tell me what you and Lucia are going to do with yourselves. When are you coming to Brayton? Been in London, haven't you?"

Edgar did not stop long after this, but before going he extracted the extent of her losses from Aunt Cathie, and her promise that Fair View should be instantly reinstalled with a new piano and its usual complement of servants. A visit to her bank was necessary, but after that he had not the heart to do the rest of the business for which he had come, and went back to Brayton.

So Lucia had known all about Aunt Cathie's troubles, and had done nothing. It was only reasonable to suppose that the letter had reached her when she was very busy, and that she had forgotten all about it. The point was that she had been able to forget about it. Aunt Cathie, with a generosity of which he was incapable, had said that she knew Lucia loved her. But was that so? Did Lucia love anybody?

And at that question all the flood of suspicion overwhelmed him again. Somehow he must arrive at certainty. It would not be arrived at by asking Lucia.

CHAPTER XVIII

It was Thursday night—a night of cold, steady rain. Edgar had dined alone, and given orders that the motor should come round after dinner to take him up to town. The burden of his suspicions had become intolerable, and he could no longer resist testing them. Though sane reasoning told him that Lucia was at Ashdown with Mouse, and Charlie was in London with Maud, he could no longer pay any attention to sane reasoning, and he did not believe these things. Should his test fail, should he find no grounds for all that he suspected, he had fully made up his mind what to do—namely, to confess to Lucia all that had turned these last weeks into hell for him, and throw himself on her generosity, imploring her forgiveness.

The test he had devised was simple enough. He meant to drive to Charlie's house, ask the servant whether he was in, and whether Lucia had been there. If Charlie was in, and Lucia had not been there, that would be sufficient for him; for during these last two days all the suspicions which had been vague and indefinite had hardened and crystallized, and he believed that they would be together. But if Charlie was not in, he meant to drive to his own house in Prince's Gate, and ask there if Lucia had come up to town or if Charlie had been there. If those questions were answered negatively, again his test would have failed, and he would throw himself on Lucia's generosity, confessing all, even to this last meanness, holding nothing whatever back.

The drive would not take more than three hours, and he expected and had planned to arrive in town about midnight. The car was a large one and on the top and in the luggage box behind was all that he meant to take abroad with him. Beside the chauffeur sat his own valet, and he had the inside of the car to himself. He had brought a book with him, for the electric light inside made reading easy, but the journey was half over before he remembered that he had brought it. He noticed also then, for the first time, that the rain was beating in through the window that he had left open. He closed that, but still he did not open his book. His mind seemed to be quite blank, some empty canvas waiting for a picture to be painted on it; but with that automatic perception that seems to become so vivid when anxiety or fear has deadened the large faculties into blankness, he found that he was getting very accurate impressions of the details that were presented to his senses. The two men in front wore black mackintoshes; and it was odd how the reflection of the light from the electric lamp seemed to be brighter on those wet, shiny, surfaces than was the light itself. The car went very smoothly, with a long-sustained burr of sound, but now

and then they ran through a puddle, and he heard the dash of the water against the splash-board. Once or twice, too, against the splash-board there came a loud single rap, from some stone, no doubt, which the wheel had jerked up. Then to his nostrils there suddenly came the smell of wallflower, which puzzled him. Then he remembered that it was a favourite scent of Lucia's, and, looking in one of the pockets of the carriage, he found a handkerchief of hers, which smelled of it. His hand closed on that; it was a tiny little square of finest cambric, little more than a monogram and a coronet.

The journey did not seem at all long; before he could have guessed that they were nearing its end they had entered the suburbs, and their pace, never excessive, slowed down. They went over Hammersmith Bridge, and he saw the row of lights reflected in the tawny river, and, observing that the rain had stopped—for the pane was unblurred—he let the window down again, and the cold night air, a little tainted with the smell of smoke, came in. The million lamps of the town were reflected in the vapours overhead, and to the east it looked as if there must be some fire broken out, so red was the glow. The rain could not have ceased very long, for the pavements were still shining with it, and the streets were very empty of passengers, as if the world had despaired of fine weather that night and had gone to bed. Motorbuses, empty on the top but crammed to bursting inside, passed him. Once one skidded a little just as they were opposite it, and for a moment he thought there would be a collision. They were dangerous things on a wet night.

Then, before he realized they had passed through the miles of streets, the motor drew up at the house in Warwick Square, and his valet came to the door.

"I won't get out till you have inquired," said Edgar. "Just ring and ask if her ladyship has been here, and if Mr. Lindsay is in."

And still, even though he knew that perhaps in one moment from now all his fears and his suspicions would cease, would drop into the poisoned well from which they came, his mind was empty and void. But his body took cognizance, and he felt his heart hammering and the pulse leaping at his wrist and in his throat. God! would the bell never be answered?

The hall, as shown by the glass windows at the side of the door, was dark, but suddenly they leaped into light, as a servant inside came to the door. His own man was standing with his back to him; after a moment he turned and came down the steps.

"Mr. Lindsay is out, my lord," he said. "He was dining out, and has not come back yet. Her ladyship has not been to the house during the last week."

“Thanks. Drive to Prince’s Gate. When we get there——” Edgar was silent a moment, and saw that his own hand was trembling as with an ague fit. But still his mind was blank. “When we get there, I do not want you to ring. I have my key, and will let myself in. I want the motor to stop two or three doors off.”

His servant mounted again; the car backed a little and made a half turn, backed again, and completed its circuit. At the door of Charlie’s house was still standing the servant who had answered the bell, and the warm light streamed out from behind him.

The drive up from Brayton had seemed short, but this mile or two to Prince’s Gate seemed interminable. Even here in the heart of London the ways were very empty, the hansoms that jingled by were few; the buses—since it was now after midnight—had ceased; and he looked up long perspectives of nearly empty pavements. Here and there he saw a man letting himself into his house, even as he himself would soon be letting himself in, and he wondered idly if any were on the awful errand that was taking him westward. Then they passed the lights of the Grosvenor Hotel, and again, with a sense of irresponsibility and remoteness from life, he wondered whether or no he would be there the next night. Where he was to sleep to-night had not occurred to him.

The house stood in the middle of one of the small sections of Prince’s Gate, and the motor stopped, as he had ordered, a couple of doors away.

With his latch-key already in his hand he got out, and then suddenly, to his own astonishment, for his mind was still aloof, he felt that his knees so trembled that he could scarcely walk. But in a moment he commanded himself, and went quietly past the two houses that intervened to his own porch. The windows were all blank and blinded, but then he saw something, a very little thing, that brought all his numbed faculties back to him.

The fanlight above the hall door was lit.

For one moment he paused there, and for all the chilliness of the night the sweat poured from him. Agonizedly he told himself that the caretaker had forgotten it, that when he put his latch-key into its hole he would find the door bolted and locked. Then, with a hand that no longer trembled, he put the key in, turned it, and the door opened.

The hall was lit: on a chair lay a man’s coat and an opera hat. The latter had not been folded up, and on the black silk of the crown, above the maker’s name, he saw two initials in gilt, which caught the light.

There was no more thinking to be done. He had contemplated this—just this—

so often, that his actions were automatic. He had not yet closed the door, and he went outside and beckoned.

His valet jumped down and came to him.

"Tell him to bring the car opposite the door," he said, "and then stop the engines. I want you both to sit in your places and take notice of what happens. You will not have to do anything; you will just keep your eyes on the door, and see who comes out."

He waited on the doorstep till the car had slid up opposite, and then went into the house again, closing the door gently behind him.

It was only for a moment, when he saw the fan-light, that his mind had worked, and now again, as before, it was blank. On the left of the hall was the door of the dining-room, open, and he went in. The room was in darkness, but by the light that came in from the open door he could see that a cloth was laid over a corner of the big table. He took a chair on the far side of the room out of the light, but opposite the open door, and waited.

Whether time passed quickly or slowly now he did not know. He did not know, either, in what form the future would come, or what he would do. He had forecast his arrival here just as it had happened, but his prevision had gone no further than that. There was no anger in his heart, there was perhaps a little hate, but that was immeasurable, at the time, with that which filled it—his dead love. Whatever he would do this night, he felt sure that he would do nothing violent, nothing passionate. All possibility of passion or violence was crushed beneath the huge dead weight that filled his mind and his soul. And then once more the odour of wall-flowers came to him, and he found that he had still in his hand that little scented square of cambric. With a sudden qualm as of physical sickness he threw it into the grate, where a few coals still smouldered.

The house was absolutely still; it was as if silence covered the whole world. No sound of passing traffic came to him, no tattoo of pedestrian heels on the pavements, no clink from the dying fire. Then, after ages, or after a few seconds only, for time had ceased to be computable, a sound came. Somewhere upstairs a door opened. That was followed by the noise of its shutting, and then there came steps on the stairs. They came down one flight; they passed along the landing of the drawing-room; they came down the second flight that led into the hall. Then Charlie's figure came into sight, and, standing opposite the open door into the dining-room, he put on his coat and took his hat. Then he passed out of sight, but the noise of the

opening and closing of the front door told Edgar that he had gone into the street, where, just opposite the house, the motor was waiting. Then he got up and went himself into the hall. Charlie had turned the light out, but the fan-light above the door still burned, and it was easily possible to see.

Then the silence was broken again; the bell sounded, and then the knocker on the front door, gently at first, but with growing vehemence, as if panic had seized the man who was knocking, and the whole house resounded to it. He had not foreseen that Charlie would recognize the motor, or the chauffeur, but it did not matter—nothing mattered. But Edgar just slipped the bolt at the bottom and top of the door, then he lit the hall light again, and went upstairs.

The house above was dark, and as he went he turned on the passage lights. But even before he had reached the first landing lights were turned on above him, and Lucia, barefooted and in a dressing-gown, came running down. It was no wonder she had heard the knocking; it was sufficient to wake the dead. And just as she reached the landing by the drawing-room she saw him.

For some half-minute neither spoke. In Edgar's mind there was still no anger, only the intolerable weight of his dead love. Then he spoke, raising his voice a little, so that she might hear it above the noise of that tempest of blows outside.

"The motor is at the door," he said, "and it shall drive you away to some hotel. Go and dress yourself. I will wait here for you, and take your luggage down. Ah, here is Hopkins."

The caretaker, half-dressed, appeared at this moment, roused from sleep by the noise that still continued.

"Please wait and take her ladyship's luggage to the motor, Hopkins," he said. "It will be ready as soon as possible."

Lucia had not moved since the moment she saw her husband. But then, with a passionate gesticulation, she came a step or two toward him.

"Edgar, I swear to you——" she began.

He just held up his hand.

"Ah, quite so," he said. "It is wasted on me."

"But I implore you——"

"That is wasted on me also. Go upstairs, and be quick."

He turned, went downstairs again, and crossed the hall to the door. He undid the bolts he had just fastened, and opened it, and found Charlie, white-faced, frantic.

"It will do you no good to make that noise," he said. "You had better go home."

Charlie stammered a few incoherent words before he could make his tongue do

his bidding.

"But I can't leave her like this!" he cried.

Then, at the sound of his voice, Edgar's dead love, in the presence of the man who had helped to murder it, cried from the earth. But even now he did not lose control of himself; he but just knew that his control was weakening.

"You will be wise to go, you damned hound!" he said. "I am flesh and blood also. You need not be afraid for her. She will leave the house in a few minutes. Are you so stupid as to suppose I could touch her? But I might touch you. You might spare me that! Go."

Then he crossed the pavement.

"You will drive her ladyship to any hotel she wishes," he said to the chauffeur, "and come for orders in the morning. I shall not want you again to-night. Flynn, you will go and see her ladyship safe, and then come back here. You can let yourself in with my latch-key."

Edgar went back into the hall. Before long the caretaker came downstairs with a couple of bags. He went out and put them in the car.

"You can go to bed," said Edgar.

But still Lucia did not come, and after a little while he went up to her room. She was standing there with her furs and her hat on, quite still in the centre of the room. All the lights were lit, and they showed the absolute whiteness of her face, and its incomparable beauty.

"It is time for you to go," he said, holding the door wide. "You are keeping the men up."

But still she did not move. She raised her face a little, looking steadily at him, and with short, jerky movements she raised her hands also towards him. And then, without warning, his self-control gave way.

"Go, go—you harlot!" he screamed, "or I shall kill you."

Once, long ago, his love had frightened her; it was his hate that frightened her now. And next moment she was alone in the empty room.

CHAPTER XIX

One morning, just six days later, Lucia was alone in the sitting-room of the little suite that Edgar had taken for her and himself at the Grosvenor Hotel for the night before they had planned to leave England on the cruise in the Mediterranean. She had driven there in his motor from the Prince's Gate house, and had scarcely set foot outside it since. But many different people had come to see her here, and this morning she was expecting Maud, who had asked to be allowed to come to her. But the day outside was a curtain of the densest fog; it was probable that Maud might find it impossible to get here at all. And whether her coming or her keeping away was the least faceable Lucia hardly knew. To some people suspense is worse than the worse certainty; to others, those who would put off an unpleasant scene from day to day, suspense is the more bearable. All that Lucia knew was that the suspense she was in now was more dreadful than had been the moment when, a week ago, the frenzied knocking began, and she came downstairs to find Edgar. But —yes, suspense was the more bearable than the thought of what message Maud might bring. She would have made this great pall of darkness that overhung the town of double intensity; she would have willed that it should continue for ever—anything to delay Maud's arrival.

All the days of this last week, though they had been passed without change of surroundings, were absolutely distinct to her. That was due perhaps to the fact that very few things had happened, but that each was invested with an appalling significance. It was on Thursday night that she had come here, that Edgar's valet had brought up her bag for her to her room, and had undone the straps of it and left her. That night she had not gone to bed at all, and, in spite of the hideous shock and the scene that she had been through, she sat alert and tingling. It had happened; the worst possible had happened, and it was over. But life was not in the least over; it had but begun; she had but tasted it, and she was hungry. True, there was anxiety and suspense; what had happened to Charlie she had no idea, but certainly he had been right to go away. Probably he had gone home; probably he, too, was waiting till the night should be over, and she could let him know where she was. And next morning, as soon as the hotel began to stir, she sent a note to him, just saying that she was at the Grosvenor. But the slow hours of Friday morning passed, and he did not come.

But there were other things that had to be done. Very possibly he had not gone home; a hundred other alternatives would account for his failing to answer, and meantime the hours were passing. She must at once get legal advice; tell the story

which she had yet to plan and adjust and varnish to a solicitor, and send to Charlie the account of what she had invented. Her invention had never failed her yet; it would be strange if now, when she stood in her most urgent need, she could not construe something that held water. She must think; she must think furiously.

What had happened? She had come up to town a day earlier than she had originally intended, to do some shopping. Charlie had dined with her that evening in Prince's Gate; it was no use denying that. He had stopped talking to her till twelve or a little later, and then, as soon as ever he went downstairs to go away, she had gone up to bed, and had more than half undressed when she heard knocking on the front door. She had told the caretaker that neither he nor his wife need sit up, and not knowing what this knocking was had come downstairs to see. On the stairs she had met her husband; he had given her a quarter of an hour to get out of the house. His motor was outside, and she drove straight to the hotel.

For all her quickness of thought, it took her some hour or two to get this short and simple account into shape, but no sooner was it done than she wrote it out, and sent it by hand to Charlie's club. And now she applauded his prudence in not having come in answer to her first note; it was much better so.

There was a telephone in her room, and she then communicated with a firm of well-known solicitors, requesting the immediate presence of the head of it, on a matter of great importance. She had often met the man before; he had been to their house more than once, and she had liked the clever, sharp-witted Mr. Shapstone. She felt sure he would come to her at his earliest possible leisure. And before half a minute had passed, her bell rang, and she listened.

"Yes, yes," she said, "I am Lady Brayton. What is it?"

The next moment she had put the receiver back into its place, and she turned white to the lips. Shapstone and Sons had already been engaged by Lord Brayton to instruct his counsel in his divorce suit. It was therefore impossible——

And then she had put back the receiver. So she was really in the middle of the breakers which had wrecked so many gaudy pleasure-boats.

But it was not long before her splendid vitality rallied again. There was another firm who, she thought she remembered, had once done something for Madge. So at least a story ran; they had averted danger in some very clever way. And before the early November dusk had closed down on that Friday afternoon she found herself shaking hands with Mr. Baxter, and, soon after, telling him the story which had seemed so simple and straightforward. He was as unlike as possible to what Lucia had imagined. There was nothing ferrety or fox-faced about him; he was genial and

broad-shouldered, of pink complexion, and rather like a prosperous country parson. He heard her in dead silence.

"I understand, then, that his lordship was in the house when Mr. Lindsay left it," he said, "and that he met you on the stairs some time after twelve, and very soon after Mr. Lindsay had gone down. You had gone up to bed, I think you said, and came down in—in *déshabillé*. That is so?"

"Yes; I have told you," said Lucia.

"And do you suppose that anybody saw Mr. Lindsay leave the house?" he asked. "If not, why do you think he knocked violently—I think you said?"

"There was my husband's motor outside," said she. "It is probable that he recognized it. He may have spoken to the chauffeur."

Another question.

"Did you give any reason to the Duchess of Wiltshire for leaving her house a day sooner than you had planned to?"

Lucia got up.

"Yes," she said, "I—I told her we were going abroad a day sooner than we had planned."

Mr. Baxter neatly extinguished the end of his cigarette.

"And that was the case?" he said.

Lucia did not at once reply, and he spoke again.

"You had much better tell me," he said. "It is my business to make any—any weak points stronger."

"No, it was not the case," said Lucia.

"Ah; a pity. Of course, as you say, the Duchess is your friend. But nobody knows what cross-examination is until he has been subjected to it. Now have you anything else to tell me?"

"I think I have told you all," said Lucia.

Mr. Baxter opened his mouth a little and stared at the fire. Once or twice he asked her a question, but continued staring, as if her answers did not mean much.

At length he spoke.

"I do not see the faintest chance of a successful defence," he said. "If you wish, I will do my best. I am very sorry, but my advice to you is that you do not defend the suit."

That was Friday. In the evening her maid came from Ashdown, with piles of luggage. It was bestowed in the little anteroom of the suite; the maid occupied the bedroom that should have been Edgar's.

After her sleepless night Lucia went early to bed, slept soundly and dreamlessly. When she woke, after a moment of the sense of being lost, of not knowing where she was, she woke to a sense of tremendous vitality. She recalled at once and vividly the interview of the day before, and, so far from going back into the past, projected herself into the future. It was infinitely better to have done with the false and double life, even though that implied the giving up of all that had formed the subject of her ambitions. But into these ambitions, love, the one thing worth having, had never come. The ambition, the success and achievement, had been hers; she had climbed to the very top of the highest trees, and seen all the other tree-tops waving below her. Then she had sprung upwards again to the sun itself, and though that leap had caused her to lose her footing, in the moment of falling through the sunny air she did not regret it. The last two or three months had given her more happiness than all the yield of the fat years; they, those few months, had given all that the fat years lacked, of which the absence made them seem so lean. Besides, she could hardly yet believe that she had lost all; she was a woman of a million friends—surely her friends would be friends still. Whatever the Divorce Court might decree, she would be silent, as Mr. Baxter had counselled, disdaining to reply. It was quite true; her story, which had seemed so smooth and pat, was only a tale fit to tell to children. How she herself would have smiled, if Madge had come to her with a history of the kind, expecting to be believed. And then, no doubt, Charlie would soon be free, even as she would. Yet, she had not thought of this before. What interpretation would be put on her proud silence, her disdaining to reply, if she married him?

And if they did not marry? But that she could not bear to contemplate. It was a thing unthinkable.

But on the intrusion of the unthinkable thought, the utter loneliness and desolation of her present position struck Lucia like a blow. Yet that after all was entirely her own fault, for how should anybody know what had happened, and how should anybody know where she was? This morning, according to her plans, no—yesterday morning, according to the plans she had spoken of to Mouse—she was supposed to leave town to go South. Of course, everybody thought she had done so. It was just eleven now; at this moment probably the train by which they were to have travelled was hooting the news of its departure. She wondered what Edgar had done. It would be exactly like his precision to go abroad according to the arrangements that had been made, and photograph the whole coastline of the Riviera. Well, she had done with that.

During that day she telephoned to Madge, intimating a catastrophe, and asking

her to come. The answer came back that she was out of town, but was returning next day, and the message would be delivered. And all that day she sat alone; she dared not go out, for fear Charlie might come in her absence. Also, where was she to go?

Through those long lonely hours, and through the hours of Sunday, the knowledge of what had happened began to sink deeper into her mind, and she found now that though two days ago she had said to herself that the worst had happened, the worst had but begun. At first there had been something even bracing about the shock; she was done for ever, even if the worst came to the worst, with the man she had grown to hate. Or, again, there was the chance that a lawyer might make something out of her feeble little-child-story of how the evening had been passed. That hope was gone now, and though the man she hated was gone, too, she only now began to see what an immense part of her life he had taken with him. She was now no more than she had been in those dreadful, incredible days at Brixham, except only that she carried now a load of infamy and disgrace.

Yet that could not be. There was Charlie; why did he not come to her?

Dusk had fallen before anyone came; soon after Lucia sprang up to greet Madge.

"Oh, Madge, I am glad to see you," she said. "I have been all alone—all, all alone. I want to tell you about it. What are they saying? Tell me what people are saying. Does anybody know yet what has happened?"

Lady Heron looked and was genuinely distressed.

"My dear Lucia," she said, "how could you? Well, well, it is no use asking that. The thing is done. Yes, everybody knows. They are talking of nothing else. You know the world well enough to know that."

"But my friends," cried Lucia, "are they joining in it, do you mean? Are there not any who refuse to listen to such dreadful lies about me? I will tell you the whole story ——"

But Madge stopped her.

"Believe me, that is a mere waste of time," she said quietly. "We have to consider the situation as it is."

"But nobody knows except Charlie and me, and he knows as well as I do——"

And then Lucia stopped. She saw the futility of it all. She knew the uselessness of her little child-tale.

"Who has told them?" she asked.

"Edgar, I should think; he probably told somebody, and after that—on the whole it was best that he should. It is more dreadful if the first thing that the world knows is

that the proceedings have begun. Now what are you thinking of doing? Have you seen Charlie yet? Does he know where you are?"

"Yes, he knows where I am," said Lucia. "I wrote at least to his house and his club telling him."

"And he has not been?"

"No."

The unthinkable thought showed itself again. Lucia sprang up.

"Your silence frightens me, Madge," she said. "What are you thinking of? Do you mean he is going to desert me after leading me into this? It was he all along ——"

Madge gave a long, painful sigh.

"Oh Lucia," she said, "don't you love anybody? Not even him?"

"What do you mean?" asked Lucia. "Isn't it just because I love him that I am so miserable? I don't understand you."

Madge shook her head.

"Then I can't explain," she said. "Now, my dear, let us leave alone all that is irremediable and see what is left. You will not stop in London, I imagine. Have you not some friends or relations in the country to whom you could go? And I suppose you will not defend the case?"

But Lucia shook her head.

"About Charlie," she said; "nothing matters but that. Oh, Madge, do you think ——"

And then for the first time since the crash the tears came. Slow and difficult at first, but soon growing wild and tempestuous. It was long before she in the least recovered herself, and by this time it was late.

"Now you are more yourself, dear, I must go," said Madge. "If you want to see me again, send me word, and I will come if I can."

She would come if she could! She would come if she could! After she had left those words occurred again and again to Lucia, and the meaning of them dawned on her. It was clear enough after a while; she would come if she could do so secretly. She was sure it was that which she meant.

The next day she received a note from Messrs. Shapstone asking her the name and address of her solicitor. In case—so ran the communication—she did not propose to employ a solicitor in the divorce proceedings which were instituted against her Mr. W. M. Shapstone, who was himself waiting below, would request a few minutes' conversation with her.

Lucia sent down to say she would see him; the last time she saw him, she

remembered, he was her guest down at Brayton for a Saturday till Monday.

He was announced, and bowed slightly to her. Somehow that cut Lucia like a whip.

"Please sit down and state your business as shortly as possible," she said.

Mr. Shapstone spoke to the wall apparently, and not to her.

"Lord Brayton wishes me to tell you," he said, "that if you do not defend these proceedings for divorce, he will continue your allowance. If you defend them, he will not."

"That is, he bribes me not to put in a defence," said Lucia.

"You are at liberty to put it any way you choose," said Mr. Shapstone.

That was the first real touch of shame, of humiliation, that Lucia had felt. It was intolerable that this man, who had been her guest, who was one of the crowd whom she had chosen to honour, should inflict this on her. And she had to answer him. He, too, would put his own interpretation on the "disdainful silence."

"I am not proposing to defend the case," she said.

Mr. Shapstone rose at once.

"Thank you, that is all," he said. "Perhaps, if you would give me the shortest possible statement of that on paper, it would be satisfactory to my client. Pray send it at your leisure."

The next day passed without external incident. Lucia wrote the short statement, sent it by hand, and received a formal receipt. All these days she had received no letters; probably they had all been forwarded to the yacht at Marseilles, for Edgar always made the most careful schedule of the destinations to which they should be sent. But on Wednesday morning there was brought up to her with her early tea a letter in a hand she knew well. It was from Maud.

> "Lucia, I think I had better see you. There are things that must be said or written from me to you, and I don't think I could write them. I should not propose an interview which must prove so painful if it were not that I think it necessary. I could come any time to-morrow that you may appoint. I will not write more now except just to say that my heart bleeds and aches for you. Oh, Lucia, Lucia, what misery——"

And then apparently Maud's pen could do no more, and she had left it unsigned.

Lucia had appointed eleven the following morning, but long before that hour she was pacing up and down her room in a suspense that was becoming unbearable. She felt sure that Charlie had seen his wife, and yet Charlie had not seen her. She felt

something had been arranged, and that Maud was going to tell her of it, that Charlie acquiesced in this arrangement whatever it was. But what in God's name could it be, that kept Charlie away from her, and yet made it necessary for Maud to see her?

Then, not so long after eleven, in spite of the fog, her maid came and said that Mrs. Lindsay was outside. And at the thought of Maud, who should presently come in, Maud who from the earliest days had been so true to her, so singly generous, shame, not of exposure, humiliation, but not because she was found out, at last must have touched Lucia a little, for hearing the step outside, she was not able to face her, but flung herself down on her sofa, burying her face in her hands. She heard the door open and shut, but still she could not look up; she felt Maud's presence near her, and presently on her shoulder she felt Maud's hand.

"Lucia, dear Lucia," she said, "I have come."

At that quiet, kind voice once more Lucia wept. But she wept tears that had a little more than self-pity in them.

"I don't think I can bear it," she sobbed; "you had better go, I think. I didn't know it would be like this."

"But I have come to bear it with you," said Maud. "We have both got something to bear, and what you have to bear is so far worse."

Lucia got quieter after a while, and raised her tear-stained face and looked at Maud for the first time.

"But what has happened to you?" she said. "You look so white, so ill. You ought not to have come."

"I couldn't not come," said she. "As soon as I was able to come, I had to see you. But I was not able to come before; it would have done no good. But all that is over, I think—I pray God it is."

"All what?" asked Lucia.

"My anger, my—my hatred of you," said Maud quietly.

There was no use in doubting the simple sincerity of that. Bravely Maud tried to smile, but that was not quite in her power, for her mouth so trembled, and both sat silent again. Then Maud spoke.

"You want to know all that has happened," she said, "and I will tell you. You must give me time, though, for though there is not much to say, it is difficult."

Again she paused.

"I have seen Charlie, of course," she said, "and he has told me everything. It was all his fault, he said, throughout. He told me how all along he made love to you, how—how before the end he fought and laughed at your scruples. He is sorry, he wished me to tell you, for all the wrong he has done to you and to me."

Again Maud paused.

"I sent for him; I said I must see him. I could not speak to a solicitor about what had happened or what was going to happen. And we have come to this arrangement. He is to go away altogether, for six months; he has gone, in fact. He is to communicate neither with you nor me. At the end of six months he will come back, and—and do what he wishes. At least, as far as my part goes he will. If he wishes to—to go to you, I will make that possible. And if he decides to come back to me, I shall take him back. Of course, he did not go until he knew that you did not intend to defend yourself."

Again there was a long pause; this time Lucia broke it.

"It was I who tempted him, and led him on," she said. "I—I. He resisted at first; oh, for a long time he resisted, but I was the stronger. You had better know that, so that if he comes back to you, it will make things easier. And he will come back to you," she said. "In his heart I believe he hated himself for yielding; but, I am beautiful."

Then at the thought of all she had lost, and of the absolute and utter blankness and loneliness that stretched in front of her, all the worst of her nature sprang to the surface, usurping the place of the best. She laughed suddenly and harshly.

"Take my leavings," she said. "Try and make them up into something that is more like a man. I was just his mistress, it appears, to be discarded at his pleasure."

And then she stopped, for she saw Maud's face of agonized despair, saw, too, the gesture of her hand, as if she would keep Lucia off. And Lucia again remembered all that Maud had been, all that she was, and out of the nethermost hell of her own hardness and selfishness she called to her.

"Oh, Maud, forgive me, forgive me," she cried. "If you only knew! You are not wicked, you have not been found out, and it is all that intolerable shame that makes me like this. I want to be sorry for all the wrong I have done; I do want that. And Charlie will come back to you. I know it. And, and I hope you will be happy again. You will have your husband and your child. You love them both."

Maud smiled at her, with hands held out.

"You mustn't separate yourself then, Lucia, from me," she said. "You must bear with my wanting to be friends still. I don't think I can help that. And, dear Lucia, you have told me the fault was yours and not his. You must love somebody to be able to tell me that. And don't despair. Don't think of the long blank years in front of you, or look back on what you have lost. Try—not now, but when you are able to, to make something of what is left. Will you kiss me?"

For a long while they clung to each other in silence.

“I will always come to you if you want me,” said Maud. “And some time you will let me know what you are going to do. But send for me always. There is one thing more. Aunt Cathie wants to know where you are. She wants to see you, too, when you can bear it. And she gave me this letter to give to you.”

After Maud had gone Lucia read Aunt Cathie’s letter.

> “My Dearest Lucia:
>
> “I have heard all that has happened, and I write to say that your room is ready for you whenever you choose to come. I see very few people now, and perhaps you might like to be somewhere where you will not be alone, but where you can, if you wish, see nobody else but me. There will be a room for Maud, too, whenever she likes. Thank God, dear Lucia, you have such a friend. It is very wonderful to have anyone to love you like that. Come soon, dear Lucia, or rather, I hope, you will wish to come soon.
>
> “Your loving Aunt,
>
> “Cathie.”

CHAPTER XX

Lucia came out into the sunbaked garden, and even as she stood for a moment in the little veranda a train shrieked by over the embankment at the end of it. For six months now the garden, the varying conditions of its flower-beds, the degrees of chilliness, of moisture, or of sultry heat had been familiar to her; familiar too was the sight and sound of the rushing train that took the happier folk from one place to another, where joy or pain, or something anyhow, awaited them. She had planted bulbs last November in the flower-beds, and in April had seen them flame into trumpets of daffodils, or a little later into the pure chalices of tulips. But now in June there was no sign left of these fiery presences in the beds, nor in her heart was any comfort from the sight of the spring garden. She had planted roses also, which were in bud to-day; she had planted clematis that was beginning to put forth its purple stars in a night of green leaves; she had planted pyramids of sweet-peas which were twining juicy stalks about the brushwood that supported them. All this she had done in hope, but the hope that she had dug into the soil was now known by her to be barren. It would never spring up; it was dead; there was no hope any more.

She had scarcely set foot during all these six months outside the house and the garden. Once or twice she had gone into Brixham, but on each of these occasions someone, whose face she just remembered but no more, had crossed the road when she came near, or had gone by her with quick step, and a set wooden smile, and eyes that did not see her. A very little of that was enough for Lucia, and she had her remedy easy to take; there was no need that she should go out into the town at all. Miss Lucia Grimson was her name; she looked after Aunt Cathie. Once a young woman with a child toddling beside her came out of the shop which she was passing. Lucia could not remember her name, nor had she heard that she was married. But without doubt she was the girl who had given her the orange-coloured salvia that still flourished in the garden and had planted it with her, while Aunt Cathie watered freely. But to-day this young mother, on seeing Lucia, had turned quickly to her child.

"Oh, take care, my darling," she had said, "there is a step."

But there was no step, and Lucia quite understood. And when she got home that day she plucked up every one of the orange salvias.

She had not written to Maud; she had not written to anybody. All that could be offered to her, she felt, must be offered out of pity, and the gift, made in pity, was impossible to accept. But through all these six months she had kept alive a little flame of hope, though all the time she believed that she cherished and blew on a wick that

had long ago been quenched. Charlie, as had been arranged, was to go away for six months, and communicate neither with her nor with Maud; and during those six months Lucia had deliberately cut herself off from Maud also. Maud could do nothing for her; it was not Maud she wanted. By the arrangement that had been made, Charlie would choose between them—that was what it amounted to. It was, therefore, little wonder that in the interval Lucia found it impossible to be in correspondence with her friend. Nor could she see her; the room that was always ready for Maud was always empty.

This afternoon, when she came into the hot, familiar restrictedness of the garden, she knew her fate. She had seen in the *Morning Post*, which Aunt Cathie still took in for the sake of its small paragraphs, that Mr. and Mrs. Charles Lindsay had arrived in town for the remainder of the season. That was quite enough; Maud's letter which arrived by the second post could tell her no more than that. So that was settled; it was all over, and for her there would never be anything more than she had now.

And then she knew how she had built upon the hope, even though she had told Maud she knew to which of them Charlie would go; she knew that in her heart she had never accepted that which now she was bound to accept. And therefore hitherto she had looked on this dreadful nightmare of a garden as a hotel garden, from which she would move to go elsewhere. But now it was no hotel garden; such as it was, it was the garden of her home. There was at least no other home.

No; that which had been familiar but temporary had to take another aspect. It was permanent. Had it proved that Charlie would join her, she would have gone away, lived the pleasant Bohemian life which was possible to people in their position, with the gaiety that she had taken the trouble to keep alive in her nature. London, even London, was not impossible. She felt sure that she could have managed to collect round her a set who would have been as infected with her supreme vitality and with her happiness as were the people she had moved among before. Many of these, too, would have come quietly. She could have made without effort an amusing home, for her spring, her enjoyment of things, was not impaired. She could have climbed to another tree, and been at the top of that. Of course, it would have been annoying to know that she could not go to many houses where her presence before had been so much desired—the making of the evening. But plenty of those people—such was the innate hypocrisy of the English—would have come quietly to her house. She would have gone quietly to theirs.

But now all that was over; she was left lonely and bitter. She had read Maud's letter, and though it was Maud all through, she had no use for it. It was just such a

letter as Maud would have written if Charlie had decided otherwise. But he had not decided otherwise. Therefore a heel and a garden bed were sufficient for it.

So all this feverish employment, to pass away the weeks till Charlie decided, was over. There was nothing to be done, except to use up the time of the years. There were many of them. There was much time in each, and she was young and strong and healthy. Years ago she had grudged other people the time that they did not coin into enjoyment. Now she was on the other side. She, too, had time for which she had no use, and she would have sold it very cheap.

It was impossible to go into the garden, so fiercely did the heat reverberate from the baking walls. Aunt Cathie, as usual, had gone upstairs to rest after lunch; she would not appear till four. Then they would walk down to the kitchen-garden and see how the artichokes were doing. They might even find enough strawberries to make their dessert in the evening, but Aunt Cathie always said she would rather have none at all than not have a "dish" of them. Raspberries promised well also, for Lucia had sewed up the holes in the nets that defended them from the birds.

She went into the drawing-room, and sat there a little. It was not worth while reading, it was not worth while playing the piano, it was decidedly not worth while doing nothing. But there was a cupboard underneath the front stairs, which Aunt Cathie had said "wanted" cleaning out. Lucia had deliberately hoarded up that piece of employment, but she thought she might as well use it now.

The cupboard certainly did "want" to be cleaned out. A net of spider's web had been spun over the door, and from inside came a damp, mildewy odour. On the top of a miscellaneous heap of papers and débris was a cardboard box, oblong; and, opening it, Lucia found it to contain a dozen lawn-tennis balls. Moths had eaten into their covers, but beyond doubt it was the box of balls that Aunt Cathie had once bought for her birthday present.

Lucia remembered it all—remembered, too, the games of lawn tennis, how Aunt Cathie used to throw up ball after ball, and fail to hit them altogether. These were they; moth-eaten now, mouldy.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *The Climber* by E. F. (Edward Frederic) Benson]