WINDLE-STRAWS

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TO
MY HUSBAND

WINDLESTRAWS

CHAPTER I

JEAN ARBUTHNOT stood on the steps of Claridge's Hotel, feeling uncomfortably small.

She hadn't minded the mysterious Turk who had suggested himself as a pupil desiring to master the English language by travelling abroad with her. It wasn't poor Miss Pratt the agent's fault that foreigners were often fishy.

A cool English manner and a History First had easily disposed of the Turk's olive complexion and melting chocolate eyes.

Jean had simply looked along her nose and dropped ice into her voice and the thing was over. But Lady Margaret Hamilton, whose daughter was a leading society beauty, and who would be sure to know how much Jean's clothes had cost, would be a sterner ordeal.

'She can't eat me,' Jean told herself doubtfully, feeling as she did so that cannibalism would be the lesser evil.

'And if I've got to go back to Carrie, I've got to--I'd rather sleep in a barrel, of course. But Diogenes had a different sort of climate.'

She sniffed once more at the acute, familiar drizzle smelling drearily of soot and petrol which was what she chiefly knew of London, before she faced the deep-upholstered, vaguely scented hotel lounge. She was, as she had expected to be, standing there with a dripping umbrella, steadily ignored by half a dozen well-dressed women; but after the porter had dealt with her name and removed the offending umbrella, one of the repellent women lowered her copy of the 'Times' and looked across the lounge with a good-natured sparkle in her frosty blue eyes. Lady Margaret's manner seemed to expect that people would be sent to see her, but promised that, when they came, they would be pleasantly treated.

'You must have been told to come here by Miss Pratt, weren't you?' she

demanded, holding out her hand without getting up. 'She seems a sensible woman and she hasn't sent me dozens of unsuitable girls; in fact, you're the first, and I dare say you aren't unsuitable! Won't you sit down?' Jean sat down. She began to feel less frightened.

Lady Margaret was not formidable unless she meant to be; her age was non-committal and her beauty had been hers so long that she knew exactly what to do with it. When she smiled, her teeth, of which she had a right to be proud, shone dazzlingly. She wouldn't have minded telling anyone that she was over fifty and had had none of them out.

'I hope you don't object to questions,' she began, 'I've promised my daughter not to leave a stone unturned. It's not for myself, you know, that I want you. I've not been accustomed to a secretary; when I was young and busy, the world was smaller and quieter and we did things for ourselves. But you won't mind that! You'll find Windlestraws more amusing than Tunbridge Wells!

'Her house is always full of visitors, and somebody is always up to something; and then, of course, you'll be in Town for the season. I can't afford the season now, but my daughters are well married.

'I sit at home with a box of Mudie books and a curate.

'You look as if you'd do for Beatrice, but one can't tell by looks alone, can one? Poor Beatrice is quite good-looking herself, but she doesn't mind having a pretty girl in the house.

'What she really wants is some one who'll be a stay and a prop.

'She hates writing notes and looking up people's trains. They never come by the ones you choose, of course; and then they think it's your fault if the connections aren't good. But the most important thing, of course, is to get Sir Reginald into Parliament.

'Wasn't your father a Professor or something?'

Jean admitted that her father still was a more or less famous Egyptologist, and that, as she was accustomed to looking up obscure statistics, she might probably be trusted to deal with trains. She had been his secretary for several years, she had helped him with his lectures, she had even written and published several articles. She ought to have been a teacher, but she hadn't liked teaching--and, until her father's second marriage, she had kept his house.

She didn't blame her father for marrying again; he was only fifty and had been a widower for ten years when he shattered Jean's life and his own by the abrupt introduction of Carrie.

Lady Margaret's sympathetic, compelling eyes reproduced the image of this frank disaster. Carrie seemed to stand there before them, till her bangles rattled. She was a large, strident blonde, without an idea, but with a lovely complexion, quantities of cheap clothes, and a preference, which she instantly

put into execution, for filling the house with little silver boxes.

'The only way to escape a second marriage,' Lady Margaret observed kindly, 'is to avoid making a first! There's nothing--especially for men--so vulnerable as widowhood. However old men are and however wise, they want a second wife much as a baby wants a dummy if it can't get a bottle! A dummy isn't the same thing as a bottle, of course, but it soothes the nerves.

'I dare say your stepmother is quite impossible, but she's sure to keep your father quiet!'

Jean sighed; perhaps Lady Margaret was right, but then she didn't know how intensely quiet her father had been before the advent of Carrie. Hadn't he liked, as much as Jean herself liked, the dim pleasant home full of leather armchairs and tobacco smoke? He had made, and must have enjoyed the incisive, impersonal talk which had drawn enthralled undergraduates and austere but constant dons continually to their door? The new Mrs. Arbuthnot had reduced these talks to spasmodic mutterings. The dons melted away as only dons can melt, and even the undergraduates, their kind of undergraduates, grew rapidly less. No doubt Carrie would soon find an audience for her brawling, prodding personalities punctuated by shrieks of good-natured laughter; ribs of the kind that like being dug would present themselves for that purpose in sufficient quantities; but Jean confessed to Lady Margaret that she had a desperate desire to keep her ribs intact.

'She promised,' Jean explained, 'to marry me off in a jiffy, and I don't think that's the kind of way I at all want to *be* married.'

'You will, when you're in love,' Lady Margaret suggested. 'Marriage is like the dentist's, you know--you hate the idea unless you have a toothache--and then the sooner you're off the better! But you're young yet, and I've never hurried my own girls. They did what they thought they wanted and I took good care that they should be too well brought up to want to marry a poor man; that's all you can do for young people nowadays. Do you know anything about politics?'

Jean admitted that she had studied them with a certain seriousness, but she saw in a flash that politics as a science hadn't quite been what Lady Margaret meant.

'Reggie,' said Lady Margaret thoughtfully, 'hunts and shoots most of the time, and only reads about Test matches. Still he's very sound on politics, and I think he only wants his thoughts sorted out a little and put together smartly. You know what I mean?'

Jean hesitated. She tried to make her eyes express reassurance and an ability to be smart with Sir Reginald's ideas, which she was far from feeling.

Lady Margaret went on more thoughtfully still. 'One can see that you aren't a frump and that's all to the good, but they simply can't in their house do with a

God-forsaken idiot; and if you don't mind my saying so, girls have such idiotic lapses--even the clever ones! Perhaps the clever ones are the worst!'

'What kind of lapses?' Jean cautiously inquired.

'Oh, the usual lapses!' Lady Margaret exclaimed impatiently. 'They break their tiresome little hearts and lose their silly little heads the moment a good-looking young man takes the trouble to say "Boo!" to them.'

Jean stiffened a little, and ventured to remind Lady Margaret that she was, after all, twenty-four and had won a History First; but Lady Margaret waved her Honors degree to one side as if university attainments were mere twaddle from an underworld; and she refused to consider twenty-four as any age at all.

'The great thing,' Lady Margaret added more mildly, 'is that you're a lady, and as far as I can tell *not* a poop. Are you used to men?'

'I've seen far more of them than of women,' Jean assured her. 'You see, they came in and out a good deal at home. But of course they came to see father!'

'Ah, that isn't what I mean at all!' Lady Margaret disconcertingly exclaimed. 'They aren't, in my sense of the word, *men* unless they're in love with you! Still, it can't be helped. You're not in the least like anything they've ever seen at Windlestraws, but I dare say a change'll be good for them. You dress quite nicely, too! You'll find Beatrice perfectly easy to get on with. She was considered the best cross-country rider in the Pytchley before her marriage. She's got more brains than that racing crowd they're in with now. Racing people are mostly only *just* all there, you know, and as hard as nails into the bargain! But you'll find Beatrice *most* kind-hearted--and she reads memoirs. She's a good mother, too, and *far* cleverer than Reggie.

'Still, I think that's such a pity, don't you, even if a woman can hide it? It's so good for men to be cleverer than their wives, and makes them far better husbands! You can't expect a man to be true to you, can you, if you think he's a fool?'

Jean hesitated; in the world she lived in brains were not considered a disadvantage, nor were they capable of being hidden in order to make their owners more attractive.

If she had married a fool, her father would simply have considered that she was one.

'Perhaps,' she said cautiously, 'Sir Reginald has a different *kind* of brain from his wife?'

'He hasn't one at all,' said Lady Margaret impatiently, 'but he has twenty thousand a year and that ought to be enough for any woman!'

Jean, who didn't agree with her, said nothing. She was glad that she had been brought up to say nothing and look intelligent for hours at a time; but she was surprised to find that Lady Margaret saw through her.

'You will think so when you're older!' Lady Margaret said, with a disconcerting smile. 'I shouldn't be surprised if you found Windlestraws rather amusing.

'It's good riding country; and although Reggie owns such a lot of land his mother's money quite keeps the wolf from the door. Her father, old Sir William Prout, you know, made a fortune out of yeast. I always tell Beatrice that accounts for a lot.'

Jean took this as perhaps the best moment which had yet presented itself for dropping an embarrassed plea to be told her salary.

Lady Margaret hunted up a letter which was hidden under the 'Times' and read out loud, though perhaps she hadn't intended to, '*Not* a professional siren, of course, but she must have looks and breeding enough not to be a bore.'

She covered this hurriedly by adding, 'Three hundred a year and at least a month's holiday.' 'It sounds absurdly little,' Lady Margaret murmured apologetically. 'But it'll cover your expenses and there'll be extras. They're really rather nice to people who work for them.' Three hundred a year was what the Turk had offered Jean, but he, like Lady Margaret, had hinted that there might be extras. It was a salary to jump at if you were living in.

Jean hesitated no longer, she said: 'If you think I'll do----'

Lady Margaret smiled reassuringly. 'They'll be as pleased as punch to have a clever girl like you in the house!' she said encouragingly. 'Oughtn't you to have a glass of milk or something?'

It had suddenly dawned on Lady Margaret that a girl who really wanted three hundred a year as a salary would probably be hungry.

But Jean explained to her gravely that her immediate needs were satisfied, and asked in her turn when she was to go to Windlestraws. Lady Margaret dived once more into her daughter's letter, but this time she studied with greater caution the decisive, clearly marked handwriting, which filled four sides of a sheet. Beatrice was, Lady Margaret explained, wonderfully business-like. The money she made out of pigs was simply extraordinary. She'd explained everything most thoroughly and even enclosed a cheque for Jean's fares.

'The car will meet you at Ashcomb,' Lady Margaret went on. 'It's an enchanting place--if you like scenery, you know. Beatrice has a nice garden. She goes in for roses; they work in wonderfully with the pigs--there has to be such heaps of manure; and whenever there's a show her "teas" get the first prize. It's so good for all the poor people in the neighbourhood.' Lady Margaret's eyes had begun to wear a faintly glazed look, and to wander speculatingly about the lounge.

Jean rose to depart and the glaze vanished. 'I do hope I'll do,' Jean murmured shyly, 'but I'm so afraid I shan't be clever enough!'

Lady Margaret rose, too; there was a hint of raillery in the kind smile she gave Jean. 'What you don't know,' she said decisively, 'I dare say you'll learn at Windlestraws; it's rather a good place for picking things up.'

CHAPTER II

It had all to be done in a rush--a few hours to buy clothes, barely an hour to pack them. A letter of explanation written to her father, which didn't explain anything at all, except the decent front he would expect any daughter of his to put upon a wound. The nervous farewell kindness of an aunt, who was inclined to think all ways of earning your living for a girl were dangerous and even faintly immoral; and then the innocuous jolting swiftness of a railway journey--into an unknown world.

Jean had always wanted to see Dartmoor, but although she drove through it now she could hardly be said to see it. A large and powerful car possessed itself of her and her luggage with a celestial sleight-of-hand, and whipped her across the moor over a white road like a flying ribbon. She had a vague impression of bleached heather and ghostly ling. She saw grey stones against a pale sky, and here and there a patch of gorse ran like flame over the rusty earth.

The rest of the drive was a jumble of speed and her own fears.

Suddenly the white road, which seemed engraved into the landscape, slipped out of the moor, the car raced through a small grey town, turned down a mossy road deep in flowered hedges, and stood still for a minute before the big stone gates of a park.

An avenue of solemn beeches closed over the car; deer, slender and archaic, flickered between the stems as noiselessly as light. The air, half moor and half sea, was as sweet as honey.

The beeches led up to and then fell abruptly away from a grass-grown terrace on which stood an old Tudor house, with long silvery lines and a gabled roof. The thin windows, ribbed with stone, looked as if they had been touched by frost.

Dropped close by on the smooth velvet lawn, like a kindly afterthought, was a demure fourteenth-century church.

The front door opened as if by magic before the car stopped, and revealed a grave elderly butler as austere and protective as the avenue of beeches.

'Her Ladyship is in the rose-garden,' he announced, 'and hopes that you will come out to her.'

Jean crossed a hall which seemed silently alive with the peering eyes of dark portraits. She was taken through a doorway which opened out upon a lawn fringed with copper beeches. The butler paused for a moment to indicate a path which led to a dark yew hedge. 'The rose garden is on the other side of the hedge, Madam,' he said with a dignity which seemed to limit him to the house and leave Jean to find her own way about the lesser decencies of the

garden. Jean obediently followed the path to where stiff clipped peacocks crowned a flight of steps. She looked down from the top of the steps onto a sunk garden which held an acre of roses--coppery, orange, rose, carmine, shell-pink, palest ivory, and deepest gold--spreading before her like a horde of goblin jewels.

Through the riot of colour Jean caught a glimpse of a flagged open space in the centre, where a tall girl stood by a tea-table, a girl in cream and orange, whose own bloom and texture challenged the background of the roses.

Beatrice Falconer looked across the sea of petals with a welcoming smile. Her beauty outstripped comparison; she was a new sensation.

The eyes which looked into Jean's were as blue as rain-washed scyllas, the eyebrows above them were dark, but very delicate and arched, her low Greek forehead was crowned by waving chestnut hair. Beatrice's colouring was as fine as the pink and white of old Sèvres, but her skin did not remind Jean of china; it had the soft freshness of windblown flowers.

The lines of her face were upward, slanting lines like the subtle curves of a Leonardo Madonna. When Beatrice smiled dimples came on each side of her pointed chin and lit her stately beauty into the light secretive laughter of a Faun.

Beatrice hoped that Jean didn't mind having tea out of doors? She drew a chair forward, and hoped that Jean didn't mind roses? But she gave Jean tea among the roses whether she minded them or not.

'I know I ought to have seen you in town,' she said, 'but I hated it so. I wanted to come back to my roses. They're nearly over of course, but I like to be with them as long as they last. They're so much less disappointing than people, I think, don't you, and ever so much sooner over. I do hope the tea is hot?'

Jean murmured that it was. She wanted to go on talking about the satisfactions of roses and the falling short of human beings. But Beatrice disposed of the abstract, quicker than she disposed of tea. There was decision in her every movement, but when she wasn't doing something decided she kept remarkably still.

Her tall figure gave the impression of slenderness, but there was nothing frail about her. She held her head erect and buoyant; her back was straight as a wand, the long firm lines of her thighs were supple and full of vigour. She had the small pointed breasts of an amazon on a Greek frieze.

'Mother has written pages about you!' Beatrice observed with laughing eyes. 'Poor you! She must have put you through a mangle! But there's the less need for me to bother you now! She tells me she's told you about Reggie too! He'll need a good deal of coaching! He's never made speeches before. He knows a lot about horses, but I'm afraid that won't be much of a help, will it?

Still you'll see what you can do with him. It must be nice to be so awfully clever!'

'I think it would be much nicer,' said Jean, laughing back, 'if you didn't think I was! I'm so afraid I shall let you down. All I can do really is to collect facts and to make the best of them; but Sir Reginald will have to deal with the speeches when they are made, and how am I to know that anything I can do will suit him?'

'Oh, Reggie's awfully easy to please!' Beatrice said, looking carefully into the tea-pot, 'and all you'll have to do really is to prevent his coming croppers. Archie says--he's our chief Whip, you know--that all Reggie needs is a little intelligent handling. This is quite an easy constituency and his family have always run it. He won't go wrong about agriculture, he farms a lot of his own land, and none of the farmers about here are red, thank God. About animals of course, he's always perfectly safe. Do you play bridge?'

Jean said she did; and something in Beatrice's speculative eyes, now raised from the tea-pot, made her feel that it was a mercy. It was important that she should be able to handle her work, but it occurred to Jean that perhaps work at Windlestraws wasn't as important as bridge. There was a plea in Beatrice's slow provocative smile, as if what she really hoped was to arouse in Jean a certain form of friendliness. She wouldn't ask for any direct response, nor would she perhaps go very far out of her way to win it. Under the cloak of her humility lurked a glacier region of cold pride. But friendship of some sort or other was what she really wanted.

She was, her beautiful vague eyes seemed to say to Jean, after all, only another girl.

Beatrice was silent for a long comfortable moment, while Jean took in her employer's unexpressed desire. If Beatrice was really going to like her it would make the bleak expanse of Sir Reginald's political innocence nothing worse than a game. Jean was not shy in a tied-up uncomfortable manner; she had courage and beneath her silence her judgment went on acting. She was more capable of knowing what Beatrice thought of her than Beatrice was of knowing what Jean thought of Beatrice. Jean drank her tea; and enjoyed, without attempting to match, the sophisticated repose of Lady Falconer's manner, a repose that had never been shaken by a doubt, nor breathed on by an adverse air. She saw that Beatrice felt at no disadvantage because of what she didn't know; she knew that what she didn't know couldn't really matter. Her beauty made her silences as important as speech and much less troublesome; but it was not an unconscious beauty, it paved the way for her speeches. When she did talk, Beatrice cut her conversation as an inspired dressmaker cuts expensive materials without the need of a pattern. The shape was in her mind; and it was sometimes a little alarming to watch the ruthless decision with

which Beatrice wielded her conversational shears.

'I hope you'll like Devon,' Beatrice announced when her friendly comfortable pause had lasted long enough. 'It's my county as well as Reggie's, but we come from the sea. My brother's place is twenty miles off, but he and Reggie don't get on. The children are on the sands now. I hope you don't mind children?' Beatrice smiled sympathetically across the table at Jean as if she were willing to give up her family at a moment's notice should they seriously inconvenience her new secretary.

Jean assured her that this drastic sacrifice was not required of her. She did, as a rule, like children--but not in the lump. She liked them individually in the way she liked--if she did like--grown-up people.

'Oh, much better than that, I hope!' said Beatrice quickly. 'We're all so much nicer when we're young. One ought to like children and make them happy, don't you think? Later on one can't; and then they'd be so sold if they'd never had any happiness. I was a frightfully happy child, and it's helped me to put up with a lot since.'

Beatrice's eyes wandered over the goblin jewels to the stately silvery house. Windlestraws hardly seemed a possession which required much putting up with. There was in the long slim lines of the building, the definite roof, the thin straight windows, a mingling of force and grace, singularly like the force and grace of Beatrice herself. Surely she had the right setting for the supreme gift of her loveliness?

'I've got three children,' Beatrice dropped after an odd little sigh. 'Oliver--that's my boy--is the youngest; and then there's Bridget and Anne. They're really rather nice little girls, but Oliver's the betterlooking. Such a pity, don't you think? For looks are so wasted on a man. You'll see for yourself what they're like. I'm awfully fond of having them with me. That's why I really need some one to help me in the house. I want everything to be rather tidy and clean; and servants, if you don't look after them, do nothing but sit in the kitchen and eat lumps of meat. Just now we haven't anybody here but ourselves; but on Saturday there'll be about fourteen for the shooting. Do you mind my asking if you're engaged to be married or anything?'

'Not even anything!' Jean murmured with decision, 'and certainly not engaged.'

'That's rather odd,' said Beatrice with amused eyes, 'though very sensible! But you're awfully good-looking to have been left so much to yourself! I think it's a mistake getting married too soon. Of course in the end you'll have to; people who don't are in such a hole when they get old and ill; but marriage is a dog's life. Still a love-affair is quite different--it keeps you from hankering!'

'But I don't hanker!' Jean protested. Beatrice's amusement deepened, first one and then the other of the dimples made their enchanting appearance.

'Perhaps not now,' she said, 'but you can't tell when you'll begin, can you? There isn't any known antidote to falling in love--not even being in love with somebody else already, though I admit that's the stoutest protection! Well! I suppose you'll have to manage the best way you can--like the rest of us! The house is always full of men. Lock your door at night--and don't come to me with stories! It's so awkward to have to know things about one's guests--and besides, I may have my hands full with my own little troubles!'

Jean longed to say that she knew how to keep men at a distance and to prevent stories. But defence on the subject of love is often only an opening for a more dangerous attack; and after all, could she be sure, in a world where doors had to be locked at night, of the security she'd always known in the placid non-inflammable atmosphere of her father's house? Even then her father, poor dear, had been caught by the wandering flame of Carrie; perhaps Beatrice was right after all, and there was no immunity from love. She returned to Beatrice's less personal remark with an instinct that it might be more enlightening, and would involve her less.

'Why do you say that marriage is a dog's life?' she demanded. Beatrice laughed.

'Perhaps I should have said a cat and dog life!' she amended. 'When it isn't a fight--it's a bore! It's bad enough to want anything from a person you don't happen to be living with, isn't it? But to have to live with a person who wants what you don't, or won't want what you do, does demand rather a lot from one's morals and one's manners! However I admit that marriage is a bore one gets used to, and there are bores one doesn't! So don't let me put you off a disagreeable necessity!'

Jean reflected that she could hardly be put off what she was so little on; but she had an uncomfortable feeling that either she was going to feel sorry for Beatrice (whom she already liked far too much to wish to have to pity) or she was going to dislike being forced to form such a poor opinion of Sir Reginald.

She felt that she was moving about in a world she didn't realize and that there was nothing to count on but Beatrice's aloof yet genuine kindness.

Jean wanted, even more than she had expected to want, to please Beatrice; and it was a relief to feel sure that Beatrice wouldn't easily take an adverse view of a subordinate. She might, Jean thought, be terrible if you failed her; but she wouldn't expect you to fail her. She'd give you plenty of rope, and make her wishes and the way to carry them out perfectly plain. 'I won't fail her!' Jean said to herself firmly. 'I won't fall in love--and even if I have to, she shan't be bothered by it! She'll find that she can fill the house from floor to ceiling with Apollo Belvederes--and yet I'll stick to my job!'

But Jean had already fallen in love without knowing it. She was in love with Beatrice's clear voice, her motionless sculptured hands, her chiselled

eyelids, and her sidelong, haunting smile. Jean knew well enough that no soul could be as beautiful as the lips Beatrice's soul spoke through, and she doubted if Beatrice's heart was anything like so tender as the innocent azure of her eyes; but her own heart had slipped, without a flicker of hesitation, into Beatrice's empty, undesirous hands.

Beatrice rose slowly to her feet and fingered a basket half filled with dead roses, which lay on the table beside her.

She had given up an hour of her time to making this girl like her; and she saw that the girl did like her; so her time hadn't been wasted and she might now return to clipping the heads off the roses. On the whole Beatrice liked dead roses better than living girls.

A man strolled towards them across the lawn, accompanied by his own gigantic shadow. He stood for a moment silhouetted against the darkness of the hedge; the sunshine made him look a dazzling figure.

He came unsmilingly through the sea of petals towards them, and stood by Beatrice's side without a word.

He was not so gigantic as he had looked on the steps, but he was a head and shoulders taller than Beatrice, his black hair curled obstinately, though it was cut short and perpetually smoothed down by hard brushes and cold water. His deep-set grey eyes had an irritated, homeless look, his sensitive curved lips were strengthened by the heavy line of his jaw; he had a cleft square chin which jutted out a little; and the expression of a man who had never asked for peace in his time and would not have known what to do with it if it had been offered him.

Beatrice said 'Tea,' and he said 'Thanks, I've had it.' There was a perceptible pause before either of them spoke again. It was as if, at their meeting, time was always necessary before the shock of a pleasure so intense could be assimilated. The two tall figures stood three feet apart, they hardly looked at each other, but Jean felt as if the whole physical universe had altered to meet the intensity of their passion.

A chill wind blew through the garden, the sunlight vanished, and the colour lay dead on the roses. Beatrice spoke at last. 'This is my cousin, Major Ramsay,' she said. 'Miss Arbuthnot. I'm taking her to her room,' she added in a voice that had changed to music. 'I'll come back.'

Ian Ramsay said nothing at all. He bowed to Jean with a brief indifferent glance, and stood rooted to the steps where Beatrice had left him. But Beatrice herself seemed hardly to have left him; as she turned away from him, the sudden flowering softness of her beauty was eclipsed.

Jean felt as if she were being accompanied to the house by a gesture, not by the hand which made it.

Her room was full of the scent of flowers, a soft meticulous bloom was

upon the furniture, the deep yielding carpet was a luxury to her feet. Nothing had been forgotten which could minister to her comfort.

Beatrice herself had given the finishing touches to everything and had made the bedroom look as much as possible like the garden they had left.

She glanced about it now with desultory but observant glances. 'I hope you'll be comfortable,' she said. 'Ring for anything you want. You'll meet my husband at dinner. He's Ian's greatest friend. They fought together in France for four years. I believe they saved each other's lives. They got wounded and decorated together, and I supposed they'd get killed together. But they both came back instead. Ian's frightfully clever--he reads Shakespeare and he found a way of making bricks on our estate which has helped us to meet the awful taxation. He's usually here, but he has a home in the village. The children adore him. Sims will unpack for you. Dinner's at eight.'

Beatrice lingered for a moment as if there was something more she wanted to say before she reached the door, but nothing came.

She was gone with no more than the deepening of her sudden sidelong smile.

CHAPTER III

THE deep reverberating roar of the gong rolled through the house. Reggie had picked it up from a Buddhist monastery in Burma where it was meant to indicate the speechless passion of a god. He had thought it just the thing for a dinner-bell.

Jean stood alone at the top of the staircase; below her stretched the shadowy beauty of the big hall.

She had never before been in a house where space had so much character. The fine lines of an ancient craftsmanship were very little interfered with by time, and still less by the Falconers. Falconers always left well alone; what they accumulated went with what they already had, and if they acquired a contrast like the Burmese gong, it was only for the sake of making it serve their own more usual purposes.

Jean wondered, as she stood there, half afraid to go down into the twilight of the hall and half afraid to miss whatever the gong had sounded for if she stayed up, rather ruefully what she herself had been acquired for. Would she fit in with their vague flawless code? Could she be used like the gong was, only more silently, to improve their already perfect order? She hadn't been able to say a word to the magnificent young man in the garden, and if Reggie Falconer was built on the same scale what on earth was he likely to make of her? She shivered with horror as she thought of a bold blond giant yearning to get rid of her--and perhaps too polite to know how.

But she reminded herself that this wouldn't matter, Beatrice would get rid of her for him soon enough. She'd be just as startlingly beautiful and kind as she had been in engaging her--if Jean really was engaged--but perhaps a shade more definite. She'd make it seem as if unfortunately they'd failed to do for Jean what she always hoped they could do, not in the least that Jean hadn't herself come up to the scratch; but Jean would go just the same.

A door opened softly and Beatrice stood beside her, like a lilac tree in the moonlight, dressed in shimmering amethyst and silver.

'We're both frightfully early,' she said in her sociable intimate way. 'I usually go to see the children now. They ought to be asleep, but they won't be till I've seen them. Would you care to come too?'

They seemed to walk for a long way, through a gallery and up a staircase. 'This is a new wing,' Beatrice explained, 'but I would have it--though I've ruined the windows. Children must have air and light. The architect nearly wept when I told him what I wanted--he said it would break the Tudor line. I awfully like old houses--but flesh and blood matters more, don't you think? Ah, this is Mrs. Meadows. Mrs. Meadows, this is Miss Arbuthnot.'

A large and tranquil woman rose up in front of them. She stood like a pyramid in a desert--a vast solidity of bulk. She was spotlessly starched and had a manner as complete as that of a bench of bishops.

The day nursery was a long, empty, cornerless room; a frieze of rabbits and birds decorated the walls; under foot was a sparrow-egg-blue linoleum on which no dust could lie.

There were big cupboards for toys, a dresser filled with dwarf nursery china, a rocking-horse, a doll's house as large as a small cottage, and a motor van. Three small painted chairs with low tables attached to them reminded Jean of the tale of the three bears. The door stood open into a shadowy room beyond.

Jean wondered if she ought to address Mrs. Meadows, but she didn't dare. Mrs. Meadows looked like a being to whom all forms of address were as clear cut as the rules of a game, one of those quiet subtle games which if you do not know how to play you had better leave alone.

At their entrance, Mrs. Meadows had risen majestically from an armchair by the carefully guarded fireplace, and she stood before them in a sublime calm which neither speech nor silence could shake.

'We can go in, I suppose?' dropped Beatrice.

'Certainly, your Ladyship, you can go in,' said Mrs. Meadows in a deep impressive voice. 'They're not yet asleep.'

Jean suddenly realized that Mrs. Meadows' submission covered the spirit of revolt. Mrs. Meadows didn't want them to go in and Beatrice knew she didn't; but the odd part of it was that Beatrice, though she was going in, came as near defeat as she was ever likely to come; she said almost coaxingly, 'I shan't stay long, Nannie,' to which Mrs. Meadows replied nothing at all. A silvery voice cried 'Mummy!' and in a flash Beatrice was gone.

Then Mrs. Meadows really spoke. She said, looking indulgently at the open door, 'Her Ladyship takes great pleasure in running in and out. Her Ladyship was one of my babies, Miss. A most beautiful child she was, but one to have her own way, and Master Oliver is like her. If you go through this door, Miss, you'll find a room to the right leading out of it--Master Oliver's--and one to the left, which is the young ladies'. You'll find her Ladyship in Master Oliver's room.'

After Mrs. Meadows had spoken Jean had an odd feeling that she could never be quite so afraid of anything in the house again.

She opened the door to the right and saw Beatrice on her knees by a little blue bed, her arms round a boy who was like a Bellini angel.

They were hugging each other with a starved ecstasy of joy.

Oliver was five; the rush of his eager words a little inconvenienced him at times; then he fell back on his beautiful helpless smiles and waving hands.

'Your jingles in the ear hurt,' he exclaimed, drawing away from the head bent over him.

Without moving, his mother dashed her amethyst and pearl ear-rings on to the floor; and it struck Jean that anything, however precious, which came between them would be flung off with the same recklessness.

'Here's a lady to see you,' Beatrice said, drawing herself up at last and sitting on the bed beside him. 'Her big name's Miss Arbuthnot but her little one's Jean. To-morrow you must show her everything, the pony and the dogs and the rabbits.'

Oliver nodded gravely, lifting celestial starry eyes to Jean. 'Only me,' he said firmly, 'only my dogs, my pony, only my 'abbits.'

His mother drew her fingers through his short crisp curls, trying to disguise her tenderness. 'Oh, no!' she said. 'Anne and Bridget must do their showing too! You can do it together.'

"N I won't show her noffin'!' said Oliver with a sudden alarming scowl.

'What are their names?' pleaded Jean, trusting that the privilege of Adam might shatter his vivid egoism.

'Names noffin'!' repeated Oliver stoutly.

'Well, your own pony----' compromised Beatrice.

'You can show her that quite alone; and its name is----'

Oliver, mollified, took the words out of her mouth.

'Its name's Merryfought, like chickens have when you wish a wish--and I'm going to hunt him next season with Uncle Ian.'

Beatrice had recovered her serene calmness. She let the vexed question of hunting slide. They discussed Merrythought at length, his height, his pace, his jumping powers--and Jean, who had never ridden in her life, watched without participation the perfect unity of their minds. A brief transition produced prayers.

Oliver kneeled with his head against Beatrice's heart, her arms round him, and dashed through the verse of a hymn; his concentration was on speed, and he kicked out a shell-pink foot behind him to emphasize it.

Then he briefly blessed his family by name--the sequence interested Jean. Nannie followed Mummy, then Uncle Ian, Bridget, Anne, and Daddy. He explained to Jean briefly over his mother's shoulder; 'Now my own prayer--I make it new everly night. "Pray God make my pony, my dog, and my 'abbits mine forever and ever. Amen."'

The blue-pyjamaed, shell-pink figure bounded back into the nest of bedclothes. 'Bend over me!' he ordered his mother. Beatrice stooped to kiss him; in a moment his arms held her fast. 'Now 'oo can't ever go!' he cried exultantly. 'That's my trick! Love makes 'oo so clever!'

The voices of the two little girls called plaintively from the other room,

'Mummy! Mummy!' Beatrice tore herself away at last, accepting as a happy afterthought the ear-rings Jean picked up, from the floor.

The two little girls were lovely, but their loveliness had a less exotic quality. They were pink and white, with very blue eyes and corn-coloured hair, each had a diminutive pink bed, with a white satin eiderdown sprinkled over with apple blossoms. The walls of their room were painted a deep cream with a dado of apple trees in full flower.

Beatrice gave herself to the little girls afresh, with a cool happy sweetness.

It was plain they not only adored her but were all of them utterly at home with her. She was their home--but less of her was theirs than Oliver occupied; for them she wouldn't so recklessly have torn off her ear-rings. She sat on each bed in turn, and drew Jean into the circle of their interests.

She was to go with them to-morrow to the sea. She was to paddle. Anne could swim, but Bridget could only float--at least if Uncle Ian's hand was under her head she could float! Oliver couldn't do anything but sit in the waves while they ran over him. Anne, who was eight, explained most of what Jean had better know. Bridget only clung to her mother's hand as if it might be taken from her if she wasn't careful.

Oliver shouted words and refrains of songs from his room through the open door, although it wasn't his turn. Nobody stopped him, and Jean found herself wanting to go back to him. The little girls were much more friendly, but their eyes hadn't his wild sparkle. Bridget cried out suddenly, 'Where's Daddy?' and a strange silence crept into the room. Beatrice sat still saying nothing at all; the smile on her lips ceased to grow--it just stood still--and the lurking dimples in her cheeks waited for the smile to come alive again.

'Later on Daddy will come,' said Mrs. Meadows's deep voice from the other room, and over the queer dropped silence, the happy chatter spread again. They couldn't bear it when the dinner-gong rolled its deep call through the house; they were stoical cheerful children who had been brought up never to cry, so they remembered instead all the important questions Beatrice hadn't settled.

Anne wanted to know how God made kittens. Oliver produced a sore toe, Bridget wanted to say a new prayer. 'Please keep the sea where it was to-day, to-morrow, and don't let it whuffle up too much.'

'Now don't ask your mother any more questions,' said the imperious voice of Mrs. Meadows.

Only Oliver went on after this. He said one of his toes was redder than the other--see if it wasn't! Beatrice saw it and cried: 'You've *pinched* it, you little imp!' and off they went to the sound of Oliver's triumphant chuckles.

On the other side of the door the laughing girl Beatrice was gone. She had become suddenly a very great lady. Not at all an unkind or portentous one, but

just coldly and gracefully great. She froze the happy praises on Jean's lips; Jean couldn't say now that she loved the children or what she thought of Oliver. She could only wonder why Beatrice should possess everything--not only frosty Tudor houses and her dazzling beauty--but those beings built out of love and sunshine, hardly of mere flesh and blood, and yet with all these great possessions should shut herself suddenly behind high stone walls.

They walked downstairs side by side into the brilliant lighted well of the hall.

At the foot of the stairs Ian waited for them, and standing with his back to the fireplace was a tall fair man with a single eyeglass--precisely the blond cool giant of Jean's worst fears. She couldn't see him very plainly; her eyes wandered in spite of themselves back to Ian. She caught for an astonished moment on his upturned brow the same fierce possessive scowl which had ruffled Oliver's tender forehead.

CHAPTER IV

JEAN had never been afraid of people before. Even great scholars and learned ladies hadn't made her feel self-conscious or shy. They'd been kind, or they'd let her alone; she had known by a mere glance at them which course they meant to pursue, and had lent herself to following it.

But she hadn't any idea what these three beautiful but inexpressive human beings wished from her, or even if they wished anything at all.

Intercourse with them was like gazing over the placid expanse of a June sea.

There was the azure surface as smooth as a painted plate, with a kindly sparkle of sunshine resting upon it; but beneath the surface who could tell what wild wars of terror and anger were being waged? Or how suddenly out of the depths might rise the fin of a menacing shark?

If Jean only had to look at the mild expanse, it mightn't be so dangerous, but supposing it should ever be her duty to dive, wouldn't it be as well to know a little more of that ravenous underworld before she trusted herself to its shining surface?

By the time she had shaken hands with Sir Reginald he had become civilized, but there had been a moment, as he advanced to meet her, when his eyes had ripped off the centuries and left her defenceless.

She had to answer his courteous questions about her journey, his hope that she hadn't found the long drive from the station a bore, with the outraged feeling of a slave in a slave market, exposed to the mere elements of sex.

Beatrice looked on with a vague friendly smile; and Jean couldn't guess if she had seen Reggie's look, or shared her answering anger.

'Reggie thinks the moor's really Heaven,' Beatrice said lightly, 'and that no one in their senses could fail to be thrilled by it. Don't be misled by his apologies. He's got a nature like a dog's; he buries all his pet bones and won't even let you know where he's hidden them!'

'Please don't take my wife's view of my character as final,' replied Sir Reginald genially. 'She can't see the wood for the trees. We've lived together so long now that we only notice the corners we rub up against.'

Jean was struck, as they moved vaguely away from the hall, by the manner they had of never showing a purpose, even when they had one.

The dining-room was like a refectory, a high narrow room with a carved ceiling.

Tea-roses with colours like sunset clouds rose above a polished pool of silver and shining glass. There was very little light in the lofty oak-panelled room; and all that there was seemed concentrated upon their faces and the

flowers.

'Yes, we've been married ten years,' said Beatrice casually. She smiled across the table at her husband; her dimples sprang out, but her laughing eyes held, behind their laughter, a curious watchfulness. 'Don't people say we ought to have a change of partners every ten years?' she went on blandly, 'or is it every seven, like small-pox? The inoculation wears off, you know, and you have to be done again.'

'It's the quality of duration which is the risk in marriage,' said Ian. 'No man can be perfectly charming to the same woman for more than two hours at a time, and a husband takes it on for a lifetime. That is my main reason for remaining unmarried.'

'I think a woman can remain charming to the same man rather longer than two hours,' said Beatrice speculatively.

'That's why a woman is more dangerous than a man,' replied Ian. 'She keeps her head the longest.'

'Unless she's in love,' objected Sir Reginald, 'then she promptly loses it, and insists on advertising the fact to any one in the neighbourhood.'

Their even voices and their challenging smiles, the easy way their eyes met and lingered on each other was the height of friendliness. There was no edge to their words, they sank or rose on the scented air, with the effortless ease of midges dancing on a summer evening.

'You're the best-tempered man I know,' said Ian suddenly. There was a touch of sincerity behind this blunt compliment which splintered their light speech into fragments.

Reggie, whose eyes had been on his wife, turned them quickly away from her; but there was no pause before Beatrice laughingly disposed of the challenge.

'You can't possibly tell,' she said laughingly, 'whether Reggie's good-tempered or not. What has he ever had to try his temper? He's young, he's strong, he has quite a nice place, his children are all they ought to be, and his wife is nothing that she ought not. Don't you think he should have the temper of an angel, Miss Arbuthnot?'

Jean hesitated. She knew definitely now that something sinister was alive under the shining surface. She had not seen the shark's fin, but she had felt the ripple made by it. 'I don't really see,' she said, trying to reach the security of the abstract, 'what happiness has to do with money, or children, or even health. I've always thought of it as a kind of special luck. You're happy if you like the taste of life, aren't you, and awfully unhappy if you don't?'

'Don't you think then,' Beatrice demanded, 'that some kinds of people are happier than others? Virtuous ones, for instance? I think good people are always happy, and rich people are almost always good--at least there's awfully

little reason for them not to be! and I think the poor in a lump are bad as Tennyson's farmer thought.'

'I think bishops and pickpockets are rather happy people,' said Jean reflectively. They liked her choice of types; but they instantly demanded what she meant by it.

'Bishops,' Jean explained, 'always seem to me happy men, because they can live so long without losing their dignity or their influence. Most old men have to give up things, but bishops begin late and are holy and important till they die. Pickpockets, of course, have a different reason for being happy--theirs is the short run; but they must enjoy just what the bishops don't have to enjoy--their skilled risks! They have power too. They outwit constables; and hunger and chance and cold put an edge on their happiness.'

'I can see she backs the pickpockets,' said Reggie, with a genial chuckle. 'Obviously she's not a safe person to have in the house.'

'She'll do us all good,' said Beatrice decisively. 'We think too much of bishops.'

'Oh come!' said Ian plaintively, 'it's you who have a weakness for bishops. Reggie and I are awfully immune from clerical influence. It's such a bore to bone one's favourite stories or to have to avoid a friendly innocent damn.'

'I don't know which of them is the worst,' agreed Beatrice dispassionately. 'Reggie who won't take the Church seriously--though he goes now and then as an example to the parish, or Ian who won't go at all. I was properly brought up. I go to Church every Sunday, and I like it. I shouldn't enjoy my roast beef and apple tart afterwards unless I'd heard a sermon. I don't know if I think too much of bishops, but I do think they ought to be happy, they do so much good.'

'But she didn't say they were happy because they did good,' objected Ian, with a friendly look at Jean. 'She said that they were happy because they liked power, and didn't have to drop it. I think she's right. Nothing matters like power. That's why on the whole women are happier than men.'

'Are they?' asked Beatrice, raising her indolent arched eyebrows, and stretching out a dazzling arm towards a dish of salted almonds. 'I didn't know that we were happier than men, or had any power compared with theirs!'

For a moment no one spoke. Ian obviously couldn't, his eyes were on the shining curves of Beatrice's arm. Reggie's were held stiffly away, as if he knew how unbearably beautiful it was, and did not dare to risk even a glance.

'Women have power,' Reggie said after a pause, 'damnable power; and they use it damnably.'

'Perhaps,' Jean ventured, 'women have too little material to use their power on--and that is why they use it damnably!'

'Too little?' asked Reggie, fixing her again with derisive eyes. 'What d'you call too little? They have men.'

Jean ignored the personal thrust. 'But perhaps they ought not to have only men,' she said quietly. 'Perhaps they ought to have a little life!'

'I like her "only men"!' murmured Beatrice to Ian in an undertone.

'Of course it's better now,' Jean went on bravely, encouraged by Beatrice's friendly smile. 'When I saw Strindberg's "Father" in London I was awfully struck by how much more love of power old-fashioned women must have had--just because they couldn't have jobs or freedom.

'Strindberg made the wife in his play a fiend dragging her husband's mind to pieces; but the husband admitted with complacence that she was to have no control either over her own child, or over her own money, or over herself.'

There was a curious silence in the room, as if Jean's audience were not only listening to her, but to each other's inaudible comments on her words.

'I thought it the greatest Feminist play I ever saw,' Jean went on a little nervously, 'though I'm sure Strindberg didn't mean to defend women. He made the play out of his hatred of his wife; but even the hatred of a great genius has a flash of truth in it.'

'It must be a very entertaining play,' said Beatrice meditatively.

It was a harmless sentence, and yet Jean felt that she had never heard a woman say a more deliberately cruel thing.

Reggie never moved, he did not show by the flicker of an eyelash that her words had been a blow; but Ian looked at Beatrice, and his eyes had bare and unmistakable anger in them; he had forgotten all about the beauty of her outstretched arm. Why was he angry with her even if she had hurt her husband? If he loved her, why didn't he stand by her?

Jean felt a passionate pity for Beatrice. She wouldn't be cruel if she hadn't been hurt, and if her pain was in proportion to her cruelty, how deeply must they both have hurt her!

'Do tell us,' said Beatrice, ignoring with smiling eyes the anger in Ian's face, 'what the fiendish wife in the play does with her power? The little, I mean, which she contrives to get hold of!'

'She makes her husband think their child is not his own,' said Jean reluctantly. She didn't want to go on, but something in Beatrice's eyes forced her to continue. 'The Father cared awfully for his child; it was partly a mystic feeling as if his own life went on in her; she was his only hope of immortality. His wife didn't exactly deny his fatherhood but she deliberately shook his faith in it. So he went mad and died.'

'How funny,' said Beatrice. 'Do you think most men would care enough for that? I think they'd take it out of their wives instead. It would be so much simpler.'

No one answered her. The words and images out of the play seemed to become solid in the spacious shadowy room; Jean would have given anything

in the world not to have told the story of the 'Father'; she felt as if she had created a monster which might turn and rend them all.

'I don't think men should kill themselves,' observed Reggie, looking at no one in particular; 'it isn't sporting.'

'He didn't kill himself,' said Jean gently, 'he died of pain.'

Beatrice rose to her feet. She looked across the table at her husband with smiling provocative eyes.

'What a mercy,' she said, 'for modern husbands that they rarely if ever take their wives seriously!'

Ian who was nearest the door opened it. The scent of the roses seemed to rest upon Beatrice's beauty and to pass with her out of the room.

When the men rejoined them, they talked only of horses and racing fixtures. They were all three friendly to Jean; they gave her the feeling that they liked her; but as if they had talked quite long enough about rather peculiar things.

They surrounded her with their unostentatious but perfectly settled kindness, so that it really didn't matter leaving her out of their talk.

She'd have been kept in it, if she had had anything whatever to say about flat-racing or the inhabitants of their neighbourhood; but as she obviously hadn't, they gave her cushions, cigarettes, and from time to time a curt but pleasant reminder that they expected her to feel at home.

Jean would have thought that the whole conversation at dinner--Strindberg, suicide, and Ian's unspoken anger--had been only the play of her own uneasy imagination, if it had not been for one singular omission.

All through this cheerful, desultory talk which took place equally between the three of them, Ian never once looked at Beatrice's face. He seemed, even when he turned towards her, to be addressing the air above her head.

CHAPTER V

No magnificent painted tiger all polish and stripes could have been more mysterious and sinister to Jean than Reggie rising up before her in his comfortable shooting-clothes after breakfast in his study.

The room they were to work in looked as if nothing but a dog or a pipe had ever entered it. All the walls were covered with pictures of horses, not very good pictures, but obviously very good horses. On each side of the deep stone fireplace sat a golden setter, with watchful amber eyes fixed like flames upon their master. He had told them to keep still and they kept still, but the quality of their stillness was the most intense and active restlessness that Jean had ever encountered. Their eyes shifted to her for a moment as she entered the room, their ears, pricked to the highest point already, moved back to take in the provocation of a new sound. When were they to go out? Their yellow plumed tails moved imperceptibly, keeping even their hopes at bay.

Besides the golden setters, there were guns, enormous leather armchairs, and a desk with accounts in a state of easy-natured confusion.

A magnificent stone Tudor rose carved over the fireplace looked down a little cheerlessly upon the groom's dream of comfort which Reggie had created.

There was no hint in the littered room of the beauty and freshness Jean associated already with everything which Beatrice touched.

Reggie glanced a little ruefully about him before he offered one of the vast leather armchairs to Jean. He himself stood with his back to the fireplace between the golden setters, his monocle fixed firmly upon her, and the 'Times' between his finger and thumb.

For all his air of calm impassiveness he had caught Jean's panic; but he merely became a shade more formidable and desultory to meet it.

He wasn't sorry for Jean; he enjoyed fear, either in women or animals. It gave him the feeling of having something to play with and of slowly paying them out for the power that, in spite of their fears, they had of attracting him.

He hadn't wanted the girl, hanged if he had! Beatrice in her usual high-handed way had foisted her upon him; but since she was here he intended to get some fun out of it.

She was pretty, which was all to the good; but she evidently didn't know what to do with her looks, though Reggie thought she might learn in time.

'I hope,' he said, when he considered that his silence had been alarming enough, 'that you don't mind odds and ends of firearms and this mess I make here? Every dog has to have his own corner to curl up and turn round in, hasn't he? and this happens to be mine. Beatrice loathes it, but she has the rest of the

house to fiddle with. Does my pipe worry you?'

Jean said it didn't. She looked steadily out of the latticed window where, between the roses, cobwebs sparkled thick with dew. She hoped that their frail wall of beauty might stand between her and her panic.

Reggie continued to stare at her speculatively through his monocle. You could, he was thinking, make serious love to a woman of your own sort, and you could kiss a pretty housemaid, but what could you do with a girl who sat with a writing-pad in her lap, pointing a fountain pen at you?

She had an enchanting little hand and she could not stop it trembling. Still it was all rather boring; he liked to rush his fences and this was a fence his instinct told him couldn't be rushed. He had been outdoors once before the gong sounded for breakfast, and what he wanted now was to go outdoors again.

He intended to make Jean meet his eyes before he spoke to her, but in spite of her trembling hand she could keep her eyes away from him; and not even the portentous length of his silence shook her into surrender.

'Do you know anything about politics?' he asked her at last, knocking his pipe out on the Tudor rose. 'Because I don't. I'm supposed to be going in for them. Rotten luck I call it, having an election this time of year. Never made a speech in my life. Beatrice had an idea you'd write them for me?' Her eyes withdrew themselves unwillingly from the terrace and rested vaguely on the Tudor rose.

'I suppose,' she enquired cautiously, 'that you're a Conservative?'

This was much the same question to Reggie as if she had asked him if the golden setters were dogs, but about what he felt deeply, he invariably spoke inconclusively, so that he merely refilled his pipe and said, 'Um! I don't know. I don't believe much in the people, do you? though mind you I've nothing against my servants, quite the contrary. I like people to be treated well; but I'm not a Socialist of course. I'm all out for law and order, King and Country and what not! What else can you be? I suppose education's all right and I don't know much about this Safeguarding. You might look up statistics and arguments for me; make 'em as clear and short as you can. I think the Government ought to do something for agriculture, farmers can't sell their produce, freight is too high and foreign competition too strong. I'm all against dumping. My constituency is mostly agricultural--stock-raising and fruit. You might write to some of the farmers and get their figures. Something ought to be done about taxation and rates must be lowered. They're playing the deuce with property in the country, couldn't stay on here myself if my mother hadn't had money. Hang it, I don't know what to call myself--Progressive Conservative is as good a flag as any to fight under. Call me that if you like.'

'Progressive Conservative,' repeated Jean. 'Isn't that rather a contradiction

in terms?' Then she remembered that she wasn't there to argue and wrote down hurriedly 'Progressive Conservative.'

'Eh, what?' asked Reggie, taking a step towards her, so that he seemed to tower up above her to the ceiling and to blot out the light. 'Not at all. I've never been against improvements. Wireless, you know, got it in the billiard room now; cars, though they ruin the roads! Can't put the clock back, may as well get the good out of what's there. But I like smartness, like it all the way down, too! All the boys and girls in the place are Scouts--Beatrice runs the girls and I run the boys. Excellent motto, first-rate stuff to teach children--makes 'em useful. I'd like to see every man and woman in this country drilled--that'd knock some of the nonsense out of 'em!'

He moved back to the fireplace again, and Jean trembled afresh. What she minded most about him was his massiveness--not merely his physical massiveness, for though he was tall with broad shoulders there was nothing heavy about him; it was his weight mentally which she felt she couldn't handle. He had all the intractable force of the unimaginative. Nothing could reach him that he did not already know.

'You believe in Force then,' she asked, 'as a cure for Progress?'

'Force naturally,' said Reggie, 'but I don't want to cure Progress. Force helps it along. Look at Mussolini--fine progressive chap Mussolini--he's getting those dirty Italians as hard as nails. Pity we haven't a Mussolini or two in London. What we want is a man with drive to him--get people on the move.'

'But it does matter a little where they're moving to, doesn't it?' Jean interjected.

Reggie waved the need of direction aside with his pipe. 'Get 'em going, and keep 'em going,' he said emphatically. 'Everything in the end comes back to a fight, and what you've got to do is to make everyone fit for it, so that when it comes you're the winner. It's no use flinching from the fact, Miss Arbuthnot, that might is right--always has been, and always will be, and a jolly good thing too! Who'd really want rickets on top?'

Jean considered this point of view with thoughtfulness. 'What,' she asked, after a moment's pause, 'becomes of the idea that we fought the Germans for thinking the same thing?'

'My dear girl,' said Reggie confidentially, 'we didn't! That was all my eye, and--what d'you call this tosh--propaganda? Have to have something to throw at old women while there's a war on! We fought the Germans because we wanted to lick them, and that was the reason why they fought us! I assure you that was all there was to it. Pity we had to have the Americans in; but we needed the money.'

Jean laid down her fountain pen. 'What do you really think about lies?' she demanded. 'You don't use them much in your private life, do you?'

The setters saw the head keeper approaching along the terrace, he was their friend and the sight of him broke down their self-control. They whined pitifully and flew towards the door. Reggie's fellow-feeling overcame his sense of discipline. He opened it for them.

'Morning, Parsons,' he said, 'don't let the dogs frighten the birds. See you later.' Then he turned back to answer this odd girl's question about his private life.

Didn't she know that a gentleman always knew when to lie, and when not? She spoke as if there was an inconsistency in his conduct and as if this was a serious charge to bring against a man, whereas of course ideals were vague and should be kept vague; they didn't have to match. He was not exactly annoyed because she showed pluck and had pretty eyes; but he was damned if he wouldn't make her see sense.

'Well,' he said impressively, 'on general principles I don't lie. But there are cases when a man's got to lie; to help a pal out of a tight corner or to shield a woman.'

'But to save himself bother--not?' Jean insisted.

'No, certainly not,' agreed Reggie. 'A man must stand by his guns.'

'Only a country, to save itself bother, may lie?' Jean asked reflectively. 'Perhaps it would be simpler then to say that a country has no morality. Is that what you teach the Boy Scouts?'

Reggie looked at her sharply. He thought her questions rather rude and distinctly silly; she obviously didn't know the elements of behaviour. Of course he didn't teach the Boy Scouts that England was immoral. But in the background of his mind a reasonable person realizes the moments when a slight evasion has to be made to escape a great inconvenience. A leader is a person who knows when the right moment comes to shift rules, but this is not a fact you should have to explain to those who follow leaders. Apparently this girl had no background to her mind, or else like all women she simply was not reasonable.

'Governments may lie to save themselves trouble,' she repeated with a long indignant breath. 'Well----!'

She had evidently forgotten that she was a private secretary. 'And we're a nation that says it believes in fair play!' she aggravatingly finished.

'Of course we are,' said Reggie, feeling rather red and stiff; a feeling he didn't remember having had since he was a small boy. 'Naturally we do. I don't see why propaganda or the defence of the weak should strike you as unfair.'

'I think a lie a poor shelter for the weakest thing that exists!' exclaimed Jean, 'and to tell a great nation a lie is to treat it like the lowest of savage tribes. Why should any fact have to be misrepresented to a normal mind?'

Reggie looked wistfully out of the window at the two setters bounding

away after the keeper in the distance, with ecstatic waggings of their plumed tails, almost embarrassed with the variety of their early morning scents. For the moment he missed them more than they missed him, and this is an undignified attitude for the proud master of devoted dogs.

'Can't get away from facts,' he said firmly. 'Countries are chancey, you have to say what's good for 'em. I don't say you'd need to if you hadn't got democracy. Then you'd simply say what you meant to do, and do it. I agree that's the best way; and the most honest. But since we've got a lot of rabble into our electorate, and can't rule 'em without fooling them, then we've got to fool them! You see, Miss Arbuthnot, we're responsible for the job--and they'd go to pieces as well as we should, if we didn't pull it off.'

Jean saw that his point of view was as fixed as stone; but she saw also, what she had never seen before when she had merely read the specious twaddle she considered his ideas to be, his kindly sense of obligation.

It was the best in Reggie, not the worst, which made him want to delude the people for their good; and it was his benevolence and not his despotism which was really dangerous.

He honestly wanted to do his duty and that was the only way in which he thought duty could be done. 'He doesn't know,' she said to herself, 'that his kindness is just a smoke screen for his greed. He wouldn't like to be greedy in any marked way. So he and his kind have invented duty and kindness--it employs their sense of power without preventing them from having the best of everything. He'd make love to me like that if I'd let him; but since I won't let him, I shall have to face his greed. Lady Falconer has had to face it, but she has fooled him back. I shan't do that. I don't know quite what I shall do, but I shan't yield and I shan't fool him, and if I can help it I won't even run away.'

She raised her eyes to his for the first time; and he let her see the admiration which he knew she felt was an insult.

It was his way of punishing her for having ruffled his sweet temper; but he was a little surprised that she took his stare with composure.

'Wouldn't you like to go out for a walk?' he suggested genially.

'No, but you would,' she said politely, rising from her chair. 'I can write your first speech for you now. I know just what you want, and I'll verify what facts I use; if you will just tell me where you are going to speak first, so that I may study the neighborhood, I shan't have to bother you again.'

'Ashcomb, I believe,' said Reggie, 'next Wednesday, if I don't funk it. It's our nearest town and the market for all the countryside; the audience will be chiefly farmers--my own men most of them. All we've got to do is to cheer them up about rates and taxes. Sure you know what I want?'

'Quite sure,' said Jean, smiling at him for the first time. 'You'll be surprised when you see how well I've grasped your point of view--and of course if you

don't like it, you can tear it up!'

He nodded in shamefaced relief. Of course he could tear it up, or Beatrice could. The girl was her fault, and she'd have to do the dirty work if there was any to be done.

He said with empressement that he was sure whatever Jean wrote would be awfully clever and good, and held the door open for her.

She knew how to walk out of a room while she was being looked at. Her thick smooth crop of hair had pretty lights in it.

Reggie really was astonished when he found the speech on his table before he dressed for dinner.

There in clean clear type was the lucid exposition of his views, admirably summed up. An attractive agricultural programme set forth with telling anecdotes and apt illustrations, a shrewd impersonal hit at his opponent, and a really nasty attack on the entire Labour programme. No progressive Tory could fail to feel a thrill of satisfaction as he read how progressive he was and how staunchly he ought to retain all the privileges he intended to retain.

'By Jove, the girl's sound after all!' he exclaimed to Ian, who was smoking a pre-dinner pipe with him after a good day's shooting. 'Thought we'd got a Bolshie in the house--kept me till eleven o'clock this morning--wasted half of my precious morning, arguing about political morality; hope she's not quite as firm about the other kind. She's got a jolly pair of ankles and an instep a kitten could walk under. Did you notice it?'

'Lord, no!' said Ian wearily. 'Haven't looked at the girl.'

'Well, you're so damned unobservant,' said Reggie in an aggrieved voice.

'Not always,' replied Ian under his breath.

Their eyes met suddenly and held each other.

It was a tense look, dispassionate but wary. Each of them knew of what the other was thinking but neither of them was sure what the other meant to do about his thoughts.

Reggie was the first to look away.

'Can't for the life of me imagine,' he muttered, 'what Beatrice wants the girl in the house for, can you? A man could have written my speeches!'

'Any man who comes to this house----' Ian began, and then stopped dead.

'Would fall in love with Beatrice,' Reggie finished for him with savage irony. 'What would that matter? She'd like it, wouldn't she? and one more or less could hardly matter to me!'

'I think,' Ian said quietly, 'she wanted to be quite fair to you about it.'

'Fair!' said Reggie with increasing bitterness. 'Are you as far gone as that? When does a woman ever want to be fair to her husband? If she loves him she fools him, and if she hates him she not only fools him, but she fools the man she's fooling him with!'

'I think you are wrong to suppose that Beatrice is fooling you with any man,' said Ian, controlling his voice with difficulty. 'She can't help being beautiful.'

'She doesn't try to help it very much, does she?' asked Reggie jeeringly. Then suddenly his voice changed and the anger sank out of his eyes. 'My dear old chap,' he said quietly, 'she isn't fooling me with you, and I know it, but only because she can't; and you know that. No one else knows it as well as you do.'

Ian stiffened and said no more. They very seldom spoke of Beatrice, and when they did it was Ian (who was considered to be the clever one) who found the least to say.

CHAPTER VI

JEAN was never told what to do; her duties, at convenient, but not at stated times, simply rose up before her like additional features in the landscape. There were voters to be visited and meetings to be held, important political guests came and went; but nothing was really allowed to interfere with the shooting.

The household filled and emptied for week-ends without an apparent ripple. More doors opened and shut, more well-bred pleasant voices broke the silence of the house, and when the week-end was over, the murmurs died down and a pile of dead birds was sent to the Cottage Hospital.

Mr. Cripps, the political agent, who came to the house daily and was almost always asked to put up with Jean, because Sir Reginald had started off with the guns, complained bitterly.

'It's not fair on me, Miss Arbuthnot!' he insisted, wrinkling the expanse of his smooth pink brow. 'I'm keen as mustard to get him in but he doesn't take it seriously! It isn't that he won't unbend--that's my usual trouble with a powerful landlord! They can't get over the feeling, you know, that people are bound to kotow to them, whether they put themselves out or not! But Sir Reginald is pleasant enough! He unbends all right if he's there! But no matter how humble people are--and nobody is particularly humble nowadays--they do expect a candidate to show up!'

Mr. Cripps glared at Jean as if she was directly responsible for Sir Reginald's habitual absences. He had a large round face, china-blue eyes, and a good deal of bare upper lip; and Jean wondered if he had any idea of how much he looked like a celluloid doll in a bath.

'I wish I could help you,' she murmured meekly, 'but I only see him myself for a minute or two after breakfast, and perhaps after tea to sign things, if I'm lucky enough to catch him before he sits down to bridge.'

'That's just it!' groaned Mr. Cripps tragically. 'Birds--beasts--bridge! What can you do with a man that fills himself up on cards and animals? I can't fit him into the day's work! I work eight hours a day for him and he only gives me two!

'He sends Major Ramsay instead--and 'pon my word that makes things worse. Major Ramsay takes any amount of trouble and comes down to hard tacks. If he were standing for himself I might put my hands in my pockets and whistle! He'd get in on his merits. But people see well enough that it's only for Sir Reginald he puts himself out. If I speak to Sir Reginald he only laughs things off--and says he has every confidence in me! Does he think I can hoax Ashcomb to take me for their local magnate? If you could get hold of him for

me yourself, Miss Arbuthnot, Lady Falconer and Major Ramsay say you are the one to do it! Either he puts his shoulder to the wheel or he'll lose the seat--that's the way to put it to him! He couldn't have an easier constituency! All it asks of him is that he'll take the trouble to say that he wants it!'

Jean looked dubious. 'I don't know why I should be the person to ask him,' she said hesitatingly. 'I haven't been here long and I'm only supposed to do what he tells me.'

Mr. Cripps looked at Jean with a kind, vaguely embarrassed expression. He even blinked a little, as if the soap from the invisible toy bath had got into his china-blue eyes.

'Will you try?' he said persuasively. 'You've done a lot for him already, you know--so have I for that matter--and I expect that's why they think it's up to you to do rather more?'

Jean considered this theory carefully. It seemed to her hardly a commercial proposition, but not an untrue estimate of the Windlestraws' method. If they didn't confine you to your duties, she had already discovered that neither did they confine the duties. They grew with your ability to get them done.

Mr. Cripps gave her hand the warm grasp of an ally and departed, but he left the problem behind him. How was she to get Reggie to work? This responsibility seemed so definitely pushed into Jean's hands that she ventured to seek for Beatrice to ask her to share it. She found her surrounded by piles of chrysanthemums, scarlet leaves, and Michaelmas daisies. Beatrice paused from her labours to glance at Jean with friendly raillery.

'The only way to make Reggie go about properly,' she dropped, 'is to go about with him!'

Then she returned to the task of her autumn garden and appeared to think that she had disposed of the problem. Jean pursued Reggie to the stables. She found him with his hands in his pockets, a pipe between his lips, and a general air of being more at home in the stable yard than the grooms.

The wind blew about the leaves of the Virginia creeper on the grey walls, Robbins hissed softly over Beatrice's satin-smooth bay mare, pails of water stood on tiles already glistening with cleanliness. The harness in the harness room shone like a jeweler's window.

Reggie shot an appreciative glance at Jean. She was a little flushed with her anxiety to get him to attend to his job, and the sunshine touched her light brown hair with gold.

'I want to ride Moonlighter to hounds to-morrow,' he announced; 'would you like to have a look at him in his loose-box? You must keep well back--he's such an unaccountable brute--but we'll take him some sugar, that'll soften his heart.'

Jean followed Reggie obediently into the garnished temple of his gods. It

was a haunt of peace; the vague smell of fresh straw, leather, and animals, made a climate of its own. Each loose-box bore the name of its treasured inmate, and Reggie paid his leisurely calls upon his favourites as if he were visiting famous actresses in their dressing-rooms. A few words of description to Jean came first, so that she might grasp their reputations and their histories. Then he slipped open the door and entered with the freedom of the habitué introducing a novice. Jean had a glimpse of large, startled eyes gazing down at her, and then the slender beneficent beings stood over to show her their points; they were all beautifully made up and prepared, waiting in the wings for their cues, but having no great objection to passing the time of day with suitable admirers, until the call-bell rang.

Some of the hunters showed pleasure at Reggie's entrance, others were at first a little restive, as became the owners of the dramatic temperament, but the subtle flattery of Reggie's voice and hand soon reduced them to a benign acceptance of their visitors. They took Moonlighter last.

'Stand well behind me!' Reggie warned her as he slipped the latch of the loose-box. Jean gazed up with mingled admiration and anxiety at the towering chestnut. Moonlighter took some time to appreciate their kindly intentions. He stared down at them with haughty horror-struck eyes, and pawed at his straw as if it had turned to hot coals. He even squealed with annoyance and laid back his ears, till his magnificent head wore the expression of a spiteful gargoyle.

He was like a mighty dynamo stored with terrific powers, all of them inimical. The only doubt in Moonlighter's mind seemed to be how best to show the extent of his displeasure. Reggie waited with magnetic stillness for his nerves to settle; then he began to speak. Something in his quiet voice and leisurely movements soothed Moonlighter's active disgust into a temporary docility. He consented to stand over, and even drew his soft lips back and searched Jean's hand for sugar with his long yellow teeth. Jean was deeply afraid of him, but she hid her terror and even her relief when the sugar was finished. She felt that the only way to make Reggie listen to her was to go through this ordeal without disgrace.

'Mr. Cripps,' she said, flattening out her hand for the last lump of sugar, 'is very unhappy. He thinks you ought to go to Ashcomb every day and not miss a single meeting!'

'It's the time of year that's such a bore!' Reggie explained, with the grieved eyes of a suddenly chidden child. 'If it were only after Christmas you know, when the frosts are on! And then, I don't mind telling you that I awfully hate going about grinning at people as if I wanted things! I don't mind taking what I want--or going without it if I have to--but I've never been keen on asking people for things!'

'But if you want things I think you must ask for them!' said Jean gently.

Moonlighter had finished the sugar and it occurred to him, with desperate suddenness, that this was the moment to turn them out of his loose-box. He snatched back his head, and Jean found herself lifted by Reggie, straight off her feet and dropped outside the door. She leaned breathless and shocked against the wall, wondering helplessly what was happening to Reggie. A moment later he joined her and apparently nothing had happened to him, or even disturbed the ironic indulgence with which he gazed down at her. She could hear the fury inside Moonlighters box and guessed the danger Reggie had snatched her from.

'Bad-tempered brute,' Reggie murmured apologetically. 'I oughtn't to have let you inside his box, but we had plenty of time to get out really. Hope I didn't startle you. Hear him kick himself into Kingdom Come! He can't do himself any harm, though, as his box has been specially prepared for his ill-humours! Well, what do you want me to do to soothe the savage breast of Cripps--that seems to be the main point now, doesn't it?'

It was not so easy for Jean to dispose of her feelings. She was frightened, she was grateful, she was not at all sure that Reggie hadn't been hurt, and she was called upon to make herself clear with her pulse beating a hundred and twenty to the minute.

In the end she spoke more severely than she had meant to speak, because she was afraid that if she tried to be nice her voice might tremble.

'If you want to get in you must work a little harder,' she said drily, 'that seems to be all there is to it!'

Reggie laughed as if her brevity pleased him. 'Come,' he said persuasively, 'if you'd had more sugar to give that brute inside, he wouldn't have let himself rip! I hope you grasp the analogy?'

Jean moved towards the open stable door, she wasn't going to start grasping Reggie's analogies. If she was to stay at Windlestraws, she foresaw that she must acknowledge nothing, except her duties.

'I hope,' she said more drily still, 'that you are in the habit of being more civil than Moonlighter, to people who try to be of use to you!'

She felt that Reggie's eyes were still laughing at her. 'I think I am pretty civil,' he murmured, 'but I do like sugar! Come, let's make a bargain! I'll go about more, if you'll go about with me! But I won't be put off with Cripps. He sits beside me while I'm driving and talks fifteen to the dozen! Can't keep a quiet tongue in his head and jumps like a trout when I put on pace. Besides, I prefer a girl in the front seat of my car; and I'm sure the electors do--if she's at all suitable to look at!' Jean gazed severely at the stable clock.

'You couldn't do better, then, than have Lady Falconer beside you!' she answered stiffly.

'Yes, she looks well on the front seat of a car,' Reggie agreed pleasantly.

'Any letters for me to sign this morning?'

Jean flushed angrily. He had made her feel that she was being impertinent, when she was only defending herself, and that he wasn't being impertinent, even when he was attacking her. Danger, anger, and a feeling more disconcerting than either--that she ought to be able to stand being teased--threatened her self-control. If only Reggie hadn't lifted her so neatly out of the loose box, she wouldn't have minded showing him how cross she felt!

'I am sorry to have bothered you,' she said at last with less dignity and more resentment than she had intended, 'there are *no* papers to sign!'

She heard him call after her 'Miss Arbuthnot!' 'Jean!' but without turning her head she made her way through the fluttering of pigeons, past the discreet, still hissing Robbins into the deep tranquillity of Windlestraws.

CHAPTER VII

JEAN came on Ian suddenly sitting alone in the hall. He was writing at a table in a patch of sunlight. A tall jug of turning bracken stood close to him; the sunlight burned through them both, with a strange transfiguring glory.

Ian looked up as she passed him, and Jean thought of a stag she had caught a glimpse of one day in the park; worsted in a fight, with all the misery of his defeat in his stricken eyes. Had Ian too been locked in a hideous struggle, held, starved, broken, to be at last set free with half his glory gone? She did not speak, but she looked at him with something deeper than pity. They seemed for a long moment to communicate without words, across the pool of light.

Ian's eyes asked her for something--for understanding, or perhaps for recognition. He wanted her to know that he was held where he was by loyalty; and not by being a mere sunk slave to his passion. Jean didn't say 'I know! I know! You aren't light! It's the only thing which keeps this home and all that's in it from spinning straight off into space!' But he must have known from the depths of her answering glance that this was what she meant.

When she found herself a moment later alone in her little sitting-room she knew that she hadn't said anything at all. But what made her feel certain that the communication between them had been as real to Ian as it had been to her, was that he hadn't got up. He had actually let her hover there for a moment close beside him and then pass him, without attempting to meet her with any of the punctilious forms which no one at Windlestraws ever omitted. It was almost as if he had said to her, 'I know I ought to get up, open a door somewhere, and ask you what you're looking for, but then--this thing which has taken place between us--your seeing me in this plight and my having the relief of knowing that you at any rate don't blame me--would all go by the board!' He had actually valued her momentary sympathy more than he had valued the rigid etiquette of Windlestraws.

Jean opened the long window which led onto the terrace. The short afternoon was nearly over but the light still lingered very clear and golden over the autumn flowers. Late roses, leafless and frail, hung heavily from their stalks; the herbaceous borders looked dishevelled, as if, after a riotous youth, age had forced upon them a harsh extravagance of colour. Only the levelled lawns were still as vivid as the spring. The park stretched away beyond the terrace to the edge of the shadowy purple moor. The leaves had changed to bronze and thinned away so that the light fell straight onto the naked beauty of the boughs.

Suddenly Jean heard Beatrice's light laughter, and Ian's voice, as effortlessly gay, joined hers. Was she not rather overdoing the depths of her

sympathy?

Jean had been at Windlestraws long enough to find that what mattered most to her mattered least to its inhabitants. Providing that the deep smooth stream of their familiar pleasures rolled on, their broken hearts and their mortal wounds were as insignificant to them as are the bones of the drowned on the ocean floor to the well-fed passengers of an Atlantic liner.

An hour later Jean went into the hall to find Reggie and confront him with an article on the Income Tax which she had carefully boned for his invalid appetite. A large party, cleaned up and well fed, sat round the great open fireplace, the slight thrill of their clever little murders still upon them. Jean had to pass close by Ian, who was deep in conversation with the prettiest girl in the room. He did not look up, but Reggie caught her eye, and, murmuring something about going 'to have his wits sharpened,' joined her outside the circle.

Reggie's study was empty and rather dark; Jean heard him shut the door behind them, and then lock it. The next moment she was in his arms. The scattered points of the income tax were still in her mind, while she found herself incredibly struggling in his embrace. The whole thing was as sudden and as disastrous as a street accident. A burning anger that was almost like jubilation ran through Jean's blood. She had never fought before, but she fought now with every nerve in her body, with every instinct, and with all her wits.

This wasn't Reggie any more; it was a wild beast with a sickening plan to get the better of her. Jean hadn't at first any answering plan. She writhed and twisted in his arms only to get away; then she realized suddenly that her strength would fail her, while Reggie's was not even being tried. Fear ran in upon her like a fresh assailant. Her mad anger sank into the saving clarity of thought. This wasn't only a wild beast, it was Reggie, a man who wanted to be a member of Parliament, who was the master of Windlestraws, whose hall was full of his guests.

Whatever he wanted, Reggie wouldn't dare to pay the price of publicity.

She must scream and to do this she must free her mouth from his covering hand. Jean relaxed suddenly, swaying limply against his breast. Reggie withdrew his hand to reach her lips with his; and then she screamed.

The sound of her voice, wild and shrill, was as terrible to her as Reggie's burning kisses; but her scream saved her. Quick as a flash, Reggie gripped her by the shoulders; with the same expert strength with which he had dropped her out of the loose-box in the morning he pushed her through a door which led into the servants' quarters.

Jean ran breathlessly up the servants' staircase, through a glass door, into the passage to the nursery. She caught for a moment the astonished gaze of

Alice, the nurse-maid; but she couldn't face Oliver's little flying figure--she found herself pushing him away from her to avoid the touch of his small innocent hands.

At last she was safely in her own room with the door locked behind her. She threw herself stiff and rigid on the surface of the bed unable to grasp the oblivion for which she blindly prayed.

Even her fierce, helpful anger died away from her. She couldn't feel that she particularly hated Reggie. You would not necessarily hate the sea which had nearly drowned you; you would only want to get as far away from it as possible. What had happened to Jean seemed as inexplicable and as fatal as a tidal wave. This was what Beatrice had meant when she said, 'Lock your door at night and don't come to me with stories!'

But Jean hadn't supposed then that those stories would have so little point. She wouldn't so deeply have resented Reggie's being violent if they had had any relation to lead up to it. She ran over feverishly in her mind her short formal interviews with Reggie. Was there anything in any one of them which excused or even explained his attack? From the moment she had first met his insolent appraising glance she had taken his measure and hidden her sex from him. If he had attracted her, as she admitted to herself that Ian had attracted her, she would never have let Reggie see it. She could not honestly blame herself and yet she shrank from accepting this picture of Reggie as final. He had meant to be nice to her this morning, he had been sorry when he had vexed her. He had never let her feel for an instant the discomfort of having to drag him off to be bored. He was always ready for her when he was visible at all, and he invariably made his guests think that he was dragging Jean off, never that he was being dragged. He had shown her more than once a deliberate thoughtfulness.

She hated to go away with nothing but this dismal enmity between them. It was unbearable to have to remember a relation which began and ended in unconsidered violence! She had been the victim of a mere physical threat when she wasn't a mere physical being, that was bad enough, but Reggie, who was human too and no more merely physical than she was--how would he feel at having trapped her into meeting physical violence? There must be something behind his attack, something that if she could understand it would make her feel less like a creature over whom a troop of cavalry has blindly charged! Her heart beat hard and menacingly within her, as if what had happened to her had not stopped happening. But it was no longer the symptoms of her body which Jean minded. Groping beyond them to what Reggie must feel at having frightened her, she found herself in tears.

CHAPTER VIII

THE smoking-room was empty except for Reggie, who was sitting in his usual chair cleaning a gun; but he was not holding the gun in the position in which men who understand guns clean them.

Ian coming suddenly into the room met his eyes before Reggie had quite succeeded in driving the desperation out of them. He said quickly:

'If there's got to be an accident with a gun--I'd rather it were mine!'

'Nonsense! My dear fellow! Nonsense!' Reggie murmured; but he made no protest when Ian took the gun out of his hands. He leaned back in his deep chair with a queer little sigh, as if he suddenly felt tired.

Ian examined the gun; unloaded it and returned it to its place without further comment. Before he turned back to Reggie, he said casually: 'I heard the girl scream; but it was quite all right. They thought it was an owl.'

Reggie readjusted his monocle and spoke in his usual good-natured drawl. 'Damned picturesque touch of natural history--what? I'm willing to bet you ten to one Beatrice thought of that. But a bit misleadin', owls shriek when they see their mouse,--this was a case of the mouse shrieking when it saw the owl meant business.

'No great harm done, though! I remembered the hall was full of people, so I shoved her outside the door more frightened than hurt!' Ian made no direct comment on Reggie's statement. The loaded gun seemed to him comment enough. Reggie had thought so lightly of the matter that if Ian had been a few minutes later he would have blown his brains out. Ian sat down at some distance from Reggie, so that he could see his easy lounging figure but not his face.

'Of course all I mind about is you----' he said presently. 'That's why I came--in such a hurry I mean!'

'There's nothing fresh to mind,' Reggie answered, his voice dragging a little. 'You know as well as I do that there are times when--like the chap in the play Jean told us about--I find it pretty hard to stick it. Amusin', wasn't it, her first evening here--telling us about that Strindberg stuff?

'I wonder if she guesses now that she hit the right nail on the head from the first go-off? That chap of hers in the play though hadn't got a pretty secretary let loose on him. His wife hadn't thought of that, I suppose. Mine went one better. Bad luck for the girl though. I'm willing to admit to you that I regret it. I regret it rather a lot.'

Ian was silent. He was thinking that what the Central Empires had failed to do, Beatrice had accomplished.

Four years of France hadn't broken Reggie. When earth was nothing but

scattered rubble, and air packed close with shrieking death, Reggie's nerve had remained unbroken. His whole regiment had lived on Reggie's pluck; desperation could make no final clutch upon the heart while Reggie's drawling voice threw out its dauntless jibes.

If Reggie felt he couldn't stick it, things must be pretty bad. It was hard to see--worse not to be allowed to see, only to feel--the steady nerve, his own had rested on, shaken at last.

The only comfort was that Reggie probably knew exactly how badly Ian felt. He glanced anxiously at Reggie's stiffly held figure pretending to relax.

'Nothing's happened,' he said awkwardly. 'It's all right really. None of those fellows in the hall would think anything particular of it. Nor the girls either--less if anything. People don't feel things like that to be serious nowadays. Why should you?'

'I don't know what you call serious,' Reggie murmured, putting out his hand for his pipe and trying to keep the lightness in his voice. He got hold of his pipe but the lightness escaped him. 'You see it's never come to my attacking a girl in my own house before. If she'd given me any excuse--I shouldn't have cared a damn. But this girl didn't. She looked at me as straight as a dog looks--she hadn't a thought back of it, except some election dodge.

'If you ask me what happened I can't even tell you. Funny thing is I hadn't as far as I know any particular fancy for her. Of course I'd been thinking about her--my mind does rather run on women, you know. I haven't touched Beatrice for six years.'

'Good Lord!' muttered Ian below his breath.

'Oh well!' said Reggie quickly, 'why should I? She loathes me, you know.'

Ian said vehemently after a short pause, 'I'll go away to-morrow--I'll swear never to set eyes on Beatrice again! This business about the girl is all my fault! You know you've only to say the word! I don't stay here for Beatrice, it's for you!'

'Fact's the same, whoever is at fault.' Reggie murmured. 'The girl's badly frightened and I frightened her. I don't see what it's got to do with you. And I don't want you to move off. Last time you went would take some beating. Beatrice raised Hell. Even if she hadn't, I prefer to have you about the house. Some one to talk to. Besides, if you're here Beatrice behaves herself.

'I don't really want to see the whole thing smash. Windlestraws, you know--the children's lives--all that. Nor does Beatrice. She's a good mother.'

'She's perfectly good--that's the most damnable part of it,' Ian said after a pause. 'We stick to the path of duty as if we were glued. But that doesn't make anything any easier!'

Reggie moved a little. 'It's hard on you,' he agreed slowly, 'but you've got yourself more in hand with women than I have. You always were a cold-

blooded devil! Perhaps it's easier when they take a fancy to you, than when they cut and run.'

Ian gave a laugh that was half a groan. 'Think so?' he asked. 'Have you forgotten Char? I didn't keep my head that time, did I? Nor did Char! It's not so damned easy being liked by women! Besides, you're liked enough yourself. Most women take to you.'

'That's their look-out then!' said Reggie. 'But you can't say I'm markedly lucky over my own fancies. At least not the principal one, am I?'

Ian plunged his head in his hands. 'I could kill her half the time--if that's any satisfaction to you!' he groaned.

'Can't say it is, particularly,' answered Reggie, 'it's the other half I'm apt to notice. But you won't kill her, my boy, nor will I. She'll outlive us both!'

Ian stirred uneasily. 'She isn't any more to blame than we are!' he said, lifting his head out of his hands and glancing fiercely across the room at Reggie's motionless figure. 'She must suffer damnably! We both torture her--and at the same time too; if she hadn't the patience of an angel, she'd put poison in our soup!'

Reggie made no reply; his lips moved, closed more firmly over his pipe while the eyes above them gleamed as if he were amused at something but had no intention of handing his amusement on.

Ian would have liked Reggie to answer him back. He knew what he could say in answer to a challenge; but he couldn't say anything to protect Beatrice if Reggie wouldn't attack her.

He had to sit there broken in two between them--false to them both.

'Well,' said Reggie at last, 'as far as I can see, then, there's nothing one can do about Beatrice, but there's the girl. I should rather like some form of apology to be carried to her.'

Ian gave a quick movement of relief. 'Shouldn't you think,' he asked eagerly, 'that perhaps Beatrice could tackle her? She seems--Miss Arbuthnot, you know--awfully keen on Beatrice. Beatrice might be able to do more with her than we could.'

'I shouldn't fancy anyone could do more with Miss Arbuthnot,' said Reggie drily, 'except to look out her train. She'll cut and run, whatever anybody says, and you can't blame her. I'd like to send her a cheque though but of course it 'ud be no good--she'd tear it up!'

'No, money's no earthly!' agreed Ian gloomily. 'But you'd much better see the thing through, old man. That girl could help you a lot. If you make her a decent apology, she'd stay on. She's got guts!'

'How do you mean "see it through"?' Reggie demanded. 'What is there to see, except that I've made a damned fool of myself; and I've seen that already?'

'Why not think of her?' Ian objected. 'She's got steadiness for two. A man

can be kept out of the divorce court by a girl like that. If you carry on and she sees that you respect her, she'll end by being your friend.'

'But good God, man! I don't want a girl for a friend,' Reggie objected. 'I'm too damned domestic! I don't say I wouldn't like a little girl in the house who belonged to me. Sally's in London and I hate having to go up to town. It doesn't do to poach on one's own neighbourhood--awfully bad for politics. Perhaps--having one here in the house is Beatrice's game! I'm afraid I must have inadvertently spoiled her sport if it was!'

Ian considered the possibility with extreme distaste. He saw that Reggie would not think it base, if Beatrice had brought Jean Arbuthnot into the house in order to tempt him. It would merely seem to Reggie unfortunate that he had not given the temptation time to succeed. But to Ian it seemed base. He couldn't think only of Reggie, or only of Beatrice or only of himself. He had to think of Jean Arbuthnot. She was an innocent, honest girl who wanted to do her job well, and who liked them. They had no business to set a trap for her.

'Beatrice couldn't do that!' he said at last defensively. 'She couldn't use a friendly girl like that! I expect what she means is what I said to you before. She wants to balance things a bit--to keep you amused, and help on your career! She knows that men always gravitate to her--well then, don't you see, she gets hold of a girl, and a damned nice one too, and hands her over to you! She doesn't mean any harm by it, and there mustn't *be* any harm! It's jolly decent of her, I think! and *like* Beatrice!' He finished, flushed with relief and triumph; but Reggie, puffing dubiously at his pipe, continued to look profoundly sceptical.

'So you think that's the idea, do you?' he asked with a grunt. 'Well--I won't argue with you about my gifted wife. As you truly observe, she gets every man in the house on her side. About Jean Arbuthnot--I'm not sure you aren't right. I have a feeling that I rather ought to see the business through if she'll consent to it. I'd rather be shot at dawn than meet her again; but that's my own affair. The girl's a good girl, and virtue ought to have its fling as well as vice. Besides it's a beastly thing to do a woman out of a job because you can't control yourself. I don't think she'll forgive me if she stays on, nor am I particularly keen that she should; but on the whole I'd rather she stayed than went. Will you take her an apology for me? I'd prefer Beatrice kept out of it. If it's her scheme to have the girl here she'd get round her to stay whether the girl wanted to or not. I'd rather Jean was given fair play. Tell her I know that I've behaved like a cad, regret it, and can be trusted not to do it again; and then let her go or stay as she likes.'

Ian agreed; he thought that it would be a difficult job to speak to Jean; but not as difficult as if she were a fool. She'd either stay and be nice to Reggie, or go and keep her mouth shut.

It was strange how certain Ian felt about her behaviour; still it didn't

prevent him saying: 'Damn all women!' when he had finished deciding how Miss Arbuthnot would behave.

'Amen!' murmured Reggie piously. 'Damn 'em all you like, but keep 'em on the wing! We've got to have something to let fly at, haven't we?'

The door opened softly and Beatrice stood before them. 'Hullo, you two! What are you talking about?' she demanded. Her glance strayed over the dimly lit room, as if she wondered a little, without anxiety, what had happened there lately.

'Birds!' said Reggie succinctly, 'and what we should do if there weren't any. We agreed that owls were awfully useful wild-fowl.'

'Oh, you'd shoot something else!' laughed Beatrice. 'You wouldn't let the business of life stop for a little thing like a bird! Now which of you will come to play bridge? I only want a fourth.'

'I'll come,' said Reggie. 'It seems to me about time I put in an appearance.'

It hadn't been what Beatrice had wanted, but the smile which lingered on her lips as she turned away was no less sweet.

CHAPTER IX

TIME was like a refuge built of sand. Moment by moment slipped past Jean carrying her nearer towards the gulf of human intercourse. When the reprieve of this half hour was over, she must ask to see Beatrice. She must admit that a catastrophe, which did not arise out of her work, had put an end to it.

She could make no excuses. She could only say: 'I am very sorry. It is impossible for me to work any more with your husband. I must go.' Beatrice would understand, and she would ask no questions; her eyebrows would go up, her eyes would gleam recognition of what the catastrophe was, mixed with a slight contempt that Jean had failed to avoid it.

Didn't all wives, however indifferent to their husbands, believe that other women were to blame for their husband's infidelity? A knock at the door brought Jean trembling to her feet. She hadn't expected Beatrice to come so soon to her. Still less had she wanted Ian. She could not trust her voice to answer his; but she opened the door.

His keen friendly glance took from Jean the cruel sense of enmity between her and mankind. 'I won't keep you long,' Ian said quickly, 'but I'm sure you'll want to be fair! Would you mind talking to me for a few minutes in the china room? There's something Reggie wants me particularly to say to you for him.'

Jean followed him without a word. She had a blurred impression of blue dragon vases, Brussels' tapestries, polished parquet, and austere and frail French furniture. The brilliant little room felt like a ship upon the waves of night. A window was open onto the dark beech avenue. The moor lay beyond the trees, a deeper band of darkness. Ian sat down at some distance from her, his long legs crossed, his head bent forward. He was obviously nervous. Jean thought she would not so much mind what he had to say if he minded saying it. What had hitherto struck her about Windlestraws was that nobody--except herself--ever really minded saying anything.

'Of course I'm awfully sorry to bother you,' Ian began a little stiffly. 'You must think it frightful cheek, my asking you in here like this at all. But sometimes cheek's the best way out of things, isn't it?' He looked up at her with a slight frown and Jean gravely assented. She liked his frowning at her like that; it seemed to give a security to what he meant to say. 'You must forgive me,' he went on after a pause, 'for putting to you all kinds of things which don't usually get said to girls. Anything less than the truth wouldn't help you to see straight and a great deal depends on your seeing straight.' If he would do all the talking, Jean felt that she wouldn't mind what he said. She didn't want to have to talk herself, that would only make the fiery jumble of ugly images come back into her mind. She nodded and Ian, with a brief glance at her, fixed his

entire attention upon a green jade bowl which stood between them on a glass-topped table.

'I'm glad you'll let me,' he said with relief. 'I'll smoke too, if you don't mind--you won't yourself? It's much better having things out really. Reggie wants me to tell you that he's frightfully sorry. He doesn't send you any excuses. He only says that he knows he's behaved like a cad; and apologizes. If you could trust him, and stay on, it wouldn't happen again, and I think I may tell you from myself--he'd feel it an immense relief.'

'I thought,' said Jean hesitatingly, 'that I did trust him--as much as I had to; never very much, perhaps, he didn't give me that feeling, but enough to make him understand what couldn't happen.'

'He admits that!' Ian replied eagerly. 'He says your manner to him was perfect. You never gave him the least excuse. You helped him all you could without knowing how awfully he needed your help. What I want to tell you now is why he needed it. Then you'll be able to feel that what happened to you both wasn't a calculated brutality on his part, but just an unfortunate accident, a screw loose in the social order of things--and that it happened not to you alone, but quite as much to Reggie. More--for him it was the greater disaster!'

There was no longer between them the polished shield of his manner. Ian's eyes, quickened and intelligent, held hers with entreaty--the direct and confident entreaty of a friend. Jean wanted to talk herself now, for this was at last a person she could talk to.

'But why should Sir Reginald, why should any of us,' she demanded, 'break loose and attack each other? People who care for women as human beings don't do such things! I wasn't like a human being to him, I was a plate of something to eat--which he snatched at. Why should I forgive him for snatching?'

'Because you've got him all wrong!' Ian answered with intense conviction. 'That not realizing you as a human being, isn't really Reggie--it's the way he's been brought up! You know what cavalry officers are like? They always look on women as mud--or pretend to! It isn't with the decent ones more than a pretence. Reggie's the best fellow in the world--but he's never had those things out with himself. I daresay you're thinking "How *can* awfully fine fellows do such awfully base things!" Well, they can! Not often--but sometimes! There are special pleas for mercy between men and women--not all on the men's side either. Things aren't as clear as daylight or as safe as houses! If you want to be fair you've got to know what people break loose from! I expect you judge Reggie as a husband and father, don't you? You say to yourself--and quite right too--that his being all that is what makes what happened to you a much more shocking business? He has all the rewards of law and order, why can't he stick to them, and not behave like a pirate on the high seas? Well--the children are

his right enough, though you must have seen by now that they're a good deal more Beatrice's than Reggie's. He had to found a line, that's his idea of loyalty to his house; but he's never had any of the rewards. He's not been a husband since Oliver was born; and he's never been an acceptable husband. He has lived under a provocation as nerve-racking as perpetual gun-fire. Try to think of him--lonely--starved--pretty near beaten--with Beatrice before his eyes all day long!' Ian sprang to his feet and began restlessly pacing up and down the small light room between the sky-blue dragons.

The silence and the soft moor air crept between them and increased the sense of their confidence. Jean wondered what Ian was thinking of--what memories and what remorse his words had called up to live before his eyes? Or what relentless beauty? At last he shook himself free from his preoccupation and turned to face her.

'Then you turn up!' he said accusingly. 'Another woman! Not the kind he's used to either! He's thrown with you constantly; his mind is diseased with longing. The nicer the girl, in a sense the stiffer the tussle that must have been going on in his mind! How long have you been here? A month, haven't you! There's something in the very air!----' he broke off abruptly and listened. But the bronze beeches kept the mist upon their leaves--the moor was as silent as a desert burned out by the sun. He tossed himself into his chair as if flung back once more into the strait-jacket of an old patience.

'Well,' he said more kindly, 'a month can be a long time to spend two or three hours every day with a girl. Don't blame Reggie for what happened--if you want to blame anybody, blame the woman and far more the man--since there must be another man--who has made Reggie's nerves raw and shaken his control for ten interminable years! You have a fellow victim! I'm as sorry as he is, about you! But do you begin to see now what he's been up against? If you go away, you'll destroy the last bit of self-respect Reggie has got! That's an awfully dangerous thing to do to a man, as bad as what he tried to do to you! But after all he didn't succeed! And if you go away you will succeed! You'll rob him of his virtue! Some girls would think it would serve him right, but I have an idea that serving people right isn't part of your code?'

'No, it isn't!' Jean answered reluctantly. 'But if he's starved and suffering as you say, won't my staying on only make things worse? I don't blame Reggie after what you have told me, and I'd stand seeing him again if it were any help to him, but after all what is another woman in the house, but another temptation? If I was bad for him before, shan't I be worse for him now?'

'No!' said Ian decisively. 'On the contrary, if you give Reggie back his self-respect--and your staying on would do that--it would ease the whole show! Physical things aren't only physical, nor spiritual things only spiritual. They're a mix-up, and what Reggie wants is a lead. He could follow a woman he'd

learned to respect across any country she took him over.'

'But are you quite sure he wants me to stay?' Jean asked doubtfully. 'I understand your wanting it for him because you think it will let him off being ashamed. But will it really? Won't it make him feel worse when he has to look at me? He's a proud man, and surely proud men don't like women they've had to apologize to, under the same roof?'

'If they're as proud as Reggie is,' Ian explained, 'they mind a good deal more having driven a woman out of their house! Reggie has never in his life failed any one who has worked for him. It'll help him awfully to trust you, and he'll know, if you stay on, that you're trusting him back! I don't suppose any woman has trusted him before--certainly not Beatrice!'

Ian had been looking at Jean straight between the eyes, but at the mention of Beatrice he looked away, flicked his cigarette ash into the fire, and swung his foot to and fro with an irritable movement.

'I dare say his pride makes things worse there,' he added after a pause. 'They're unforgivable anyhow, but I can't explain! I'm only trying to show you that his failure of control this afternoon wasn't his fault. It was the breakdown of an unbelievably brave man. Reggie hasn't only physical courage--it's a bigger thing than that: he has unselfishness. He would take any risk to keep some one else safe. That's why what happened this afternoon, is worse for him than it would be for most people. I'm not exaggerating. It's broken him to pieces, and only you can put him together again!'

'I'll stay then,' said Jean, but she couldn't be nice about it. She couldn't say any more or even explain to Ian what she felt. It was as if she must be tied to a heavy weight that flight would have shaken her free from. Her pity for Reggie was larger than the obstacle to which she would be tied but it was not large enough to take away her fears. Ian gave her no direct thanks, he was silent for a moment, then he said slowly: 'I'm trying not to think of it from your point of view. What a girl like you must feel--that's too easy to realize, and far too easy to sympathize with. I hope you'll force yourself to get over that, and remember not to mix up Reggie and nature. Nature's terribly ugly when she's been suppressed--man is at her mercy. It was nature you saw in Reggie; and even if you damned Reggie and ran away from the spot it happened on, you might come on nature again any time, looking quite as ugly. Think of a man who's had four years of Flanders and ten years' marriage with the most beautiful woman of her day, who has consistently loathed him during those ten years, and yet remained before his eyes. Don't you think Reggie has been punished enough?'

Jean rose to her feet. 'I'll go down now,' she said impulsively. 'I'll make any excuse. I----'

Ian interrupted her by saying one of the things they were always capable of

saying at Windlestraws: 'No,' he said quickly, 'you can't do that; it's time to dress for dinner. Besides it's always best to go on as usual. Don't say anything. It'll be quite all right.'

He got up and wandered about the light empty room, looking at the treasures in the glass cases with appreciative eyes.

'I think they ought to lock up this Ming,' he announced half to Jean and half to himself.

Everything ended in the brief vague way things usually ended at Windlestraws.

When Jean came down to dinner, Reggie talked to her as if they had parted in the most natural manner in the world. He looked straight at her when she first came into the hall before dinner, and then, without appearing to avoid her eyes, did not look at her again for the rest of the evening. It was as Ian had told her it would be, 'quite all right.' She had crushed down her nerves and foregone the luxury of escape; in return nobody was going to take the slightest notice of her.

CHAPTER X

BEATRICE let the groom mount her because she saw that Ian was unnecessarily occupying himself with Redgauntlet.

He was cross because she had forced him to ride with her against his will, and she was prepared to let his crossness run its course.

Beatrice had the strength which ignores the outward forms of triumph. Nor did she try to propitiate Ian; she simply waited for his mood to match her own. Bad temper could not last on such a morning.

The world was white with unsubstantial mist; behind it the sun already glowed; the chestnut trees by the stable door stole slowly out of the mist, leaf by golden leaf; the cushions of moss on the roof were touched with fire, and heavy dew-drops trembled on the sprays of the turning ivy. Ladybird, Beatrice's young bay mare, champed impatiently at her bit, pawing the unresponsive paving-stones and fidgeting to be off. Beatrice slipped a caressing hand along the mare's back, settled herself comfortably in her saddle, exchanged a pleasant word with the expectant groom, and only then allowed herself to direct a faintly amused but friendly smile at Ian's sullen face.

Ian made Redgauntlet's fiery temper an excuse for not returning her smile; but when Redgauntlet had shown what he thought of gates in general and of the stable-yard gate in particular, and they were safely off down the drive together, Ian had to yield and their eyes met. The golden light pierced like shafts of spears through the brown beech leaves. Mist still hung above them, hiding the tops of the trees, but their grey, dark stems covered with delicate beads of moisture marched steadily beside them, like a silent army. Without possessing any conscious love of beauty, Beatrice was always at home in it. When she saw dead leaves, if she thought there were too many of them, she sent a man to make a bonfire; but the taste of them in the air mingled with mist was pleasant to her. She and Ladybird felt the same untutored ecstasy, when they moved briskly through the sharp sun-lit air.

Her practised hand and mind noticed and responded to each quiver of the horse beneath her. Beatrice had a real affection for what she used; without having any sentimental feeling about the creatures that served her, she always noticed and supplied their needs. She hoped the day would clear and when, at the lodge gates, the sun gathered force and broke through the mist, flinging before them a handful of the purple moor, Beatrice said to herself that now the horses would get their gallop.

She would have been surprised and slightly amused if she had known what Ian felt for the little group of silver birches standing above the rusty heather, under their canopy of trembling golden leaves. Beneath them the dying heather

was swept with cobwebs bright with dew. Shapes of flying mist hung like trailing scarves over the moor, or folded themselves into deep blue hollows; only the distance was still veiled--so that the sunshine seemed like a prisoner in a walled city. At the feel of the soft turf under her hoofs Ladybird arched her glossy neck, dilated her nostrils, and flew forward. Redgauntlet thundered beside her. At last they were off, no one could stop them, and nothing could come between them any more--the same mood held them fast.

The horses galloping side by side were filled with an eagerness as great as their riders. They shared, without knowing that they shared, the serenity of self-expression. On either side of the broad grass path the moor fled by them, crisp dead bracken and flashing streams passed them, and then sank away. Old grey stones piled high among the heather rose up threateningly and vanished; sudden hollows where brilliant brambles flung their trailing crimson leaves between tall ruins of fox-gloves opened around them like a theatre, fell back, and left them to the empty moor.

The mist rolled still farther away, though it still hid the sky. Behind it, in a space of sunny air, invisible larks poured out their thrilling streams of song.

The horses slowed up at last. 'You were angry with me?' said Beatrice softly.

'I wanted to come--too much,' Ian admitted, 'and to be deliberately alone with you--that always seems to me to be like cheating Reggie!'

'Oh, Reggie!' said Beatrice. 'Is he always to do all the cheating? I had to see you alone. Tell me about that funny girl, and what happened yesterday?'

He wanted to tell her, he wanted to share everything with her, and yet he wanted in some strange way to hide the girl with the frightened eyes, who had so steadily pushed her fright behind her. If Beatrice laughed at her, he wouldn't like it, and the old craving was on him to like all that Beatrice did.

'Of course you guessed what happened?' he asked tentatively.

'I guessed everything!' said Beatrice lightly. 'One has come across Reggie's ways with women before, you know. Though I'll say this for him--that he's usually had more encouragement. But guessing isn't all one wants, one has to know as well. About that girl I have a feeling that one might guess wrong. I suppose he let her go--in time?'

'Well--yes,' Ian admitted, 'she got away. Still, she'd been badly frightened. It was a pity. Did you know it would happen?'

'D'you mean did I mean it to happen?' asked Beatrice with a sidelong dimple. 'No! Certainly not! Not like that anyhow! I was awfully sold! And I felt rather apologetic too! I like that girl! But she's going to stay on, isn't she? She'd hardly have come down to dinner if she meant to cut and run?'

'Yes,' Ian admitted a little reluctantly. 'Reggie apologized--or rather I did for him.'

'You did--for him?' Beatrice repeated thoughtfully. 'Wasn't that--perhaps a trifle unwise? You know, my dear, you're dreadfully nice when you're apologizing!'

Ian frowned, he was aware of a growing discomfort in these explanations, which he could not understand. 'She wouldn't, you see, just then,' he said after a pause, 'have taken it from Reggie. I thought I could make her see--all there is to be said for him. It's nonsense of course, what you say--about me. If she has a feeling about me, it's dislike.'

'You think there was a great deal to be said for Reggie?' Beatrice asked with a faint lift of her eyebrows.

'Everything!' said Ian shortly.

Beatrice felt the sense of their union escape her for a moment. Ian's eyes, which till then had rested on her own with passionate persistence, hardened. But it was a familiar portent, and Beatrice felt vaguely relieved by it. He had borne her cool curiosity about the girl; it was Reggie as usual whom he was out to defend.

'I suppose then you had to give me away,' Beatrice said after a pause, 'but I don't really mind. Jean has an observant eye. She must know pretty well how the land lies already. Still I don't quite know how much she knows from you. D'you mind telling me?'

'Of course I told her nothing about us,' Ian said stiffly. 'Only about you and Reggie--I had to tell her that!'

'Yes,' Beatrice agreed, 'I see you thought you had to! Indeed, I'm rather glad you did! I wanted her to stay, and she might have refused to, if you hadn't made her sorry for him. I should have made her stay too--but on quite other grounds: I should have made her sorry for me!'

'Would you have preferred that?' Ian asked.

Beatrice laughed, a low amused laugh. 'To tell the truth, I wouldn't!' she said. 'In this particular case I prefer Reggie to pose as the victim! I want the girl to like him! And though he seems to have put rather a stopper on that for the moment, pity will do nearly as well! As for Reggie, he'll like Jean all the better for keeping a stiff upper lip and staying on.'

'What's your idea in making Reggie like her so particularly?' Ian demanded.

Beatrice smiled at him; the hostility he put into his voice was contradicted by his eyes. The horses were near together, and moving slowly, a little breathed after their long swift gallop. Their hands met and hung for a moment together as if they could not keep apart. Desire, which to other lovers was like an open path, stood like an impassable rock in front of them. Beatrice was the first to draw her hand away; but though she took her hand away from Ian, her eyes still clung to his.

'I'm not such a brute as you sometimes think, old boy,' she said softly. 'I'd like the poor devil to have something!' The smile in her eyes deepened, she leaned over and patted Redgauntlet's shoulder and noticed as she did so, the long streak of sweat on his flanks. 'Poor fiery fellows, both of them!' she said to herself.

'Aren't you afraid,' Ian asked abruptly, 'that perhaps if she stays on--Reggie may really like her? There's something about her--I don't quite know what--that's attractive!'

'She's pretty,' said Beatrice, without hesitation, 'rather more than pretty. I like those golden-brown pansy eyes--under the owl-like feathery eyebrows! And her upper lip is short. If she held her head up, she'd have a nice figure, but she doesn't quite know how to carry herself. Good bones don't help you if you slouch. But it isn't really her looks I mean. You can say anything you like to her--quite odd things it wouldn't occur to one to say to other people. It's rather like thinking out loud. I never knew a girl could be so little of a bore. Hardly at all really! If Reggie really likes her, it'll be something quite new for him! It'll make him sit up! You see I've given all the sugar I've got to somebody else--who doesn't even have to sit up for it!'

'He has to bend all his energies in trying not to take the sugar,' said Ian grimly. 'Beatrice, why do you try to make me do--what you know you won't let me?'

Beatrice flicked at Ladybird with her crop, and Ladybird broke into a light canter. 'How do I know what I won't let you?' she laughed at him over her shoulder. Ian swiftly overtook her, but when the two horses had settled down into a walk again he did not take up the conversation where Beatrice had left it.

'Suppose Reggie breaks his heart for her? He won't be any better off then,' he suggested a little gruffly.

'Reggie's heart,' said Beatrice laughing, 'has marvellous powers of extension--nothing very serious will happen to it that hasn't happened already!'

'But there's still the girl to think of,' Ian persisted. 'Suppose that later on when she sees what a damned good fellow he is she takes a definite fancy to Reggie?'

'You're awfully anxious to protect this particular girl, aren't you?' Beatrice asked teasingly. 'I'm sure you apologized frightfully well!'

'I don't care a damn about the girl and you know I don't!' said Ian savagely. 'You could plaster the house with defenceless girls from floor to ceiling without my bothering about 'em! What I do dislike is to see you making use of her! You know what happened to Char!'

'But you can't compare them!' said Beatrice, the laughter vanishing from her eyes, 'thank goodness--and besides that was your fault, not Reggie's! I don't ask *you* to try to be attractive to Jean! Leave her alone and she'll be as safe as

houses! She's not the kind that would fall in love with a married man easily, and least of all with one who happened to be my husband! You seem to have overlooked the fact that so far the only person Jean has taken a fancy to at Windlestraws happens to be--me!'

'That doesn't keep all of us so very safe!' Ian replied. 'It may be a universal habit--but there's no universal security attached to it!'

'Darling!' said Beatrice softly. 'Don't you wish we were horses! What fun not to have any husbands or wives--nor anything horrid! Just to keep in good condition and take our fences well! And never to have to go back to breakfast! We'll have another gallop now, shan't we?'

Once more the horses let themselves out over the springy turf. The air was full of the scents of crushed grass and wild thyme. Light and speed sang in their blood. Beatrice's slight figure flashed into Ian's vision. He loved to watch her ride, her hands so light on the reins, her lips close shut, her eyes making the world shine.

He felt no more questioning in his mind; whatever she did was right.

She rode without an effort and yet with a deliberate, observant care; nothing in her charge was ever over-ridden, or ill-treated. She would see that no harm happened to the girl. Beatrice hadn't been able to save harm from coming to Reggie, but she had been forced into a wrong relationship with him. She could do nothing for him and nothing for herself either. But Ian had never heard her complain of her own troubles. She took them in her stride, just as she took unforeseen obstacles in the hunting field. She never either rushed or funked anything. Deliberate, plucky, she faced what lay before her, and made the best of it. He couldn't think any more about Reggie, or the girl; his whole heart melted, and his mind ceased to stand out against her.

Beatrice had made this sparkling rushing world--and given it to him like a bright jewel. The larks, making the air ring with their shrill rapture, were her messengers--and she had spread the light upon the distant sea.

CHAPTER XI

THEY sat in silence round the breakfast table, but no conversation could have been more dire than their unspoken anger. The house was empty of guests and there was only Jean to break the danger of their intimacy.

There was nothing in the day itself to take off the sharp edge of their tempers. Rain was falling indeterminately from dun-coloured clouds upon a colourless earth. The only sound in the room was the faint vent of the flames in the small spirit-lamps on the sideboard, under the row of silver dishes. There was nothing unusual in the fact of their silence, only its quality was disturbing. They always talked at dinner, but to make up for it, they seldom if ever spoke at the breakfast table. Reggie and Ian wandered to and fro between the sideboard and the table, looking, in their scarlet coats and white riding breeches, too large and too handsome for private life.

Jean felt that they should have had gladiators to face, and the vast sanded arena of the Coliseum to move about in. There was nothing in Beatrice's serene sophistication to suggest an early Christian martyr, and yet Jean was unable to escape the impression that Beatrice at her own breakfast table was facing a danger quite as frightful as being torn to pieces by lions.

A robin redbreast popped onto the window-sill with his head on one side and sang a brief stave of sweet and piercing rapture, but the gravity of the breakfast table seemed to damp even his volatile spirit, for with a flirt of his short tilted tail, he rejoined the scarlet leaves of the Virginia creeper pressing against the window, instead of waiting for a crumb.

Reggie rustled the 'Times'; Beatrice glanced at the 'Morning Post' which lay beside her plate. Ian mutely offered Jean the choice of the two remaining papers.

No matter how sharp the intensity of their tempers, the ritual of their lives never varied. There was the same quality of relentlessness in the things they would do for each other as in the things they wouldn't. Jean could imagine that, in the intervals of murdering Beatrice, Ian would not have overlooked her usual moment for taking honey.

Beatrice appeared to be perfectly composed and even slightly amused, but once, for a moment, her hand shook, so that the tea-things rattled. Jean felt a pang of apprehension. What had they done to Beatrice to shake her iron nerve? In a second, Beatrice's hand was steady again. She even met Jean's eyes with a faint smile of reassurance.

Reggie went on rustling the 'Times,' and Ian looked down at his plate as if a weight were attached to his eyelids.

At last Reggie pushed the pile of his correspondence toward Jean with a

brief wintery smile. 'D'you mind looking through all this and telling me if there's anything I ought to do about it before I start?' he asked her with an impersonal cordiality of manner which ranked her with inanimate objects.

Jean had answered Ian's appeal; she had accepted the service he had asked of her; and in return they had pushed her off their universe into fathomless space. She reminded herself, however, that her duties still remained attached to her. 'You won't forget,' Jean said, rising to her feet, 'that you're to dine to-night at eight o'clock with the Mayor of Ashcomb? It's very important. He isn't particularly friendly to big landlords. If you could say nice things about the town?'

Reggie grunted. 'Traffic's like feeding time at the Zoo! And I don't approve of the new slaughter-house--he shouldn't have chosen the cheapest plans! As for the damned new rates----'

'Yes, just use your natural tact,' interrupted Beatrice with her swift sidelong dimple. 'A few statements in your happiest vein of personal insult are sure to go down with the Mayor!'

Perhaps she had simply meant to be funny, but the room seemed to fill with trapped lightning. Reggie slowly turned his formidable hawk's eyes on her, and drawled: 'Thanks----!' There was a moment's interminable silence, before he added with a slight pause between each of his words: 'You--ridin' Moonlighter this morning?'

Beatrice met his glance with a bright cold steadiness. 'I thought I had already told you that I was,' she answered.

Ian pushed his chair back from the table with an abrupt movement. 'You're mad!' he said in a low voice. 'You know the horse isn't fit for a woman to ride! You know Reggie's going to part with him next week. Why the devil don't you ride your own mare?'

'I prefer not to,' said Beatrice without looking at him. 'Jean, d'you mind ordering the Napier for Reggie to-night at seven? And if it comes out fine, do go with the children for a picnic on the sands.'

Ian stood holding the door open but he managed to convey that he had practically ceased to be in the room. Reggie stood by his chair, and folded the 'Times' with a deadly composure.

Beatrice slipped a friendly hand on Jean's arm, and passed the two men without a glance at either of them. 'Why have you made them so angry?' Jean murmured when they reached the hall. 'Must you really ride a dangerous horse in order to annoy them?'

Beatrice laughed. 'Why should they be annoyed?' she asked lightly. 'They know I can ride, and nothing is particularly dangerous if you know how to do it. Didn't they look funny clinging to their newspapers and longing for murder? Don't you look like a frightened hare though! Pop your eyes back into your

head and enjoy yourself with the children! I'd far rather come with you for a picnic, if you really want to know! But I never have been able to stand bullying!'

Beatrice's smile became enchanting. She had never--like the two men--pushed Jean out of her universe. On the contrary, her manner to Jean had softened into a deliberate kindness. A capricious, never-lingering intimacy came and went between them. Jean couldn't be sure of it, as she was sure of Beatrice's unvarying consideration, but sometimes, without words, she became aware of a confidence on Beatrice's side as deep as friendship. Then a shutter would slip down, and Jean would find herself once more face to face with a kind but preoccupied employer. Beatrice floated away from her with a friendly wave of her hand and Jean hastened through Reggie's correspondence, and then ran upstairs to the nursery to watch the riders set off for the meet.

Oliver leaned out of the window beside her, tense with expectation. The two men had already mounted in the stable yard, but Beatrice, who had kept them waiting a little, now came out onto the terrace. Two grooms led Moonlighter towards the mounting block. He was in a wicked mood, his eyes slanting viciously towards their sockets, his ears flattened against his head.

The moment Beatrice mounted him, he reared, rocking more and more dangerously as he towered up, a monstrous spectacle, with a groom dangling vainly in front of him. It looked as if nothing could prevent him from a complete crash. Suddenly recovering himself, he dropped his head between his front legs, and lashed out with his heels. Beatrice sat him superbly, as if she were instinctively prepared for all his murderous dodges. Her lips were curved in a steady, half-mocking smile.

'Is Mummy all right? Will Mummy be all right?' Oliver demanded, half throwing himself out of the window in his terror. Jean clutched him firmly round the waist. 'By God, he's off!' she heard one of the grooms shout. With an ugly scattering rush Moonlighter bolted down the drive. Ian's black charger was after them in a flash, the grooms ran through the trees towards the lodge. Jean laid her eyes for a sick moment against Oliver's curls. When she looked out again she saw Reggie still beneath the window, slowly twisting his monocle in his eye, and glancing up at them as if nothing had happened. 'Your mother,' he observed to the half-frantic child, 'will be all right--if she wants to be. Things seldom happen to her unless she makes them happen. I'm not so sure about the horse. But I meant to sell him next week, so I shall only drop his price whatever happens.'

'I hate you! I hate you!' flashed Oliver, trembling with passion. 'Why don't you try to save Mummy--like Uncle Ian?' Reggie laughed indulgently. 'Partly because she hasn't cast me for the role of saviour, my boy. Take my word for it, nothing annoys a woman more than to be saved by the wrong man! And

partly because I might as well try to overtake the Day of Judgment on a donkey. Sky's going to clear and you'll get your picnic all right. Hope you'll enjoy it, Miss Arbuthnot. I won't forget your advice about the Mayor.'

Reggie turned his horse's head and made slowly off under the dripping trees, as if nothing in the misty world beyond them had any significance for him.

Jean tried to soothe Oliver's rage with a calmness she didn't possess.

It was a relief when the nursery motor glided up to the front door, and Mrs. Meadows, who had been downstairs eating an interminable breakfast, appeared, starched and invulnerable, to repeat Beatrice's invitation. An eager southwest wind had blown the clouds away; but the brilliant rain-washed day only set Jean's fears deeper in her breast. She couldn't express her anxiety before the children, but when they were safe on the rocky beach under the rose-red cliffs, Jean let some of her anxiety rush out to Mrs. Meadows.

Jean knew that Mrs. Meadows expected her to look at the sea every now and then, and to read a book most of the time. If she felt restless she could play with the children, but her stubborn fear made her break through the picnic routine.

The children were scattered at the sea's edge. Alice's sharpened stupidity was at a distance mounting guard over the hamper. Mrs. Meadows sat where she could see all round her, and took out her knitting. Everything started so excitingly at Windlestraws and then abruptly stopped to finish elsewhere behind an invisible barrier. Of course Mrs. Meadows wouldn't tell her what took place behind this barrier, but did Mrs. Meadows know that things were taking place? Dreadful things like the speechless anger at the breakfast table; unknown horrors that made Beatrice's hands tremble among the tea-cups? And if Mrs. Meadows knew, couldn't she perhaps help Jean to understand how an onlooker like herself should behave? Should there even be an onlooker?

'Do you think, Mrs. Meadows,' Jean began breathlessly, 'that her Ladyship is all right? Moonlighter bolted with her down the drive this morning and--and one couldn't see what happened!'

'Quite all right, Miss, I should think,' said Mrs. Meadows composedly. 'The pantry would have heard of an accident from the lodge if any had taken place before we started. Her Ladyship always likes going faster than is good for 'er. Tempting Providence no doubt it is, to ride that ugly chestnut, but tempting Providence with a good seat is one thing, and tempting Providence without it is quite another, as many find to their cost, not having been brought up to it. If you was to sit here, Miss, on this water-proof square, the damp wouldn't rise.'

Jean accepted Mrs. Meadows' short way with science, and sat down on the water-proof square.

She was not quite sure how to pursue her subject. She watched the children

paddling in and out of small blue pools, trying to coax the unresponsive denizens of the sea into their unalluring tin buckets. Close by her a gull stumped disenchantingly over the wet sand spaces. Bounce, the nursery fox terrier, made an ill-judged rush at it, and the gull rose like silver lightning, and floated serenely off towards the sea.

'It was horrible,' she said at last in a low voice, 'watching them start off this morning. I don't think Sir Reginald wanted Lady Falconer to ride Moonlighter, nor did Major Ramsay; and the grooms looked as if they didn't think him safe. Why do you think she did it, Mrs. Meadows?'

Something important, Jean was not quite sure what, hung on Mrs. Meadows' answer. She had purposely named both men; which would Mrs. Meadows touch on in return--Reggie or Ian?

'I shouldn't be too uneasy, Miss, if I was you,' Mrs. Meadows said at last. 'Those who are used to danger take it light, though I don't hold with it myself. Not for any young person. As to her Ladyship, riding that brute when no one wanted her to--that, you may say, is what does happen when from morning till night there is nothing to be done but what you fancy or don't fancy. If you've got to have things hard--you like 'em soft, and if you've got to have 'em soft--the first thing you're asking for is a nut--and the harder it is to crack, the better.' Mrs. Meadows had avoided both their names and yet the important thing had happened. Jean felt suddenly sure that Mrs. Meadows knew everything.

'I'm very much attached to her Ladyship, Mrs. Meadows!' Jean said gravely, as if it were a confession of faith.

'So I've noticed, Miss,' Mrs. Meadows replied, without lifting her eyes from the heel she was turning. 'There's many as is attached to her Ladyship and no doubt more will be; it's only natural. She's been like that from a child. I used to say to her: "Miss Beatrice, you can't always have your own way!" and she'd answer "I can if I want to, Nannie!" and to tell the truth she generally could. She'd dare something dreadful and when daring didn't do it, she'd get round you with her coaxing ways. Not me, if you understand, Miss, I'm not one that children do get round; but her Ladyship's parents. Especially her father, Colonel Hamilton--'e was wax as you might say in her hands. Lady Margaret stood out sometimes, she being one that stepped where she liked herself without noticing what she stepped on, but even she gave way to Miss Beatrice, more than she did to any of the others. Master Oliver! You come off that spiky rock this moment, or it'll be through your trousers!'

Oliver cautiously descended, avoiding Mrs. Meadows' prophecy by a hair's breadth, and wandered off in search of another spiky rock, less overlooked.

"E takes after her!' Mrs. Meadows muttered gloomily, 'but I shan't let him! Not if I can help it! Nine times out of ten they smash what they don't want and get what they do, but the tenth time--they smash themselves! And it breaks

your heart to see them do it!'

'Do you think,' said Jean, after a pause in which she considered this revelation very carefully, 'that it's any use to her--my being attached, you know--and just staying on in case I can be of any help? Of course I'll stay till the election is over--there is quite a lot to do now--but afterwards--shall I be of use enough to make it worth while for me to stay on?'

Mrs. Meadows made no direct reply. Instead she raised her voice with unexpected resonance: 'Alice!' she cried, 'you bring Miss Anne and Miss Bridget out of them waves! It's too late in the season for them to get their knickers wet be'ind and you can tell them I say so!' Her powerful voice subsided as suddenly as it had risen. 'You fit in well, Miss,' she observed thoughtfully, 'and her Ladyship has taken quite a fancy to you, there's no denying that! Nor she's not one to take a fancy lightly. I should say, Miss, that as long as you wanted to stay on, they'd keep you!' Mrs. Meadows paused, but not quite as if she had finished saying what was in her mind. She gave a brief warning glance at the sea, as if she thought the tide was coming up too fast and might have to be put back again; then she glanced from one of her charges to the other, but they were all innocuously engaged in searching for reluctant crabs.

'If you was to hear of something more reliable-like, Miss,' she finished cautiously, 'there's no saying but what in the long run it might suit you better.'

'You would advise me to leave then, would you?' Jean asked wistfully.

'It's not my place to advise you, Miss,' said Mrs. Meadows stiffly, 'but I have 'eard that politics is uncertain.' Mrs. Meadows laid down the sock she had been knitting and once more her deep impressive contralto swept the beach. 'You bring that hamper here, my gel!' she called to Alice. 'And tell Master Oliver he can get on that there spiky rock again or have 'is lunch! He can please himself which!' Inspired by this dread alternative, Oliver skimmed safely past temptation. The two little girls ran up from the sea, giving vent to the shrill cries of tropical birds. Mrs. Meadows, having finished what she had to say, stopped talking and proceeded to unpack the hamper.

Jean had wanted to know what Mrs. Meadows thought, and now she knew. Whether Mrs. Meadows was aware of the actual incidents which had taken place at Windlestraws or not, she was fully aware of what might happen, and she did not think the situation safe for any young person.

It was hard to believe in danger on those golden sands, while Mrs. Meadows' practised hand disposed of pigeon pie, skillfully apportioning to each his share of bird, a slab of transparent jelly, and a twist of flaky pastry. The lazy waves broke indolently upon the yellow sands; the children popped ginger-beer bottles with riotous rapture; Alice, Mrs. Meadows, and Bounce ate steadily on.

They drove home before dusk fell, the children singing fitfully the tail-ends of their favourite hymns.

CHAPTER XII

JEAN was left alone to make tea by herself in the vast shadowy hall. A procession of scones and cakes were piled high on the old Worcester china; the kettle boiled serenely above a small blue flame. The two setters lay like patches of bracken at her feet. The outlines of the furniture became darker and less solid; only the eyes of Reggie's ancestors pierced the dark with their intent and speechless recognition.

Jean was glad to know what Mrs. Meadows thought; if she wanted support to make up her mind to leave Windlestraws, she had been given it. She had stayed long enough to keep her promise to Ian, and to restore Reggie's self-respect. Her mind was free to go--if her heart would let her? It wasn't any use trying to bully her heart. She knew that she was going to stay. No doubt they were all three purely predatory creatures, who were going to fall even beneath the level of their own Punch and Judy code. They wouldn't look at the things they were going to do, but sooner or later they were going to do them. They were going to be disloyal, unfaithful, brutal; and they were dragging Jean into their circle in order to break their fall. She hadn't the least idea what they wanted from her, but she knew that roses, cars, privacies, and picnics weren't spread out before her merely for her to be nasty at a pinch. Their instincts were sound. They knew she would be loyal to them, while all they had to do for her was just to have her in the house. 'The poor girl's devoted to me; let her be devoted!' was as far as Beatrice's friendship would carry. Ian's went, if anything, less far; and yet it was for Ian that Jean meant to stay. She couldn't get his look of appeal--that one straight look in the hall--out of her mind. He had buried it under his laughter; his eyes were blank now when they met hers; but it had been there--that one flash of recognition which bound her to his deepest need--and if she went away, she felt that it would be to forsake him.

The silence broke suddenly. The telephone bell rang with a steady tuneless urgency. Jean waited, because it was the footman's place to answer it, and she knew that Beatrice disliked any one performing any one else's duties; but the continuous pressure drove her at last to take off the receiver. There was a brief pause before she heard the minute distinct sound of Ian's voice. 'Lady Falconer has had an accident. Will you tell Mrs. Meadows? She must keep the children in the nursery, and get her room ready. The doctor and Reggie are coming with her by car.' She knew by the sound of his voice that he didn't want her to ask him how badly Beatrice was hurt. 'Shall I ring up London for a nurse?' she asked instead. 'Yes, please do--two perhaps,' he answered in instant relief, then he rang off, and left Jean, hurrying to the nursery, to guess how badly Beatrice was hurt.

When Mrs. Meadows met Jean's eyes, she put down the dish she had been filling. 'Here, take hold of this, Alice,' she said shortly, 'and keep your fingers away from the edge, Master Oliver, or what you get on them will be all the jam you'll have for your tea!' Then she retreated into the night nursery with Jean, closing the door carefully behind them. 'There's been an accident, Miss?' she asked quickly. Jean told her all she knew, and their eyes rested for a long moment in silence on each other. 'It was to be expected sooner or later, Miss,' Mrs. Meadows said at last. 'But I hadn't thought it would be her Ladyship. If you feel you could, I'd be obliged if you'd go back to the children; that Alice has a hen's 'ead on her when anything's wrong.' Jean nodded. She wanted to ask Mrs. Meadows why she had thought that the victim of an accident, expected or unexpected, wouldn't be Beatrice--but Mrs. Meadows gave her no time for questions; she slipped off her apron and was gone. Jean went back to the children and told them fairy stories, with cheerful preliminary woes and happy endings. Time did not pass; it held Jean viciously in front of a procession of dreadful images. At last Mrs. Meadows came back and said quietly: 'If you was to go downstairs now, Miss, you'd find your tea.'

She spoke as if that were all Jean would expect to find.

The hall was still empty. What had passed through it had left no traces. Jean sat down opposite the great silver urn and went through the ordered motions of tea-making.

A moment later she heard the hall door open quickly, and Ian, in his hunting clothes, came in, a crop still clenched in his hand. He stood looking down at Jean, his eyes drained of light. She said quickly: 'I haven't heard how she is--the doctor's still upstairs. I haven't seen Reggie.' 'They'll tell us as soon as they know,' said Ian quietly. He spoke as if it mattered to Jean as much as it mattered to him.

Jean poured out his tea, and he sat down, as if something in the ceremony itself soothed him. 'It wasn't Beatrice's fault,' he said half to himself and half in his odd recovered intimacy to Jean. 'You saw how she got off this morning? Well, she had him in hand again across the moor. He pulled like the devil all day, but he's a magnificent jumper. We found, about ten miles away in Seven Wells Comb. But there was a get-away back to the moor. It was a fast run, and Moonlighter was all over himself--they were going at the deuce of a pace--when they came on a wall with a ditch on the other side of it. He might have got over the thing, if he hadn't rushed it. It was an awkward toss--it had to smash them. The brute's back is broken; I found her under him.'

Jean said nothing. She felt that Ian liked the sense of her sitting there by him; or perhaps because she was so still, he forgot that she was there, and liked only the stillness. He stirred his tea absent-mindedly and pushed, it away untasted. He lit a cigarette and let it go out between his fingers; but he did not

turn his head away from Jean, or try to hide his shaken heart.

He had spoken as if there had never been any estrangement between them. Had he never felt it, or was it a part of his deep sense of privilege, that intimacy, too, was a mere convenience and could be used on or off, according to his need, with no sense of spiritual outrage? He took her emotions for granted as if he were ringing a bell for fresh hot water. Suddenly he looked up at her, and said:

'I know you care for her; you haven't said so, but I feel it. I never thought another woman would--not like that. I'm awfully glad--she needs it; not only now--always. Never let her down! I do myself; it's part of the price she has to pay for her--her beauty! Men can't be fair to a woman like that--we either give her every chance there is--or none at all.' He drew a quick breath, 'I don't think she'll peg out,' he added 'not this time. Perhaps it would be better if she did--for her, I mean, and for me--but I can't feel like that now.'

'Oh no!' said Jean under her breath, 'don't feel like it. She must live--for all of us!' She looked into his questioning eyes; it was as if he relied on her to make it safe for all of them if Beatrice lived. All that he had said was part of that one thought--a thought that had bound them close together; and outside that thought Jean had no real existence for him. They heard a step on the stairs. Reggie was coming down them, interminably, like an old man, but when he reached them, he looked just as usual.

'She's all right,' he said drily, stirring one of the awakened setters with his foot. 'Concussion and a crushed rib. She'll be ill for a month or two, but she's pretty tough.' One of them--Jean never knew which it was--said: 'Thank God! She's safe!' Reggie laughed. He caught it back in a moment, but too late to stop Ian from springing to his feet at the cruel sound.

'You cad!' Ian said in a low voice, 'you damned, insufferable, cold-blooded cad!' Their figures grew rigid, there was an ominous short pause, while they stood looking into each other's eyes.

Reggie was the first to relax; he said in his usual genial voice: 'Have a whisky and soda, old man; you're done in.'

Ian looked down with startled apologetic eyes at the hunting-crop he had caught up from the table. He laid it down carefully beside his unfinished cigarette. 'Thanks,' he said unsteadily, 'I don't mind if I do.'

They strolled away together into the smoking-room as if nothing had happened. But Jean sat and trembled for a long while after they had left her.

She was not as used as they were to things that nearly happened.

CHAPTER XIII

THE long, slim figure lay barely outlined under the heavy silk counterpane. Jean wondered as she stood at the foot of the bed, gazing at the white heart-shaped face, if Beatrice were still alive. The words rose up in her mind: 'Cover her face--mine eyes dazzle--she died young.' But before her fear could take root, the long-fringed lashes lifted and she found herself looking into the deep cold blue of Beatrice's eyes.

The western sun shone through the green damask curtains upon her empty outstretched hands, and rested upon a bowl of roses close to the bed. Every time a puff of air blew through the long thin windows, the scent must have reached Beatrice. Her great canopied bed with its slender posts was so high that she could look out on the lawn beneath the open windows and see a small crab-apple tree, turning scarlet against the rusting moor.

'You haven't seen this room before, have you?' Beatrice murmured in a low weak voice. 'What I like most about it is the light. That's why I keep it so empty. Things interfere with light. They say I've been ill three weeks?'

'Just three weeks,' said Jean. 'I've wanted to come to see you before, but I knew your head ached so, and as I couldn't be with you, I've been with the children as much as Mrs. Meadows would let me. Oliver has been terribly anxious; he wouldn't say anything about it, but we could see; it made him sometimes dreadfully naughty and sometimes dreadfully good. The other two have been angels.'

'They are angels,' agreed Beatrice bitterly. 'They might be anybody's children. Oliver's really mine. This bed's four hundred years old. Do you like the peacocks on it? I should like to have everything in this room burned, including myself; but I'd let you out of it alive first.'

'Ah! why?' Jean murmured. 'Why do you want to murder all these beautiful things?'

'Because I loathe Reggie,' Beatrice observed in the same detached voice, 'and they all belong to him. I suppose you know by now that I loathe him?'

'Yes,' said Jean with a little gasp, 'I know.'

'You must feel it in this room most,' said Beatrice. 'But I sometimes feel as if I'd put it into every cushion in the house. I try to keep everything looking tidy, but behind it all is hate.'

'But it's your own beauty,' Jean murmured uncertainly, 'not his. Everything you touch is beautiful!'

'I try to be fair,' admitted Beatrice. 'A wife ought to make a good show. I think I do that part of it rather well. Because you're a bad wife, you needn't be a bad housekeeper, or a bad mother either. I feel you really do owe children

something.'

'But a husband,' Jean asked, 'or any human being that one's got--like that--doesn't one owe him something too?'

'I like your "got like that"!' said Beatrice with a faint smile, 'but I don't admit I did get Reggie like that. I was trapped, and what a wild beast owes a trapper is his teeth.'

Jean said nothing. She was trying in her mind to be fair to Reggie and not to let the blind hate of sex antagonism choke the fact that the pain she had seen in his eyes was as real--more real, perhaps--than his insolence.

'He wouldn't be so bad with anybody else,' Beatrice went on after a pause; 'it's just spite against me for finding him repulsive. Lots of women adore him. He's frightfully run after. It's just a matter of taste, and I don't happen to have one for him. He sets my teeth on edge. He doesn't live with me now. He hasn't for ages. I believe he has an idea that Oliver isn't his child, so he won't, now he's got an heir, give me any more children. It's really rather funny, because, although technically Oliver is his child, spiritually he isn't. I mean I read, I loved, I prayed Ian into him from morning till night. Ian is so deep in me that I couldn't have a child not Ian's; so in a sense Reggie's right. They're all Ian's children.'

'You make me rather sorry for Reggie,' said Jean quietly.

'Do be sorry for him, I shan't mind,' replied Beatrice reassuringly. 'But don't forget I get the worst of it all round. He's perfectly free. I shouldn't divorce him whatever he did; and he'd divorce me like a shot if he could get any evidence against me. I won't give him any evidence, because if I did, I'd lose the children. Besides, love's such a funny thing, it takes two to make unfaithfulness. Ian won't be unfaithful to Reggie, not even to be faithful to me.'

'I can see that,' Jean agreed. 'He fights his heart and yours from morning till night, but he hardly ever fights Reggie. Beatrice, why don't you let him go? It's like putting out a hawk's eyes to keep him tied up here!'

A faint, cruel smile curved Beatrice's white lips. 'I keep Ian here,' she said, 'because he won't be my lover. At least he shan't desert me. My dear, men don't know what suffering is. Ian's free; he isn't a thing to be used, he's not at the mercy of any one's brute force. If he won't set me free, at least he shall see what I suffer, and as far as he can, he shall suffer with me.'

Her low voice ceased; she did not move, but it was as if without moving she had compressed herself into less space. She fixed her eyes on the crab-apple tree, which looked like a flame through the gathering mist. Jean said nothing; she could understand Beatrice's hate, but not her love.

'It ought to be for me,' Beatrice said after a long pause, 'that he keeps that loyalty he's so proud of. We have loved each other since we were children. We never spoke of it, but we meant it always. Marriage is a thing you talk of to

bring two people together. We were together without being brought. I was thirteen and he was twenty when he first went to India. We said good-bye on a road in front of a letter-box. I can remember seeing the scarlet through his legs. I felt for years afterwards as if I'd fallen over a precipice. When I saw him again it was on a leave in Paris--at the Ritz. The lights went all funny and I swear I saw the scarlet letter-box again. It was on my honeymoon.'

Jean put her hand up to her throat; her heart beat so hard that she felt afraid, but the passion which shook her was not her own. The slow scornful voice paused, stopped, and went on again.

'It's nice of you not to ask me why I married Reggie. Of course every one thinks it was for his money. Ian has no money. Reggie isn't only rich; when his cousin dies he'll be an earl; that's always something, but it's not why I did it. My mother and Reggie between them jockeyed me into it. Ian had had an affair with his captain's wife in India; they made the most of it; they kept letters back; they did all the usual dirty tricks people do for your good. I was proud and my head was turned with the stuff people talked about my looks; so when I was nineteen I married Reggie. It's rather funny when you think of it--how much alike men are. Ian believes I married Reggie for his title and the money, and Reggie believes Ian has been my lover since our marriage and that Oliver is his child; and yet it's me they despise, not each other.'

'But Ian *must* believe in you; he can't think such base things of you--if he loves you,' Jean insisted.

'Must he?' asked Beatrice drily. 'Of course he says all the decent things to Reggie--the standing-up-for-a-woman's-honour things--which Reggie doesn't believe; and to me--well, he says to me what a man says to the woman he loves when he can't have her. You see somehow or other I've double-crossed them both. Neither of them will touch me; they're both unfaithful to me, of course, whenever they can be, and they'd turn me on the streets to-morrow if I was ever unfaithful to them. I've sailed as near the wind as I've dared with other men, but never into it because of the children.'

Jean hesitated, then she said: 'I've seen a lot of them these three weeks. I thought they were--well, I believe they really trust each other. I don't think Reggie thinks--what you think he thinks--about Oliver.'

'Well, they may trust each other--' said Beatrice with weary exasperation, 'and Reggie may only cast Oliver up at me, because he'd almost *like* it to be true--I'd be more vulnerable if it were. He hates to have to respect me. I know they're friends; the war joined them together thicker than thieves; and they have a good deal in common. You see, they both have pluck, and though they're utterly different, in a way they're oddly alike; and they've got the same way of handling horses and guns. You won't believe it, but when they were in France together, just four years after my marriage, they never spoke of me. I

simply mightn't have existed. As for me, I'd have been relieved by then if they'd both been killed; but the fun of the thing was, though they were wounded, they both came back alive. Almost nobody else did. It was the same kind of poisonous luck that didn't break my head like an egg-shell when Moonlighter gave me that toss.'

'You rode him on purpose?' Jean whispered.

Beatrice considered the question; her eyes sparkled like frost in her pale face. 'It would have been fun to die,' she admitted, 'to go out like that--in their very faces; but I didn't do it on purpose. You see, I can't--because of the children. I've often said: "If this bough breaks--if this wall I'm jumping has too big a ditch on the other side----" and I've ridden for a fall, but only to chance it! If there's a God, it's His job to see I don't go out before He wants it. In a way, you know, I'm awfully religious. I say "if there's a God," but I do believe in God, though I must admit I find Him a bit of a puzzle. Hullo, what's the matter with you?' she broke off short.

'Don't--don't do it again!' Jean breathlessly implored. 'It isn't fair! You must live. I can't bear it!'

Beatrice stared at her in an amused surprise. 'Why,' she demanded, 'do you think, after what I've told you, that I do any particular good by living? And what earthly difference can it make to you?'

'I couldn't bear you to die,' Jean whispered. Her eyes filled helplessly with tears. They rested on Beatrice's eyes, with the hopelessness a climber feels who confronts the blank wall of a precipice. But Beatrice smiled a little; the hard shining of her eyes melted into a vague mist-like softness.

'You really care for me like that?' she asked. 'That's funnier still--being liked by another woman! All the other women I know--except my mother--hate me. She cares for me, poor old thing--though she did me such a bad turn. But it's awfully queer, you know, your liking me such an awful lot. We don't even really know each other.'

'I can't help it,' Jean whispered. 'I want you to live--more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. It isn't only that I like you--so--awfully much, but I can't help thinking it might come all right.'

'It might,' said Beatrice quietly, 'if Reggie were to take a mistress--a *good* mistress. You know what I mean--not a light of love. Some one who would fill his life and really make him take his poor old eyes off me.'

'You think any man *could* do that?' Jean asked incredulously.

Beatrice laughed softly. 'That's the nicest compliment any one's ever paid me,' she said. 'But any woman who could humanize Reggie could make him love her. He's not a bad sort; but it would have to be a woman he couldn't catch out, or pay. You know what I mean; he'd have to respect her; the thing wouldn't work unless he thought she was worth his while.'

'What thing wouldn't work?' Jean asked anxiously. She listened intently for Beatrice's next words.

'The satisfying, or whatever you call it, of Ian's honour,' Beatrice explained drily after rather a strange pause. It was as if she had wanted Jean to see something without her having to say it and was annoyed with Jean for having missed seeing it. 'You see,' she went on meditatively, 'if Ian saw Reggie definitely happy, in a decent long-winded way, with another woman, he'd feel free--he's said so--free to be my lover all the way round.'

Jean was silent. There were so many things to take up that she hardly knew which she wanted to handle first. She said abruptly, after a pause, something which she hadn't known that she wanted to say at all.

'Why have you told me--all this--now?'

Beatrice too paused a long time before her answer.

'Oh! well,' she said at length, a little helplessly, 'I suppose because I saw you didn't, like most girls, instantly side with one of the men; and I've told you now, because to-morrow mother comes here, and she's a clever woman who would have told you rather good lies. It's up to you, of course, to consider I've simply got in first with my own.'

'I believe every word you've ever said,' cried Jean quickly; 'and I always shall believe you.'

Beatrice closed her eyes and once more sank into a deathly stillness. Jean leaned forward to touch her hand, but Beatrice moved it out of her reach.

'I hate being touched!' she whispered; but though she hated being touched, she knew that Jean had already touched her.

CHAPTER XIV

WHAT Jean noticed first was their increasing niceness. It wasn't that she saw much of either Ian or Reggie; every day they went out early and came in late. If they weren't hunting hinds, they were shooting partridges. Their short days, filled with guns, dogs, and the scent of dead leaves, were quite independent of women. But however late they came home, they seemed to want Jean to pour out their tea. They made no arrangements for visits or visitors, and spent their evenings after dinner sitting with Jean before a cedar-wood fire. When they knew she really didn't mind, they smoked long cigars--which smelt like good tea--and then abandoned themselves to the comfort of pipes. No tension, no bitter challenge from their hidden passions broke in upon their placid deep communion. As long as Beatrice wasn't there, there seemed no point at which their intimacy clashed.

In the big house with its easy interminable hours, it was impossible to say when they saw Beatrice. They might each have had their private arrangements with the two stiff young women who had come down from London to Windlestraws to nurse Beatrice, or they might equally have both been kept out. The one subject they never touched on before Jean, although they mentioned her occasionally as a part of plans which included them all, was Beatrice herself.

Except for this exclusion, they drew Jean more and more intimately into the circle of their interests. They dumped their confidences down before her, much as a child confronts a welcome visitor with his toys. Their faces ceased to wear a guarded sophisticated look, their short nonchalant sentences no longer fenced them in. Even their chaff yielded occasionally to a serious simplicity of statement. Jean guessed that when they had first known her, they had suffered from two mortal fears--the fear of being found out, and the fear of being 'got at'; they had had to know her well enough to be sure that when she had found them out, and knew them for the engaging and, on the whole, decent human beings which they were, she wouldn't get at them by striking a personal note. They were her guarded enemies till they knew that they were safe, and her friends for life now that they were sure of her. There was something in Jean which had set their fears at rest. She was unconscious what it was that she gave them, but she saw that it was something which they both liked.

Reggie, although he perhaps profited most by imbibing the soothing draught, didn't know what it was; but Ian knew. On the night they were waiting for Reggie to bring Lady Margaret up from the station, he took the trouble to tell Jean what it was they liked about her. They were alone together in the hall. Jean was thinking to herself with a sort of exultation that this strange comfort

worked even when she and Ian were by themselves. They sat one on each side of the hearth, the dogs between them, holding their silence as if it were a living thing which neither of them wished to disturb.

Jean spoke at last, but very quietly and as if she were continuing her thoughts out loud: 'You haven't either of you said whether you like her?'

Ian half turned his head and glanced at her as if he expected what was in his eyes to add to the weight of what he merely said. 'You'll see for yourself,' he answered, after a pause.

'I'll see if I like her, of course,' Jean objected, 'but how am I to see if you do? You're both, even when you pretend to be rude, so awfully polite.'

'Not to you--we aren't--now,' said Ian, smiling; 'but perhaps we shall be rather polite to Lady Margaret.'

'Then will that mean that you don't like her?' Jean demanded.

'Not quite,' Ian explained, pushing a burning log straight with a slim impatient foot. 'It'll mean we're a little afraid of her. She's--although she's fifty--still rather too much of a woman. That sounds rude, but it isn't; that's what Reggie and I so awfully like you for not being.'

'But I'm not a bit like a man,' Jean protested. 'All the women you know are surely far more like men than I am, with their splendid outdoor strength, and all the things they can do with you, or without you!'

'Outdoor, certainly, and sporting, if you like,' agreed Ian, 'but quite awfully women--which you never in the least, thank God, are! Don't think I blame them. They're brought up to be. It's the only string they've got to their bow, and naturally they know how to use it. And of course one likes it as a game; only it's tremendously restful and nice to live with a human being like yourself. Why do you look so puzzled? Surely you've seen how it works with Reggie? You whipped the head off Reggie's bear in no time.' He laughed at her with friendly quizzical eyes.

'You mean,' she said, hoping she wasn't going to sound as if she minded, 'I don't attract him any more?'

'Well--no,' said Ian, 'not exactly. You attract him, and me too, if it comes to that, exactly as much as is good for us; but you don't challenge us, you leave us alone. I don't think I've ever known any other woman who left men alone, except Mrs. Meadows, and she's rather more of an institution than a woman. Do you understand now?'

Jean hesitated. 'Doesn't Beatrice leave men alone?' she asked timidly. 'She seems to me to keep so far away from everybody. However well you know her, you never get nearer. I've been to see her every day since she could see people, and she lets me come and stay for a long time; but I don't really feel as if I'd, so to speak, moved towards her since we first met in the rose garden. I saw her a long way off then, and she's a long way off still. You're not nearly so

far.'

Ian's eyes went back to the burning log. 'She does it beautifully,' he said under his breath. 'She knows every move in the game, and she does it, as you say, from a distance. It's the triumph of her art. You can't get near her; but she never lets you for one moment forget to try. Even you, you see, if you'll excuse my being personal, are the living proof of it; you think of her far more than you ever think of us.'

'Yes, that's true in a way,' Jean admitted; 'but I think I've always liked women better than men. I feel more at home with them; they can't--I mean they don't----'

'They don't bother you,' Ian helped her out gently, 'but though that may be true of women in general I can't be sure that you feel more at home with Beatrice than you do with Reggie and me, for instance. Is it only my natural arrogance or the truth? I know you adore her and that you don't in the least adore us, but don't you feel rather more comfortable and happy with two indifferent objects warming their toes at the fire? You know we aren't up to anything else in particular, and you rather like knowing we're not?'

Jean knitted her eyebrows together and wondered if what Ian said were true. Perhaps she did feel more comfortable with them and more afraid of Beatrice; but it wasn't quite true about the adoring. If she had for a moment let herself--but she hadn't!--she would have adored Ian quite enough. As he rose up before her, a little to the left of the glowing logs, the fire-light flickered over him and drew out his beauty. He had the grace of strength in repose, not noticing itself, but always balanced and poised, so that you knew how easy and how right action would be if action were ever needed.

Ian turned abruptly, as if her helpless eyes had summoned him, and smiled across at her. 'Come,' he said, 'tell me the truth; you're brave enough. Isn't it true that you want to please her so dreadfully, that when she's there you hardly have time to breathe? Don't think I blame you. It's precisely the way I feel myself. But you see, liking any one in that kind of way prevents you from being--well--innocent; you have, as it were, too many fish to fry.'

Jean took her courage in both hands. 'It's true what you say about me,' she admitted. 'I do want to please her; even if I worry and make mistakes--I try, and I go on trying. But you--you have a queer way of showing your desire to please her. I feel sometimes as if no one in the world--hurts her as much as you do.'

She held her breath. Of course he'd be furious, and his fury would take the form of his freezing straight up, or, worse still, putting her off with his cruel easy laughter. She knew so well now all their forms; but to her astonishment he didn't use any of them; he continued to look at her with kind candid eyes, as if she had a right to cut straight to the heart of any subject which they touched

upon.

'Ah! but that's where you score,' he explained. 'You're a woman, you can afford to be nice to her. I daren't. But don't bother about it, because she understands. I don't hurt her as much as you think. She rather likes it really. If I didn't hit out sometimes, she wouldn't be sure she'd got me in the hollow of her hand; and that's what she likes to be sure of.'

It was nice of him to tell her what she already knew. What was hard for her to bear was the knowledge itself. So long as Jean had only said it to herself, she hadn't felt so dreadfully sure of the completeness of his passion. She could never doubt it again now. She watched for a long time the colour dying out of a glowing log, first scarlet, then rose, then a pink as light as dawn, and then a heap of little grey ash.

'Why must you be against her always,' she said at last, 'when Reggie is? I think that's what I can't bear--the feeling that your--love--is turned against her like a weapon--just when she most needs your kindness.'

'But, my dear,' he said with curious gentleness, 'don't you realize her enormous strength? I have to stand up for poor old Reggie. I feel such a brute anyhow, whichever way I turn--you can imagine that! But I needn't make things worse than they are by rushing to the help of the strongest. If you want to be sorry for any of us, be sorry for Reggie. She doesn't even hold him in the hollow of her hand, she's chucked him out long ago!'

'I *am* sorry for him--I *am*!' Jean cried in a sudden flurry of expostulation. She got up quickly and stood with her back to Ian, staring hard at the darkening windows. The shadows of the misty trees blurred before her eyes; she knew that she could no longer keep them free from tears.

'I'm sorry for you all,' she jerked out; 'so sorry, that I could die of it, if dying were ever any good. But what can I do--to help Beatrice--to help any of you? You'd all be furious at my daring to want to. Why, I mustn't even seem to know there's anything to be sorry for!'

He was silent for what seemed to her hours. She daren't look round, lest she should know what was written on his face; she only had the feeling that he was controlling something, something that she didn't want him to control.

'It's awfully nice of you to mind,' he said at last in a slightly constrained voice; 'I mean--so much; but, after all, it's our own job; there's nothing any one can do. If you've got into a scrape, you've got to behave quietly and not make the onlookers uncomfortable. It's rotten bad manners if we've made you suffer for our--stupidity.'

'Oh, manners!' said Jean bitterly; 'do you think life is nothing but *manners*, and that no one is allowed to feel or see with, or for, anybody else? If there's anything horrid about you at all, it's that you shut me out. Yes, I do think that's horrid!'

Ian got up and stood beside her. 'But I don't,' he said urgently. 'What on earth do you call it--talking to you like this; or Reggie's showing you--what he does show you; and Beatrice having you with her hour after hour? Don't you see we *have* let you in? In a sense you *are* helping us--as much as any one can!'

She did not turn to look at him, but he was standing so near her that she could feel his breath was coming quickly, as if he really minded her silly tears. This made them come quicker; it was such an unexpected deepening of her own emotion to find that it had touched his.

'Look here,' he said quickly, 'I think I hear the car. If you can't pull yourself together, go straight upstairs!'

He spoke sternly, but she felt as if he wanted her to be saved from her own emotion more even than he wanted to get it all safely cleared away before Lady Margaret arrived.

CHAPTER XV

LADY MARGARET always made a good entry. She looked about her as if it hardly mattered whether tea-things or tigers were spread out before her, her dauntless spirit would be equally successful in dealing with either.

She scooped up her small grandchildren in turn, deftly disposed of them, after a brief kiss, and laid a hand on Jean's shoulder.

'Well, my dear,' she said, 'I felt sure I should see you again, and I'm not at all surprised to hear that you're a prop and a stay. It was as a prop and a stay, you know, that I picked you out in London!' She glanced from Jean to Ian as if nothing could be more natural and desirable than to find them awaiting her together. As she gave Ian her hand, she seemed to put him once for all in his place; he was her dear and trusted friend. He couldn't play any other part, or behave in any other way. He was as much arranged for as if a good producer had fixed his part in a film. She turned from him, back to Reggie, and Jean noticed that whoever else Lady Margaret took up or let go, Reggie was always her first and most permanent object. Even when she remembered to ask Belk, the butler, about his bad knee, she did it out of compliment to Reggie. She was his mother-in-law before she was Beatrice's mother, and she managed to convey that even if Beatrice hadn't so fortunately married Reggie, she would for her own sake have retained him as a son.

The note she struck in the rather sombre dusk of her arrival was one of resplendent satisfaction.

Lady Margaret was as happy about Beatrice as if a hunting accident was one of the minor blessings of Providence; she was enchanted that Beatrice hadn't been killed and that Reggie was so cleverly sure of getting into Parliament. 'Oh yes, my dear, of course you will!' she exclaimed while she accepted her tea, getting it somehow or other precisely as she liked it, without having expressed any definite wish. 'Of course you'll get in. You mustn't be too dreadfully modest. It's the type of Englishman I like best,' she explained confidentially to Jean, 'but it doesn't do nowadays. One's got to be rather more than life-size, or one never gets on to the posters. Bishops and Prime Ministers can afford to be modest, Reggie dear, but on the way up one must, I think, either shout or clamber! It's the price we have to pay for democracy. I don't say I *like* democracy; one doesn't like a tidal wave, does one? But it comes, and one's got to ride it--or be swallowed up by it. So silly, I think, to try to be prim and exclusive about a great big jostling, untidy force that's certain to upset you. There's that clever Ian now; he never does anything with all his gifts, except to discover bricks on Reggie's estate for Reggie. Oh, well, I dare say you didn't exactly discover them ready-made, but you saw how to make them; and you

know you wouldn't have done it if the land had happened to be your own! There is such a thing, isn't there, as carrying altruism and modesty and all those charming old-fashioned things, rather *too* far. Do you think Grandmamma's a Bolshevik, darlings? And is that a puff-puff you have in your hand?'

Unfortunately it was an aeroplane--and Oliver had not called trains puff-puffs for over a year; the children looked with eyes of outraged shame at their grandmother's wanton slight. Still, on the whole they liked her; she never failed to bring them chocolates or to leave behind her a trail of ten-shilling notes. The two little girls sat fascinated at her feet; they seemed to think their grandmother a great natural spectacle which might at any moment go off; but Oliver retreated to Jean's knee and dragged the rings round her fingers, protesting with every vigorous curve of his small body against the indignity of his grandmother's derogatory carelessness. But even Oliver knew it wasn't any use correcting Lady Margaret; she went straight on; her conversation lapped them all round and tucked them all up, so that none of them had the faintest chance of as much as wriggling their toes. What Lady Margaret gave them each in turn, or collectively in a fine sweep, was the picture of what she wished to believe about them, and she allowed her sympathetic manner to convince them of the wisdom of carrying out her wishes.

As soon as Lady Margaret had finished her tea, she singled Jean out to take her up to her room. Jean hoped to slip away as soon as she knew for certain that Lady Margaret was pleased with the choice of books by her bed, and the six pots of fiery chrysanthemums chosen by the head gardener to do her honour.

But it was her maid whom Lady Margaret dismissed, while she held Jean firmly with her practised eye. 'You may go now, Sarah,' she said kindly, 'and unpack later. You must want your tea. If you aren't too busy, my dear,' she added to Jean, 'do just stay for a minute or two, and talk to me about my child! I won't go and see her till I know exactly how she is!' Lady Margaret sank into a chintz-covered armchair near the fire, and motioned to Jean to sit opposite to her.

'And now, my dear,' she began abruptly, after a long significant pause, 'how are things getting on here, and what was all the stupid accident business about?'

'The--accident?' Jean murmured. 'Didn't they tell you? Moonlighter rushed a wall; and he couldn't properly clear a ditch on the other side of it.'

'Nonsense,' said Lady Margaret good-temperedly, 'don't try to talk to me about horses! I know the wretched brute's pedigree backwards; and Reggie oughtn't to have had him in the stable. But what on earth was Beatrice on him for; that's what I'm asking you?'

Jean hesitated. Lady Margaret's arctic eyes raked her mercilessly.

'Temper, of course!' she said, as if Jean had already answered her. 'I suppose all their nerves were on the jump! But was it murder or suicide, that's what I want to know?'

Jean devoutly wished that the answer as well as the question might come from the same skilled source; but there were moments when Lady Margaret was more redoubtable as a listener than as a talker.

'Lady Falconer insisted on riding him,' Jean faltered. 'I believe they'd all--they'd both--I believe everyone wanted her not to!'

'Call them all by their proper names, my child,' said Lady Margaret soothingly, 'then we shall be sure to get on quicker! Beatrice is not naturally foolhardy or perverse, though masterful; why did she insist on riding that rascal, when she had two perfectly civilized hunters in the stable? Don't you know as well as I do that one of those men was at the bottom of it? Now which one was it, or do you suppose they both were? They hunt in couples--extraordinary as it is to believe it--when you'd think they ought to be at each other's throats!'

Jean was silent for a moment, but she saw that silence was an inefficient screen; it seemed to show her as more deeply involved in the secrets of the house than the more open country of speech. 'That morning at breakfast,' she began at last, 'they were all three angry. I don't know why, I think Ian perhaps most--but they both tried to stop her. Ian spoke straight out; Reggie just asked what she meant to do, but one could see he'd spoken of it before. Beatrice had quite made up her mind--and when I asked her afterwards why she meant to ride him, she only laughed.'

'Of course she laughed!' said Lady Margaret impatiently. 'That's the only way there is to take things. And of course they begged her not to! They respect the forms, I will say that for them! But between them, those two men will murder my poor girl--if they don't send her out of her mind! Not that I blame Reggie altogether; he's in a very difficult position for any man--as stupid as an owl too, and hot-blooded--but very easily led! If only Beatrice would put herself out a little! But of course you've seen that she's more like a stone image than a girl! If she moves at all, she moves all of a piece! A ramrod woman is so daunting! She can't get out of a difficulty without smashing things up! Now it ought never to matter *which* man a woman marries if she keeps her head! I'm glad you like Ian.'

Jean felt the hot foolish colour flood her face. 'I like them all,' she said stubbornly, trying to ignore her blush. 'But I'm afraid my liking them is not much good.'

'Ah yes, it is, my dear!' said Lady Margaret with satisfaction, 'when a very nice young girl likes a very nice young man, it's all the good in the world! It's

these tied-up affections which cause all the trouble!' Lady Margaret leaned back in her chair triumphantly. She knew the value of approaching recalcitrant facts by the force of positive assertion. She threw out her statements as a clever cowboy lassos stampeding cattle; so swift and practised was her hand that you hardly saw the flying loop, and only knew that it had reached its aim when the panic-stricken steer rolled to the ground.

Jean felt herself overthrown, and the dust and ignominy of her fall were thick upon her. The one thing she hadn't meant to show had been shown.

'You're a dear good child,' said Lady Margaret kindly, 'and we must have some more of these long talks together. I've always felt that what this situation really needed was a nice girl. Men aren't such fools as they look, particularly not when they're round about thirty and have had a good deal of experience. Beatrice hasn't prevented that, you know; she's merely made it pointless. She rather likes Ian's having flirtations, but she limits him to married women, or girls so fast he needn't pull himself up. But sooner or later men want to marry and settle down, however hard hit they are with other men's wives. The great thing for you, my dear, is to steer quite clear of poor Reggie. He's quite dreadfully susceptible, as I daresay you've found out already. One doesn't much wonder--that's quite Beatrice's fault. But we must be careful not to hurry matters. Beatrice is very sensitive and quick, and our only chance really lies in the fact that she's so sure of her hold on Ian. All great beauties are just a little stupid--that's one good thing! They think they can keep a man for ever hanging to their eyelashes. And men aren't like that at all; they get tired of eyelashes. What they like is wit; their own for preference, but helped out by a woman's.'

Jean rose to her feet. 'I don't,' she began uncertainly, 'I can't understand what you mean; there isn't anything whatever to be in a hurry about. I assure you, Lady Margaret, whatever the situation at Windlestraws is, no one in the world could have less to do with it, or *want* to have less to do with it, than I.'

'That's very right and proper, my dear,' agreed Lady Margaret, covering a slight yawn. 'Young girls should always take that attitude about everything. It pays, and it doesn't let them down. But you're not a fool, and you know what I mean perfectly. Besides, I'm in this with you; it's just as important to me as it is to you, and you'll always find me at your elbow ready to give you a helping hand. Don't think I shall be tiresome and spoil your sport. I've played my cards long before you were born, and I've learned how to hold them. No one knows what card I'm going to play till I win my trick. That's the secret of a good card-player, and it's also the secret of life; one of them, at any rate. Dinner's at eight, isn't it? And I'm to see Beatrice after it? Has she lost her looks at all? No, of course not. Accidents before thirty, unless they're disfiguring, aren't very important, are they? I think that "Challenge from the Unseen," in white with gilt edges, is the kind of book I like to fall asleep over----'

'Lady Margaret,' said Jean resolutely, 'I must make you understand that I've not got any sport to spoil, and that although I'm sure you're very kind, I don't need an ally.'

Lady Margaret waved her away. 'That'll do, my dear,' she said decisively. 'All young girls need allies, and the more innocent they are, the more they need them. But even you don't need an ally more than I need half an hour's rest before I dress for dinner. I daresay you only take ten minutes. That's the main difference between eighteen and what I expect you think is about eighty.'

Jean was vanquished. She could go out of the door with her chin up, but she couldn't go on fighting Lady Margaret's suave impertinence.

CHAPTER XVI

FOR the first week of her visit Lady Margaret took complete possession of Reggie. Politically she was a tower of strength. No one could have had a more persuasive way with voters or given more confidence to the candidate himself. Jean had only to stand aside, and it was not until she found how often Ian stood aside with her, that she found herself suspecting Lady Margaret's political zeal of having a divided aim.

Jean couldn't do anything to prevent this isolation, because Lady Margaret's way of obtaining her desires was simply to walk off with the obstacle in her pocket.

But Jean was not left long alone to consider how to play a game--which, if it hadn't been a game, might have been so pleasant an interlude. Beatrice, against all the doctor's orders, came downstairs. She looked like a ghost, but she brought her beauty with her; and her mere presence shifted all their relationships.

She said: 'You'll stay with me, Mummie, won't you?' and Lady Margaret, prepared to take the field with Reggie, resolutely took off her things and settled down by the fireside. Ian no longer found a dozen excuses a day for talking to Jean; he was tethered by an invisible hand to within a few yards of Beatrice's sofa. It seemed to be taken for granted that somebody must go with Reggie to his meetings, and that the somebody had better be Jean.

It was raining and Jean needn't have sat in front with Reggie, but a glance at his face decided her. She saw that he took it for granted that she would wish to avoid being alone with him.

'You'll go inside, won't you?' he said, opening the door for her quickly to make it easier for her. 'I doubt if it'll clear.'

'I'd rather go in front with you,' Jean said steadily.

Reggie shot a questioning glance at her, tucked her carefully in, and swung himself into the seat beside her. They were shut into a dim glass world with a moving screen of dripping trees on each side of them.

The memory of their struggle rose up implacably between them. Jean felt that Reggie was as conscious of it as she herself. With every minute of their silence it seemed to take shape and become more formidable. Silence was easier for Reggie, for he had the car to drive, and he possessed as well the country-man's natural independence of speech; but for Jean it was a defenceless torment. The rain had lashed the colour out of the moors, they stretched away upon each side of them like the backs of broken waves. There seemed nothing without or within capable of freeing Jean from the barrier of her speechlessness.

Suddenly Reggie gave a short friendly laugh. 'It'll be rather a joke,' he observed, 'watching what'll go on now that Beatrice is downstairs again. Greek meeting Greek--eh, what?'

Almost any speech was better than none, but Jean had thought pretending would have been easiest; and she saw that Reggie wasn't going to pretend. If he had got to talk at all, he meant to talk straight. He wasn't going to lapse out of the intimacy he had earned in their long three-sided talks, simply because the first few moments of being alone with Jean was always awkward for both of them.

'You must feel that Lady Margaret is a friend,' she said tentatively. 'She seems awfully fond of you.'

'D'you think so?' asked Reggie, putting on speed a little viciously, so that they dashed through the puddles on the road like a sea-plane lathering up the surface of a bay. 'Well, I dare say she is. A cat is fond of a mouse when she's caught it. I saw a little fellow once--a mouse I mean--trying to shelter himself on a cat's breast; soft place and all that--thought it 'ud get away from the claws that were doing it in; didn't realize that it was only another part of the same beast. It didn't serve him long, though, poor devil!'

'You shouldn't talk like that,' Jean protested. 'You would give any one a perfectly false impression of Lady Margaret. Whatever she wants of you it isn't to destroy you.'

Reggie flashed a sharp glance at her. 'That's nonsense,' he said shortly. 'I can't stand humbug. We've got past all that. We can be friends if you like, or enemies if you like; but we aren't going to mess about shuffling. You know as well as I do that Lady Margaret's got a game on, just as a cat's got a game on with a mouse. I don't say that they are out to destroy what they're playing with. Perhaps they both have benevolent intentions. I judge by results. She's played one game with me already, you know.'

'Your marriage?' Jean asked, just above her breath.

'My marriage,' agreed Reggie succinctly. 'I'm not much inclined to let her start another. Beatrice has a game on too; and their games don't match. It'll be a joke seeing who wins: not that it makes much difference to me personally, for whichever of 'em wins I stand to lose. I quite realize that, of course. Nice of you to come with me to-day, though.'

'I would have come with you before if you had asked me,' said Jean steadily.

'You know I couldn't ask it,' said Reggie, busying himself with the car.

Jean wanted him to feel that they were friends, but she didn't want to have to say it; and after a moment or two she knew that Reggie understood and wouldn't make her say it. When he spoke again there was a new confidence in his voice.

'I suppose you know what Lady Margaret's game is?' he demanded.

Jean hesitated; there was probably no subject she less liked to open than that of Lady Margaret's game; but she felt that she owed it to Reggie's confidence in her not to evade any discussion he promoted, so that she said after a pause:

'She told me--part of it, anyhow; and I told her that I didn't play games with people at all, and that I shouldn't dream of interfering with any of you.'

'No, I didn't suppose interfering was your line,' agreed Reggie. 'But you must admit she plays a good hand; and, by Jove, she does a cleverer thing than that, she plays a bad hand damned well. I don't mind telling you that the hand she's playing now is a bad hand.'

'You mean she oughtn't to do it?' Jean asked cautiously.

'I don't say that,' replied Reggie reflectively. 'Heaven knows it would be a good thing for Ian to get clear, and I haven't the right to grudge him the means she's taking to clear him; but I know who's got the cards. Beatrice'll beat her; she won't clear him.'

Jean took this judgment in silence. How much of it was a personal warning and how much a mere statement of opinion, she had no time to ask herself. There was something further that she wanted to know, even at the expense of having to put into words what she had hardly dared to let herself think.

'I told you I knew Lady Margaret's game,' she said at last, 'but I haven't the faintest idea of Beatrice's.'

'Honour?' Reggie asked, a queer little smile touching the hard line of his mouth.

'Honour,' said Jean. 'Will you tell me? I suppose I oughtn't to ask you. Even if you tell me, I shan't do anything about it; but I'm awfully fond of Beatrice; if I can't help her get whatever she wants, I'd like not to hinder her.'

'Really?' asked Reggie incredulously. 'You mean you'd go bang against what Lady Margaret wants to do for you?'

'I don't want things done for me like that,' Jean explained impatiently. 'No matter what they are. And I do want to please Beatrice.'

Reggie gave another short laugh. 'You do, do you?' he asked. 'Well, I'm afraid you wouldn't want to continue to please her if you knew what her game was. I'll tell you that much. I can't tell you more now, I'm afraid; but perhaps I will some day, if she doesn't. She's quite capable of stating it herself, though, hanged if she isn't; once she's got you sufficiently under her thumb.'

'I don't think I really get under thumbs,' Jean replied quietly, 'however fond I get of people.'

'You're wise,' said Reggie rather drily, 'or damned lucky--I don't know which. However, in this particular instance I admit it would suit my book to have you get under Beatrice's thumb. It's an odd start for a man and woman,

who don't get on, to have the same book--isn't it?--and it ought to produce a good result. But I'm not sure, though we do both happen to want the same thing at the same time, that we're going to succeed in getting it.'

'You think Lady Margaret will prevent you?' Jean asked him, wondering more and more what this plan was which had so strikingly united Beatrice and her husband.

'She'd put a spoke in our wheel, of course, if she could,' said Reggie meditatively. 'However, she doesn't happen to be the person I'm most afraid of.'

'I don't see why you should be afraid of anybody,' said Jean cautiously, 'if you don't want to do anything wrong?'

'When everything about a situation is so damned wrong,' said Reggie a little impatiently, 'it's difficult even to get out of it right. *A la guerre--comme à la guerre!*'

'I suppose you--I suppose you and Beatrice couldn't get on better,' Jean ventured, 'not even if Ian went away?'

'Ah! we've tried that,' said Reggie frankly. 'It didn't work at all. It was positively crashing! She hated his going and took it out of me. I hated it too. I think a lot of old Ian. We get on like a house on fire--always have. It's lonely when he goes off. Other men turn up, too. She must have some one, you know; and I've got to have other women. Am I a cad to talk to you like this? Girls know everything nowadays, don't they--even the good ones? And anyhow we're friends, so we've got to talk straight to each other, haven't we, or not talk at all?'

'I don't mind your talking straight to me,' agreed Jean. 'If we could only find a way out for either of you.'

'It isn't much of a show whichever way you look at it, is it?' Reggie agreed apologetically. 'But when Ian's away, it doesn't seem to work at all. There aren't the hours off, for one thing.'

'It seems to me terrible,' said Jean gravely, 'for all three of you; but I think you make it worse by being so unkind to Beatrice. I could talk to you better, and be more your friend, if you were kinder to her. After all, she doesn't get any real happiness out of it, any more than you do. The thing that holds you together tortures you both; but surely you needn't torture her as well?'

Reggie was silent for a long while. He didn't suggest that Beatrice tortured him, and on the whole probably tortured him the most; he made no protests. The soaked lanes flew by, the hedges, sodden and heavy with the weight of leaves, looked as impermeable as stone walls.

'My dear,' he said at last. 'D'you remember that day, a month ago, when she took that toss? If the doctor hadn't said she'd get well, Ian or I would have had to go West. We were accountable. I suppose that's why I'm hard on her. That's

why I laughed when one of you said "Thank God!" Sounded funny to me, dragging God into it. He never has been in it--much, you know!'

Jean sat motionless, reliving the scene in the hall.

'But, Reggie,' she said at last very gently, 'if you feel like that, why must you be so cruel? I know she's cruel to you--I suppose because you're like a lock on a door to her. She can't get out. But if you were less unkind, she would get to know it was marriage, not you, which was locking her in. You say awful things to her--far worse than you think, and it isn't like you to be cruel.'

Reggie was silent for a long time; then he said: 'You're rather a darling, aren't you? All right, I won't say it again; but it had to be said. I used not to believe in the generosity of women; but you're pretty generous. No one has ever said a kinder thing to me; and I suppose you're the person from whom I've least deserved it.'

'I'd be silly not to know what you're really like, now that I've seen so much more of you,' said Jean quickly. 'But it doesn't matter what I think! It's Beatrice that matters to you; and in a way it's Beatrice that matters to me. I came here for her.'

'We're coming into the town now,' observed Reggie; 'perhaps it's as well we can't talk any more at present. You've given me a lot to think about--besides politics. I'm glad that it's the last week before the poll. I'm pretty sick of it all this window-dressing tosh. I've gone in for it to please Beatrice, but of course I shan't please her. If I win, she'll wish it was Ian, and if I lose she'll know I'm to blame for it. You see, I always know that every time I open my mouth I shan't please her, and somebody else will. Rather gets on the nerves, you know, that kind of thing, when it's gone on for ten years at a stretch. I think I used to be rather nice to her at first. I meant to be.'

'She must know that,' said Jean eagerly, 'and she must hate herself for hurting you. Of course it's not you she minds; it's just not having what she wants because of you, that she hates. But you see, Reggie, if you were kinder, it would make her like you more. I can't explain quite what I mean, but I've been watching you both. Married people have so many fibres stretching out into the curtains and chairs--all the habits of the day are bits of tendrils; and you hit out at her over them--and cut her to the quick. She's proud and cuts you back. You aren't fighting for what you're *really* fighting about; you're only lacerating each other--like cats in a bag trying to tear a way out.'

'Granted cats,' said Reggie, steering carefully through the filling streets, 'and the bag, and all that; but there's something you aren't on to either. It doesn't work the way you think it does between men and women. If I were kinder to her, she'd hate me worse! Besides, I'm not the sort of man that can afford to be kind to women. Now I've got my heir, I leave her alone. That's as much as she can expect. It was hard luck for both of us the two girls came

first.'

Jean was silenced; she felt the truth in what Reggie said. Their position itself, with its inflexible demands, drove their spirits down into the mud beneath them like piles of wood driven down to support palaces in marshy lands. You couldn't expect them to pull their splendid house down to save their struggling souls. She was glad when the town caught them at last; slate-grey and dull-rose, it clambered above the dark rain-spotted sea.

Jean ran hurriedly over the points of his speech. She hoped Reggie would remember the fishermen--although she hadn't dared stand up much for them because of the shopkeepers. Middle men are dangerous; and it was her job to safeguard Reggie from the dangers of not supporting the strong.

The lunch was an uproarious, rather barbaric meal. The guests were twenty of Reggie's chief supporters, invited to the best hotel, to pat him on the back and to drop a hint here and there, as to any point they feared he might overlook.

Jean heard again and again the same short views on privileged life, the same genial selfishness, the same assured conviction that the power, honour, and glory of England lay with one particular class, and that whatever any one else claimed in any other class was bad for them and worse for the country.

Reggie made a good host. His eyes twinkled with pleasant cynicism; he was as genial, as unscrupulous, as the rest of them, and rather more assured. Jean had not realized before that Reggie was the great man of the district, and that in spite of his personal modesty he knew that he was. She could hardly believe he was the same human being, who had for a moment drawn aside the veil of his protective ease, and shown her his beaten heart.

An hour later he stood on the platform of a crowded hall and addressed his audience without a sign of flurry.

Reggie was no orator, and though he kept steadily enough to Jean's cleverly chosen points his personal vocabulary was limited. He was really at his best when he was heckled. He enjoyed a fight, and Jean felt vaguely hurt by his good-tempered skill. Reggie was never unfair to his political opponent, though he had never had to look in vain for a weapon, or had to stand on his own feet unequipped. Jean thought to herself that his courage was perhaps the greatest of his privileges. The men who attacked him weren't great county magnates. They had hard needs, and insecurity stood behind them. Reggie didn't want people to suffer. He wanted the lower classes to be docile and well cared for by their betters; although it had never occurred to Reggie himself to be docile or that he had any betters. He saw no reason why the qualities his own manhood rejected shouldn't be gratefully accepted by nine-tenths of the manhood of his country.

Reggie glanced only once at Jean, when he had finished speaking, as a

good boy looks at his governess to make sure of her approval. Jean didn't hesitate to give it to him; she saw that he was a good boy.

He didn't like a lot of noise and people; he disliked speaking in public; being conspicuous on platforms was vaguely humiliating to him; and like Coriolanus, he particularly resented having to be genial to people he didn't care for. All these things he had borne, and borne gallantly, partly to please his wife and partly for the good of his country. It was time that he drew a line somewhere. It would have been politic to take some of his neighbours home in his own car; but he got rid of them instead with casual skill, and drove Jean home alone.

Jean was afraid Beatrice would not hesitate to haul Reggie over the coals for this lapse in expediency, but to her relief, Beatrice looked rather pleased than otherwise when they came into the hall alone.

CHAPTER XVII

THE great week was over. Even Windlestraws had been faintly stirred by the reverberation of its candidate's doings. There had been dinner-parties every night, and Reggie hadn't shot a bird.

In the town itself, where they almost hurried after ten o'clock every morning, their conflict was as breathless and uncertain as the movements of a swarm of bees when their hour strikes and they drift, a multitudinous crush of swirling lives, hither and thither in the neutral spaces of the air.

Jean couldn't grasp any tangible signs of success. Their cars and the cars of their opponent shot up and down the streets, all placarded and garlanded alike with opposing statements and identical conciliatory smiles. Every one was vociferating pledges they couldn't keep and describing millenniums they would hardly have wished to share. Their activities were intense and their mental stagnation was screened by the incessant sound of brass bands, differing as little in their noise as they did in their patriotism, and both giving the same impression of fervour without purpose.

No one could have imagined that Reggie cared whether he was elected or not; his manner was a successful blend of gallant friendliness and jovial indifference; but Jean suspected that in the case of failure he would be a shade more cheerful and friendly than if success took him off his guard.

It was polling day at last and they all drove in to meet their fate, undisturbed by a November fog, in a gale of chaff and laughter. Beatrice successfully concealed the last physical vestiges of her accident. She still had hideous headaches, but they hadn't prevented her from motoring in and out of town and entertaining all day long. Reggie's agent was enchanted with her help. The local papers repeated thrilling details of her accident; her pluck was extolled and her beauty fondly flaunted. She stood by Reggie's side on balconies and platforms with the loyalty of a devoted wife. She tossed apt words from her car and lingered in public places, giving her confidence to the crowd as if she were one of themselves. She was enthusiastically seconded by Ian, who behaved like the best man at a wedding. He doubled Reggie whenever he could, spoke for him at street corners, addressed overflow meetings, and was always making notes of things which Reggie couldn't be bothered to remember. Before these two most efficient helpers Lady Margaret and Jean melted imperceptibly into the background; but even in the background, where they rather thankfully found themselves, they had plenty to do. They had to talk to influential dowagers, hand round cups of tea, ooze pamphlets, and answer difficult questions. On the day itself they found themselves alone together for a few moments, in the big, desolate hotel lounge.

It was full of preparations for tea, and harsh with an age-long accumulation of cigarette smoke. Lady Margaret and Jean had been on their feet for hours, and would be again, when the people Beatrice had invited began to collect for tea. Reggie and Beatrice had dashed out to make their last appearance before the results were declared.

Lady Margaret put up her lorgnette and took a long friendly glance at her young friend's face.

'It's rather funny, isn't it?' she observed, 'watching poor Ian trying to work the extra cubit off his stature! He's very good-natured about it, but he can't very well hide that he has three times Reggie's brains as well as twice his looks!'

'His wits may get in his own way, but they don't get in Reggie's,' Jean said quickly.

'Ah! you've noticed that,' murmured Lady Margaret appreciatively. 'It's odd how Ian can suppress everything he's got, to serve his friend--except the only thing his friend has a right to ask him to suppress. A bad conscience makes such a hero of one, doesn't it?'

Jean frowned. She wanted to deny Ian's bad conscience without drawing attention to her acceptance of his heroic qualities; but the twinkle in Lady Margaret's eyes warned her of her danger. She fell back on a defence of Reggie, even though she knew that this would be considered by her redoubtable antagonist as a technical defeat.

'Reggie hasn't,' she agreed, 'what you call an intellectual mind, of course. But is that what people want? He has a practical one.'

'Certainly not,' agreed Lady Margaret heartily. 'Nothing upsets Punch-and-Judy people so much as anything at all like intellect, and most of us are Punch-and-Judy people--especially in politics. We like to scatter up subjects like sparrows do a puddle. But Ian hasn't got as much mind as all that, you know. He's quite as good a sport as Reggie, only he has a clever tongue into the bargain.'

'But isn't Reggie rather wise too, sometimes?' Jean persisted. 'You've no idea how promptly he settles hecklers; and, everywhere we've been, he seems to be awfully liked and respected.'

'He has over twenty thousand a year, and he's a capital landlord,' said Lady Margaret a little drily. 'But granted that sporting people and agriculturalists are barely all there, it doesn't follow that they don't demand rather more brains in a leader than they possess themselves. I dare say wise men can safely answer a fool according to his folly, but if another fool tries it on, depend upon it, the most abject idiot would object!'

'But, Lady Margaret,' exclaimed Jean in astonishment, 'do you think Reggie a fool?'

Lady Margaret looked for a moment a trifle put out. Her imagery had

carried her, if not further than she meant, rather further than she wished Jean to know that she meant, but she was too wise to retract. 'My dear,' she said frankly, 'I'm bored, I'm cold, and I think I'm going to have an ear-ache. I'm dying for my tea, and we've got to wait till Mrs. Moggs the Mayoress comes in to share it. Under those circumstances you must overlook a little personal spite. I've only heard Reggie say about ten times in the last half hour what the backbone of England is--and *if* I'd had my tea, I'm sure I should have agreed with him.'

'I don't think he's a fool,' Jean repeated, refusing to be turned aside from her safe defence of Reggie. 'He does say the same things over and over again, of course, and to my mind he talks the most awful nonsense--though I've provided him with most of it myself--politics are such twaddle, aren't they?--but if he thought at all, if it were, I mean, his *game* to think, I believe he'd do it awfully well. I've thought about it a lot, and it seems to me the trouble with them both--Reggie and Beatrice--has been that they're too important to think. They only have to put their foot down--or ask some one to lunch.'

'Well, thinking isn't his game,' said Lady Margaret impatiently, as if she thought that putting your foot down or asking some one to lunch were, after all, the more sensible plan. 'But, if Reggie's made you think he's got brains, he must be up to some mischief. You'd better be careful, my child. Reggie's hairy-hoofed, he's got more than one girl into a scrape before now. From the first I've been afraid he'd take a fancy to you.'

'Oh, but he hasn't--I mean I don't think he is--not *now*!' said Jean incoherently, aware of her dire tendency to be a young girl and blush, whenever Lady Margaret took the trouble to probe her.

'Not now!' replied Lady Margaret quick as a flash. 'My dear, if he once began, you may be sure he won't stop half way! The man's a born hunter.'

'But he knows it isn't--he knows it wouldn't be----' Jean began, flurried from point to point into complete exposure by Lady Margaret's ruthless eyes. 'Really and truly I'm not the least his sort. He and Beatrice, without knowing it, have heaps more in common. It's Ian that hasn't, in spite of everything, got a real playfellow.'

'He's got you,' said Lady Margaret with terrible decision.

'Oh no, he hasn't,' said Jean vehemently, 'unless you call having "got" a person just using them when the person they want isn't there. I don't think men need minds in women if they have them themselves. Ian, I know, doesn't.'

Jean pulled herself up short. It wasn't only the misery of having shown Lady Margaret how well she knew Ian; she was shaken by the memory of an incident that had happened the day before. She had been talking to Ian about a new book--they read exactly the same ones with the same kind of eagerness, and they had fallen upon the discussion like starved animals upon an

unexpected meal. The moments flew by them; and then Beatrice came and stood in the doorway--and smiled.

It was such a little smile; not in the least a summons, hardly an interruption; for she had merely smiled and, turning her back on them, wandered away. But instantly Ian's interest had floundered. Jean surprised a look on his face as if he had been roused from a task to a supreme reward. He didn't drop the subject of the book, he merely forgot its title and mixed up its author. He left her gratefully, as soon as Jean could find him a suitable pretext for escape, but the look in his eyes remained with her still.

Lady Margaret nodded as if she were following some train of thought not unlike Jean's own. 'Well, well,' she admitted with a sigh, 'I don't see that anything can be done about it at present. But I may tell you I don't at all despair--only for heaven's sake *don't* start being impressed by Reggie. I dare say you think you're perfectly safe, and that girls don't fall in love with two men at the same time. Fiddlesticks! A man who knows how to play his cards can win any girl up to a point--and a point which can perfectly put her out of the running for other men. Ah! that's Mrs. Moggs. Why do women like that look, when they wear their best clothes, as if they were running a potato-race tied up in a sack? Once unloose them and they become human! How enchanting of you, my dear Mrs. Moggs, to come out on an unpleasant day like this! The atmosphere is like toast under a poached egg, isn't it? But--thank God!--the Labour people have fewer closed cars than we have! My daughter will be here in a moment. She's so looking forward to seeing you! But do let's have tea, Jean, before the hero and heroine appear; one gets so little chance of anything solid afterwards.'

When Beatrice came in at the end of an infinitely fatiguing day, the room ceased to be dead and stale; half a dozen men sprang up from nowhere; there was light and laughter, and an indefinable sense that to make the best of oneself had suddenly become acutely worth while.

Beatrice showed no sign of activity. She sat on a battered leather chair with her hands in her lap, while the men rushed to bring her tea and scrambled for the right to hand her cakes, which she wouldn't even look at. She didn't say very much, and what she did say hadn't any particular brilliance, but her eyes rested on them each in turn, and in every glance there seemed to shine a fresh and special revelation of what Beatrice could achieve.

Reggie sauntered in; he looked across the room at his wife, and let himself be swallowed up by a bevy of supporters; but, in his glance at Beatrice, Jean saw the same provoked attention. He had had to look at Beatrice first even though he hadn't wanted to see her at all.

Ian followed later, bringing a batch of figures with him. They weren't final, but they were promising. He went straight to Reggie, and to every one else--

even to Jean--before he found himself, as if drawn by cart-ropes against his steady will, by Beatrice's chair. Beatrice's few casual words and her light infrequent laughter were for the others; but once her eyes met Ian's--it was when the agent dashed in with the final figures and they were sure that Reggie had won. Beatrice looked at Ian then, not at Reggie.

A moment later she had risen with her unhurried grace, crossed the room to where her husband stood, and laid her hand on his arm.

'Well done, Reggie!' she said kindly. 'I really am most frightfully pleased!'

Jean, who was standing close to them, saw Reggie's arm stiffen under the touch of Beatrice's fingers. He too had caught that first swift glance of Beatrice's which had been for Ian. Beatrice was pleased; but Reggie had been right when he had told Jean that it would not be with him.

The interminable afternoon became more exhausting after their excitement waned and certainty and congratulation took the place of anticipation and suspense. They had to go on being nice when there suddenly seemed nothing left to be nice about. At last Beatrice and Jean found themselves standing in front of a dingy glass in a chilly cloakroom, putting on their things.

'You're glad?' Jean asked Beatrice. 'You're *really* glad, aren't you?'

Beatrice looked at her own image with a careful eye and, seeing that in spite of the havoc of the day it only needed a touch or two to improve it, nodded.

'I think,' she said with her usual serene candour, 'that I always like what I intend to have happen, *happen*! Besides--oh yes, I am glad. We should have looked such fools if we hadn't won, shouldn't we? Why do you ask? Didn't I look glad enough?'

'You look everything you ought to look always,' Jean assured her, 'but you didn't--you didn't look at Reggie first!'

'At Reggie? Why on earth should I?' demanded Beatrice. 'Do I ever look at him if I can possibly help it? I spoke to him appropriately when I thought I was expected to show a suitable interest. You surely didn't expect me to act in any other way?'

'He's done what you wanted,' Jean protested with a sinking heart; 'aren't you even a little pleased with him for doing it? He'd *like* you to be pleased!'

Beatrice turned from the glass, laughing gently. 'What a funny child you are!' she observed kindly, 'always wanting everybody to be pleased with everybody else! Reggie's done a sensible thing which will be for his own credit, and you and I have helped him to do it. Thank God it's all over now, and we can get away from people! I do loathe people, don't you?--especially when they have to be thanked and smell of wet straw!' She laid her hand on Jean's arm and led her away. Even that slight caress was unusual in Beatrice; it made up for the infliction of the even slighter snub.

Lady Margaret was waiting with Reggie by the side of the car.

'Will you get in, Beatrice?' she said quickly. 'The Drummonds are inside. Reggie's giving them a lift. There isn't room for all of us, but Jean can perfectly well wait and let Ian take her home in his two-seater.'

Beatrice stood on the hotel steps under the big arc-lamp. The smile on her face was accentuated by the faint lift of her arched eyebrows. 'I'm frightfully sorry,' she said; 'you must explain to the Drummonds I've got such a splitting headache, I couldn't go inside a shut car. Jean can have my place, and Ian will drive me home instead.'

For a moment nobody said anything. Reggie took the driver's seat with an imperceptible lift of his shoulders, the Drummonds made friendly sounds from the interior of the car, and Lady Margaret continued to look at her daughter. Jean thought she was going to speak, for her lips opened and she held her hand out, as if to keep Jean from approaching the car. But after a moment her lips closed and she let her hand drop.

'I'm so sorry about your head, dear,' she said mildly to Beatrice. 'Come, Jean!'

When they drove off Beatrice was still standing on the steps under the blazing light. There was no sign of Ian, but neither was there in Beatrice the least suggestion of suspense.

CHAPTER XVIII

JEAN sat in the little stuffy fourteenth-century church with Oliver pressed against her side. It was a great promotion for Oliver, for usually the children went only to the children's service to evade the alternative burden of the Litany or the Ten Commandments. But when Oliver heard that Jean was going to church alone, he felt that he would acquire a mysterious grown-up charm by giving up his afternoon walk and acting as her escort. Mrs. Meadows had merely observed: 'Very well, Master Oliver, then you must sit it out.' And Oliver up to the Second Lesson had sat it out. He had found sufficient reward in the belligerency of the first hymn, 'Fight the good fight,' and in contemplating the stout figure of a crusading ancestor. Unfortunately he knew Guy de Falconer a little too well, and although he enjoyed, he could not share in, the occasional infamies of the choir-boys. Still, it was not until Mr. Ames began the Second Lesson, a long, enervating Pauline tract, that active regret seized him. The gory felicity of the Old Testament might have saved him from disaster, even the small-scaled catastrophe of Ananias and Sapphira; but Saint Paul's rather gloomy views on matrimony ran off him like water from a duck's back. A dire thought flashed defencelessly into his mind. Suppose Mrs. Meadows and the two little girls should discover a new waterfall without him? Trembling seized him. Jean bent down and asked him what was the matter? How could he say that he saw a brand-new cascade tossing a splendid veil of spray over an unknown precipice? She might not think the waterfall existed. Was Christopher Columbus himself *quite* sure of America until he leapt upon its strand? Oliver mumbled forlornly: 'I must go out.'

'But, darling,' she whispered, 'why must you?'

'I just must.'

'But, Oliver,' Jean persisted, 'what would happen if you just didn't?'

Oliver shook his head; he bit his lips and enormous tears rose in his eyes and splashed noisily on to a new prayer-book. He didn't shed them simply to move her, they were squeezed out of him by the speculative waterfall; but he saw with relief that his mysterious urgency had beaten her. She said weakly: 'You're not ill?'

He could have used that as a lever also, but he daren't; it wasn't necessary, and being ill almost always led to physical humiliation. You did not add to what you could do by illness, you subtracted from it. Oliver shook his head vigorously; but the tears splashed on. Jean yielded and moved aside for him to pass her. He had hoped she would go with him, but she hadn't been moved enough for complete surrender. He must face, alone and unaided, the hostile curiosity of the captive congregation. He passed her, reddening to the ears, and

creaked down the aisle, with all the lonely courage of Guy the crusader, who lay so peacefully under the stone behind him.

Jean remained uneasily tied to Saint Paul's celibate expostulations.

When she came out of church the reluctant winter sun had completely vanished and the Park was swallowed up in mist. There was no moor beyond it. Windlestraws itself was a mere thickening of a milk-white wall.

Bridget and Anne were playing in the hall without Oliver. Jean thought for a moment that Mrs. Meadows was executing justice upon Oliver's shattered consistency upstairs; but when she said to Beatrice with a lift of the eyebrows: 'Is Oliver in the nursery?' Beatrice answered, 'No, of course not. Surely he was with you?'

There were a few minutes of confused search, and then they all gathered in the hall and looked blankly at each other. Oliver wasn't in the house and hadn't been seen by any one since he left it with Jean.

The first thing they all tried to show Jean was that she wasn't in the least to blame. They wouldn't let their own fears touch them until they had eased hers. The church was a mere step from the house, the child wasn't ill, he was always allowed in the Park alone, there was no real fog. They said all these things before Beatrice would allow herself the freedom to demand where on earth he could have gone. But by the time she had reached this question she looked as if age had struck at her through the veil of her beauty.

Mrs. Meadows had rather ominously come straight downstairs, and stood with respectful solidity between the parents.

'Master Oliver,' she said in answer to Beatrice's demand, 'may have thought to join the young ladies in their walk.'

'Did he know where you were going, Nannie?' Beatrice asked quickly.

'On Sundays, your Ladyship, we usually go on the moor,' Mrs. Meadows replied indirectly, 'but seeing there was mist about, I took the high road as a precaution; and Master Oliver may not have allowed for that; nor he isn't one for high roads if he can get off them.'

'Then we must search the moor,' said Beatrice, glancing at Ian.

'He's sure to be found soon,' Ian said, without returning her glance. 'There isn't a dangerous spot on it for miles, and he hasn't much of a start.'

'There's a convict loose on the moors,' Beatrice said in her clipped level voice; 'a warder was here this morning to make enquiries. If he's hungry he might be near the edge of the moor.'

'There wouldn't be any object in hurting the child,' said Reggie.

It was the first time he had spoken, and he spoke now diffidently, as if he were speaking of somebody else's child.

Jean couldn't bear to stay with them any longer; she left them to their consultation. Just because they had been so quick to say it wasn't her fault, she

knew that it was. Hadn't she let him go out alone, without knowing what was in his mind? She slipped unnoticed through a side door into the garden. She found her way between the darkness of the yew hedges to the glimmer of the white gate leading on to the moor. Oliver's favourite walk was to the nearest tor. She had only to turn to the right, when the gate closed behind her, and climb. In a moment the blind white walls of the mist pressed round her, blocking her out from sight and sound.

She could still see from time to time the ground actually beneath her feet, the short grass and the dead heather beaded and white with mist, but she couldn't tell one tuft from another.

Blanched and naked space closed in around her and left nothing solid but a single fantastic footstep. She called Oliver's name over and over again, but the opaque darkness buried sound, her voice fell back--rose and fell back against the silence, as her hands might have fallen, back, feebly beating against a prison door. Panic drove through her, a blind impersonal fear, for she was too absorbed by the child's danger to notice any mere physical danger of her own. She dared not think of what was in Oliver's mind, and yet her own was at its mercy; for every fear he could have had added itself to her own fears for him. 'He can't be far,' she said to herself reassuringly; 'Ian said he hadn't time to go far!' But space mocked her. Nothing was either far or near in the milky darkness. If he was beyond the reach of her voice, he might as well be in the middle of the Atlantic. Time, too, had stopped. She did not know if she had passed through the white gate five minutes ago or as many hours. There was no progress in the light around her, and the drenched grasses under foot might be the same grasses.

She went on calling till the fog stopped her breath. The damp air held and penetrated her whole being. The fog was disintegrating like the substance of a nightmare.

Jean felt that if she were to be out in it much longer, the walls of her body would dissolve and she too would become mist. There was something shocking in being shut in by the blanched air, as if night itself had turned unnatural. She longed for at least the feel of the stones which crowned the tor, but the stones eluded her. She was not sure that she was climbing; perhaps she had slipped into one of the hundred hollows of the moor. Her mind wheeled backward and fought itself. How could she have been so insane as to let the child go home alone? They had none of them reproached her by a look, but Mrs. Meadows, her troubled gravity framed in starched muslin, had *not* said, 'I would have let him go out alone myself.' How atrocious are those human lapses which can, like the loose catch of a door, let out or in ultimate disaster!

Jean pressed on; but by now she had lost her proud intention; she no longer expected to find Oliver. Could so stupid a creature as herself find anything?

She had merely added to their stock of trouble by being fool enough to try and find a child on a moor of which she vaguely knew only the visible fringes. They might have to look for her too now, for she couldn't, even if she wanted to, return; and for fear of being stopped by them, she hadn't even left word in which direction she was going. For all she knew to the contrary, she might be walking in a circle, just as her crushed thoughts crawled round and round their empty track.

With this final discouragement, her strength began to fail her; she would have fallen if she hadn't heard through the dense air a faint travelling sound. She flung her remaining strength into her voice to answer it; the sound came nearer. Suddenly she heard footsteps close by her. She stumbled forward and found herself in a man's arms. They closed around her safe and warm; she knew, before she heard his voice, that Ian held her.

'You silly child,' he murmured; 'Oliver's found! He hadn't been on the moor at all. He went off to Seven Wells Comb to look for an imaginary waterfall. Anderson the keeper found him, and brought him back. Why, you're trembling all over--and as cold as ice! Reggie's beating the moor on the other side of the Park. I've had the deuce of a time finding you.' He still held her close to him, as if he had forgotten to take his arms away from her, and Jean made no effort to leave them. She felt as a wandering soul might feel, lost in space, who suddenly finds God.

'Am I far away?' she whispered.

'We're about a quarter of a mile from the Park gates,' Ian answered. 'I beat the moor a good bit before I came on you. Here's a stone we can sit on till you get your breath. I'm going to put my coat round us both till you get warm. How cold your silly little hands are! Why did you fly out like that without telling us--like a stray bird?' He drew her down beside him, keeping his arm round her. She fought against her joy, but she could not keep it back; it was as desperate as her fear had been. She flung her mind towards Oliver, for even in her safety she couldn't quite envisage the whole of his.

'He didn't have to be frightened?' she murmured.

'Frightened!' laughed Ian; 'not a bit of it! He's had a marvellous time; played with a tame fox, ate gingerbread nuts, and drank elderberry wine. He had to be dragged away from Anderson by the sheer force of Mrs. Meadows' mesmeric eye. Feel better now?' As he leaned towards her in the darkness his lips brushed her cheek. Jean turned her head swiftly and their lips met. She forgot the mist; she forgot the darkness; the world was alive again--a splendid vision brilliant as the stars but, unlike the stars, as near her as the leap of her own heart.

Ian drew back his head at last with a half-ashamed, half-triumphant laugh.

'I oughtn't to have done that, I suppose,' he asked, 'ought I? I believe it's not

cricket for rescuers to kiss the rescued?'

'It was my fault as much as yours,' said Jean quickly.

'Don't let's call it a fault,' said Ian reassuringly. 'You mustn't mind having let me kiss you; you were frightened, and we're friends; we couldn't be as undemonstrative as all that when we'd found each other after our fright, could we? To tell you the truth, I was frightened too. I didn't like the thought of the convict loose on the moor.'

'I can't bear the poor convict's not even wanting to be found,' Jean whispered, 'it's so white and lonely! Oh, I hope he won't be found!' Her voice shook so that she dared stay no longer in Ian's arms for fear of his trying to console her. It was horrible to leave him, and to feel the mist stealing between them again and turning her into a separate being. But Jean knew that she mustn't let Ian think that their kiss had any real significance. Whatever happened she must take it lightly. He was so bound already to Beatrice that the least Jean could do for him was not to lay so much as a finger on him. It would be better to let him think her the kind of girl to whom a kiss meant nothing than to let him know his kiss had meant more to her than anything in life.

'There!' she said, 'my fright's over. I was so glad to be found; and you were--just kind because I was found. Now we'll be friends--like we were before.' She hoped her voice, which still shook a little, sounded light enough.

'Over, is it?' Ian answered in an amused voice. 'Must being glad and being kind be brought to so abrupt a finish?'

'We can go on being kind--differently,' Jean amended.

'But not glad?' Ian persisted. 'D'you know, if you don't mind, *I* shall go on being glad I kissed you?'

Jean saw in a flash that he was just being nice about it; but she had to remind herself sharply how nice at Windlestraws they always were, so that she shouldn't think Ian's niceness had any other basis.

'We must go now,' she said decisively, trying to regain the possession of her hands. 'I'm not cold any more.'

'Must we?' said Ian reluctantly. 'If you aren't cold, you might as well stay; and you wouldn't be as cold as you are if you'd come a little nearer. You see, they don't know when I've found you!'

'But perhaps they'd be just a little anxious,' said Jean diffidently.

'Perhaps they will,' agreed Ian; 'but does it matter? Reggie won't be back for another hour anyhow. One of us was sure to find you. The moor's in our blood. D'you want to hurry back?' He opened his hand so that she could take hers away if she liked; and Jean tried to take them away; but before she had summoned the kind of courage she would need to defeat her own desire, Ian's hand had closed gently over them again.

'You see, you don't so awfully want to run away from me,' he said

teasingly.

Jean couldn't explain that she only wanted to leave him because she knew how very lightly he wanted to keep her--as lightly as he might wish to keep a bird which had perched on his wrist. It was flattering to know that a bird submitted to the contact, but no one would want to keep the bird too long, even for the sake of flattery. The thought of how little Ian really cared steeled Jean to escape from his hand; and the moment she showed her resolution he let her go.

'Well,' he said, rising to his feet with a quick sigh, 'if we must, we must! Wouldn't Lady Margaret love to think I'd romantically found you in the fog, instead of three grooms and the gardeners, not to mention poor old Reggie, the authorities of Dartmoor, and a roving burglar!'

'You actually sent the servants out after me,' cried Jean, aghast. 'Oh, Ian, how awful!'

'They'll be back at seven,' Ian reassured her. 'We couldn't, of course, run any more risk than we had to. But it's a sell Lady Margaret isn't still here to see me lead you back in triumph!'

'Thank God she isn't!' exclaimed Jean fervently. 'I shouldn't have dared----' She stopped short, and Ian laughingly finished the sentence for her.

'You wouldn't have dared face her, arm in arm with me--after we'd been--so glad, and so kind to each other--on the moor! However stern and nursery-governessy you pretend to be now, she'd have seen through you, and she wouldn't be so intimidated by you as I am either!'

Jean stopped short. 'Ian,' she said quickly, 'I won't pretend I don't know the nonsense Lady Margaret thinks, or the red-herring role she tries to work off on me. I won't be a red-herring, and you must promise not to try to make me one. You must leave me alone. But there is something else that I *don't* know, and can't guard against. What is it? What is it that Beatrice wants me to do--and Reggie says he does too--and yet they won't either of them tell me?'

She felt Ian's arm stiffen under her hand. He stood quite still. The fog, which had drawn them together before, blew between them now like a barrier.

'You think there is another scheme, then?' he asked in a queer constrained voice. 'A scheme which involves you?'

'Beatrice hasn't told me so,' Jean admitted, 'but Reggie has.'

'Would you mind telling me,' Ian asked her, 'exactly what Reggie has said to you about it?'

Jean told him. Ian did not move until she had finished speaking. Then he walked on for some moments in silence. At last he said stiffly:

'I'm sorry. It's out of the question for me to go into this scheme--even if it exists. I can only assure you that I utterly disapprove of *all* schemes for other people, and that I should, as far as I have the right to advise you at all, advise

you to have nothing whatever to do with the family complications. There is one thing I may say to you, perhaps, which might be useful, and that is, if you should find yourself by chance involved in any situation you didn't like, Lady Margaret, whatever you may think of her, could be counted on to help you out. Will you remember that?'

Ian spoke with such unaccustomed gravity that Jean felt almost frightened. She had to remind herself that after all she was independent, and could go away at a moment's notice if any one seriously annoyed her. She felt a queer pang of resentment, however, that Ian should shuffle her off on to Lady Margaret, as if he himself had done all he could for her, and her resentment found expression in her saying quickly: 'But wouldn't you help me yourself, if there were any need for it?' She could have bitten her tongue out the next moment, for wasn't it like laying a finger on him to exact his help? There was a long uncomfortable pause before he answered her.

'I should always like to help you, naturally,' he said in a measured, deliberate voice. 'But I'm not always free to do as I like. Besides, there are times when a man can help a woman most by leaving her alone. I'll promise to do that since you ask it, and I can keep that promise, but I'm afraid I can't promise anything more.'

'No, of course you can't,' said Jean quickly. 'I didn't mean that. I only thought--we could talk sometimes! But you're quite right; we *can't* really talk without dragging the others in, and they belong to you, and I don't; so of course you mustn't. Don't bother about me any more; I was stupid to ask you that question. Besides, I shan't need help.'

'That isn't it,' said Ian in a softer voice. 'You're not stupid enough. And of course I shall bother about it; but I'm hanged if my bothering about it can be much help to you!' He stopped again, and Jean thought at first that he had something more to say; but when he spoke again it was only to tell her that they had reached the Park.

'We are in the drive now,' he said, releasing her, and Jean fancied there was a tone of relief in his voice.

They said nothing further to each other, and step by step as they neared the house Jean felt the sympathy, which had held them so close together, retreating.

The mist had fallen back from the front of the house. Windlestraws rose up like a rock, dark and gaunt against a smother of white foam. The light from within sprang upon them uncovered; no one had pulled down a blind or drawn a curtain.

Beatrice was in the hall, her face pressed against a window-pane. She ran forward quickly and kissed Jean; it was the first time her lips, cool and kind, had ever rested on Jean's face.

'My dear! my dear!' she said softly. 'You shouldn't have run out alone in the fog! The child's quite safe, and I've been having the horrors about you!'

Reggie stood by the fire; his old shooting jacket was white and drenched with fog; he made no effort to come forward and greet Jean. 'It was a damned silly thing to do!' he said sullenly.

Jean wanted to thank him for his fruitless search, but something in his face decided her not to thank him. It was not his anger; it was that she knew suddenly that, behind his anger, he was the only one who had really minded her danger.

'It was a damned plucky thing to do,' Beatrice said laughingly.

Ian glanced a little defensively from Beatrice to Reggie, 'Well, the lost has been found,' he said lightly, 'and there hasn't been any harm done that a judicious cocktail won't set right, has there?'

Reggie gave an unintelligible growl and, turning his back on them all three, strolled off into his study.

Beatrice looked at Ian. Her look ran over him like a tongue of flame, it was so quick, so light, so sure. Her hand, which had clasped Jean's close, relaxed its grasp for a moment, and then closed over it again. But in that swift moment Beatrice had seen everything that had happened. She knew and she forgave Jean her share in what had taken place. But Jean, meeting her eyes, was baffled by their empty brightness. She couldn't guess what anger or what mercy Beatrice had reserved for Ian.

CHAPTER XIX

THEY sat round the card-table safe in the armour of their laconic courtesy. Jean felt as if she had the consistency of a jellyfish in the company of hard-shelled crabs. She wondered if they were aware of her exposure and of their own crustacean immunity? The cards relieved them from the effort of conversation until Belk came in with the coffee. Belk usually managed his entrances and exits with the expert ease of a successful materialization at a séance, but on this particular occasion he allowed himself to stand rather solidly in front of Reggie, fixing him with his steady inexpressive eyes.

Reggie, who knew what was due to a good servant, looked up, when he had finished dealing, and said, 'Yes, Belk, what is it?'

'The convict on the moor has been found, Sir Reginald,' said Belk with unfettered satisfaction. 'I thought you might just like me to mention it. The police have telephoned. There was a silver flask found on him with your initials; but how he could have laid hands on it passes me! The house is untouched and not so much as a h'egg missing from the larder! Should you like to see the flask, Sir?'

'Flask with my initials!' exclaimed Reggie in astonishment. 'How the devil----' then he checked himself. Ian was sorting his cards more slowly than usual, Beatrice leaned back in her chair watching him, but her eyes were not fixed on Ian--they seemed simply to be taking him in, while they travelled a little impatiently over the table, waiting for the hand to begin. 'Very curious indeed, Belk,' said Reggie casually. 'No, you needn't bring the flask in here. Somebody must have left a window open.'

'I think not, Sir,' replied Belk with respectful firmness. 'The moment the warders called, after early tea this morning it was, Sir--the house was 'er--metically sealed! 'Er--metically, Sir Reginald, by my own hand; and not so much as a h'egg----'

'All right, Belk,' said Reggie, taking up his cards. 'No harm is done, so we need have no post-mortems. Where was the fellow caught?'

'Very near the gates, Sir; just,' said Belk, rolling a melodramatic eye towards Jean, 'where the young lady was found in the fog this afternoon.'

'Then perhaps that accounts for the flask,' said Beatrice with obvious relief. 'Jean, you may have dropped it?'

'But I didn't have a flask,' said Jean.

There was a short strained silence. Jean felt a curious sensation as if one of them, she wasn't sure which, were being trapped.

She wished she had said that she might have dropped the flask.

Reggie broke the silence. 'That's all right, Belk,' he said with finality.

Belk subdued with an effort his expression of lawful curiosity to one of a safe indifference and softly dismissed himself; but no one began to play.

At last Beatrice said, 'Well--Ian?'

Ian laid down his cards, and took refuge in a cigarette. 'I suppose I'd better own up,' he said with a reluctant laugh. 'The flask was a fearful break; I forgot it was yours. I came on the chap suddenly while I was looking for Jean. I thought he was some kind of a rock till he moved. He was pretty desperate and attacked me at sight. We had a bit of a scrap and I tripped him. He was a heavy fellow but nearly done in. He lay on the ground and I don't think I ever saw any one in a worse funk. No food for hours, shots close to him, played out, and that fog down his gullet! He hadn't got a ghost of a chance, but I'm damned if I could take away what atom there was. I know I ought to have blown my whistle and handed him over to the police. Well--I didn't do it! I'd taken the flask and some food for Jean, and I just gave them to him, shoved some money at him, told him the nearest way off the moor, and lost him again. After I'd left him, I came on Jean, five minutes after.'

Jean gave a long sigh of relief. After all, he was the same person! All through the long glittering evening, behind the barrier of his manner, she hadn't been able to find him. She hadn't even known how to speak to him, because he had lost or forgotten the language which was common to them both; but she could speak to him now.

'You might have told me!' she said eagerly, 'I shouldn't have minded! Of course you couldn't have given him up to the police!'

'Rot,' said Reggie bluntly. 'Of course he *could*, and *should*! Why the devil didn't you, Ian?' Reggie was red with anger, his voice was hard, and his blue eyes harder. He looked personally outraged.

'You must have been insane,' agreed Beatrice with a shiver. She had never taken her eyes off Ian during his recital of his encounter with the convict; and her gaze had been that of a hostile stranger. She was less upset than Reggie, but she was even more angry. 'Don't you see, if he'd found Jean instead of you, anything might have happened?' she demanded. 'A man like that is a danger to the whole community. No one has a right not to hand him over to the police!'

'You might as well let loose a wild beast,' growled Reggie.

'But don't either of you see,' Jean began hotly, before Ian could take up his weak defence, 'that the man was wild because he was alone--and chased? He wouldn't be half so wild after Ian had helped him. Think of being chased in a fog by the police! You would hit out at anything you saw--! The whole world was his enemy!' She looked from Reggie to Beatrice with imploring eyes; but she could see they couldn't admit fellow-feeling for a convict into their thoughts. They were solidly at one; angry with the same anger, horrified with the same horror. It was Ian's insensate conduct which they deplored; convicts

had nothing to do with them, but Ian had broken into their ordered security of life. He had behaved as if there were other interests to consider than their own.

Ian himself had no excuse to offer; he did not know on what compulsion he had acted. He only knew that he couldn't have done anything else.

'I dare say I ought to have given him up,' he murmured apologetically, 'but you see, when you've knocked a man down, you don't somehow feel like handing him over to justice! Besides, I didn't think that he had any more harm in him--he looked played out. I think he only wanted to get away.'

'He was a criminal,' said Beatrice incisively, 'and a vicious criminal. One would suppose that the victims were more to be pitied than the brutes who attacked them! You admit he attacked you at sight, so he couldn't have been so very harmless. How could you leave a man like that loose on the moor--close to this house?'

Ian frowned; he turned his puzzled eyes away from Beatrice as if he knew what he had got to say couldn't reach her, and looked at Jean instead. Sitting here in cold blood, of course I'd give him up,' he began reasonably, 'but after I'd knocked him down--and saw what he was up against--I couldn't. Don't you see you can't fight what's practically finished! It would be like hitting a wounded man.' He turned back to Reggie, but Reggie was inflexible.

'The law is the law,' he said stiffly. Reggie was deeply shocked; as for Beatrice she was more angry than shocked. Jean saw that she felt that Ian had risked her safety.

He had broken their code of chivalry; first you protect women, then society, then yourself. What is beyond these categories needs no protection.

'The law is only the law,' Jean said in a low determined voice. 'It hasn't got flesh and blood. It isn't frightened. It's a mere convenience, a fence we have made round ourselves for our own protection, an old-fashioned uncivilized fence! Of course we want to save victims; but has the criminal law saved victims? Bars don't make wild beasts tame! I think Ian was perfectly right!'

'But you might not have thought him right if the convict had found you first,' said Beatrice. The tone of her voice penetrated Jean's mind, as the fog had penetrated her lungs. There was something disintegrating in its coldness. Jean remembered suddenly that she was only Beatrice's secretary. Perhaps after all she shouldn't say just what she felt as if she were one of themselves.

'Of course I thought of Jean,' said Ian uncertainly, 'I knew I was risking his running into her--and yet----'

Because he had risked her safety Jean suddenly felt herself human again; she wasn't after all only Beatrice's secretary.

'What happens to an individual doesn't prove anything!' she said swiftly. 'I could have been killed, and yet not have wished to have a man hounded back to prison, or shot in the fog, to save me. Besides, he wouldn't have killed me--

the chances were a hundred to one against! I'm only a woman and couldn't have put him into a panic! It's panic which makes people wicked, and panic which makes people punish wickedly after wicked things have been done! The law is merely the other side of the same stick. It was because he wasn't in a panic that Ian didn't whistle for the police!'

'Not very flattering to you,' said Beatrice quietly. 'Personally I think Ian should have been in a panic until he had found you.'

'I think so too,' said Reggie gravely. He picked up his cards again and looked across them at Jean. She did not want to meet his eyes, but against her will she had to meet them; they were not disinterested, they made her feel menaced by the weight of his protective ardour.

'Damned if I can understand what made you let the chap off, Ian,' Reggie said helplessly. 'It was such luck your coming on him, and such rank idiocy to let him loose again!'

Ian tried to laugh. 'I can't explain, I'm afraid,' he said. 'I knew how it would look to you--that's why I kept it dark. I knew he'd be caught too, a man like that doesn't stand a chance--! He had everything against him. He hadn't even any sense. No more had I perhaps! I don't know why I left your flask with him--of course I forgot it was yours; nor why I had the incredible luck to stumble on Jean, just afterwards. But I'm glad Jean doesn't think I was wrong to let the fellow go!'

'I had no idea you were both such sentimentalists,' said Beatrice coldly. 'You got scott-free by a fluke, Jean! And if you hadn't, neither you nor Ian would be feeling quite so sympathetic to convicts! Pity is all very well when people deserve it. But it's probably the weakest way of facing danger that exists. You may get out of it--but somebody else falls in. Things have got to be decently cleared up. It's a good thing for the rest of us that there are police, warders, and prisons, and that we are not left to the tender mercy of people like yourselves, who spread danger under the mistaken impression that they're behaving like Good Samaritans.'

'Shall we start playing?' Reggie suggested apologetically. Jean wasn't quite sure whether he was apologizing to her, or to Beatrice, nor was Reggie himself quite sure. Something devastating had happened to him, for up to that moment he had lived in a world where the thoughts of his friends were the same as his own thoughts.

Jean was sorry for him, but she felt that something more important than Reggie's comfort was at stake. 'Some day you might be glad of mercy if you'd done wrong,' she said in a low voice, 'and most of us do wrong sooner or later.'

Reggie moved impatiently. 'One heart,' he said; then he added as if he saw a sudden way out of an impasse: 'I believe in mercy all right, but not to criminals!'

A shade of hostility crept into Ian's manner. 'Don't you?' he asked politely. 'Well--I suppose it all depends on what you mean by a criminal! They're not all locked up in Dartmoor.'

'One spade!' said Beatrice in an even voice. They began to play and the discussion ended, but Jean felt the weight of their difference behind every card they played. The subject flickered up again after their three rubbers were over.

They had only to face that one dangerous moment when they stood about the drinks in the hall, before separating for the night. Reggie was all for getting through it safely. If only the fog lifted they might be able to hunt to-morrow--there was no frost. But Beatrice refused this weak evasion.

'I can go to bed more comfortably,' she said lightly, 'because that convict has been found! I am bound to say that law and order mean a good deal to my peace of mind. I don't very much care what happens to the wicked, and I prefer to sleep without the chance of being murdered in my bed. I should have gone to sleep more comfortably still if you had agreed with me, Ian.'

She ignored Jean, but she ignored her kindly, laying her hand on her arm. Ian poured himself out an unusually stiff whisky and soda.

'You're too safe, Beatrice,' he replied after a pause. 'You don't need me to agree with you; and you're too lucky. You don't need to be forgiven.'

Reggie gave a short laugh. 'She's not very forgiving, either,' he said, ranging himself for a moment upon their side, 'is she? Or she wouldn't be, if you gave her the chance! Take my advice and don't ask her for forgiveness!'

Beatrice lingered with her hand on the banisters, glancing back over her shoulder at Ian. The moon pouring her light over the edge of a cloud couldn't have looked more startlingly beautiful.

Ian resolutely turned away from her, and held out his hand to Jean.

'I *was* in a panic about you,' he said in a low voice; 'don't think I was such a brute as to let that fellow go--*not* minding!'

'Ah, but that's what I liked,' said Jean ardently, 'that's what makes you really trust people--when they're frightened and it doesn't make them cruel, and when you know they wouldn't give even a friend more than their right amount of chance!'

She spoke to Ian, but she found that she was speaking to Reggie as well. He had put away the cards and strolled up to them. He looked down at Jean as if he mortally disagreed with her, and as if her words had been meant for him more than they had been meant for Ian.

'You're all wrong, both of you,' he said positively. 'You, Jean, for running out into a fog on a wild-goose chase without leaving word what you were up to--and you, Ian, for stumbling into a danger and not scotching it! You're high falutin' and that never pays--not in the long run.'

He turned away smiling, as if his outbreak had restored his good humour;

and Jean had for a moment a curious sensation, as if she were less sure than she had been that she and Ian were right.

Beatrice stood leaning over the banisters in her assured, unshaken loveliness.

She cared so little whether she was right or wrong, and yet victory seemed always to belong to her. She didn't have to fight for it, she only had to look as if she expected it to be hers.

Ian turned back to her, and the last thing Jean saw as she stood on the top of the stairs before going to her room was that Reggie had left them.

They stood there, as she had first seen them together, entranced and speechless--face to face.

CHAPTER XX

ALL night Jean's senses, captured for the first time, had ridden her hard. It was in vain that she told herself that nothing had happened except that one of Cleopatra's ladies had looked at Antony. Quite apart from the risk she ran from Cleopatra, the look had been wasted. Mark Antony's heart, 'pursed up upon the river of Cydnus,' had done no more than cast a brief glance back.

Jean tried to comfort herself with the thought that she had escaped suspense. Hopeless love is spared the torment of trying to attract its object. She could just go on with her work. There was a pile of letters, lying before her in her little sitting-room, to keep her heart at bay. The fog still shut out the world; the artificial light gave her a vague sense of discomfort, as if the morning had already gone. She heard the muffled hoot of a car, then, after a pause, the car drove slowly off again. There seemed something solid and irreparable in the long silence that followed. Nothing happened; except that, while the pile of letters decreased, the strength Jean called on grew steadily less.

At last the door behind her opened, and Beatrice stood smiling down at her. How senseless it had been to match herself, even for a moment, against that dazzling vision! Beatrice said nothing; she moved vaguely about, touching a curtain, bending over a flower-pot; she might have come in simply to let Jean see how hopeless her little triumph of last night had been--if it were a triumph. Ian had agreed with her, and forgotten her the moment after--far more deeply forgotten her than he could ever forget Beatrice, with whom he had so mortally disagreed.

'Fancy,' Beatrice murmured at last, 'you're half way through that mountain already, after all the excitement of yesterday! Oliver and the fog--the convict--and Ian's really rather shabby way of trying to find you! It was nice of you to let him off so easily. But do you know you are rather nice? I think I've come in to disturb you on purpose to say so. Do you realize, my dear, that Reggie would never have got his seat if it hadn't been for you?'

Was that really what Beatrice had come in to say, smiling down at Jean with those eyes of innocent azure? Her gratitude was like a golden net, and Jean felt herself floundering impotently against its shining meshes.

'I did so little,' Jean murmured. 'You needn't thank me. If anybody did anything, it was Reggie himself.'

'Ah! that,' said Beatrice lightly, 'was just the triumph of your art! Don't you see he isn't the kind of man who ever does do anything for himself? He couldn't have moved an inch if you hadn't incited him. You interested him, you pushed him along, you made him feel it was some kind of a game, and a game he can always be good at. It's the one way his mind works, if it works at all. I

had to come in and thank you, though as a rule I hate thanking people. I'm afraid I'm not very often really pleased, but I'm most frightfully pleased with what you've done for Reggie. Done for him all round, I mean. He's enormously improved, and men don't usually improve after thirty. You've put your hand to the plough, you know, and whatever you do, you mustn't turn back.'

There was something a little frightening in Beatrice's emphatic praise. Jean wondered if she hadn't reached that dangerous moment when somebody else's business too well minded became the minder's own. Was Beatrice trying to wash her hands of Reggie?

'You mean,' Jean murmured a little uncertainly, 'you think that he'll go on wanting a secretary?'

'That's the least of what I mean,' said Beatrice, moving across to the window and looking down into the fog. 'It's you in particular he needs, and he'll need you more than ever now that Ian's gone off like this to China.'

'Ian!' Jean repeated stupidly, 'to China!'

Beatrice mercifully continued to stand with her back to her, looking down into the immovable white mist.

'Yes,' she said, without changing the casual tone of her voice. 'He made one of his lightning decisions last night, and was off this morning. He ought to have run in to say good-bye to you, but of course he had everything to do and no time to do it in. He thought China might be rather fun just now. All those queer little armies tumbling over each other.' She turned back and her tranquil candid eyes rested kindly on Jean's blank ones.

Jean had put all her strength into staying in the room without saying anything stupid; she couldn't help her silly stricken eyes.

'It's rather a bore for poor old Reggie,' Beatrice continued after a pause. 'There'll be no one to help him carry on the hunt. I'm used to Ian's flights, of course, but they always come on Reggie with rather a shock. He doesn't have to run away from me himself, you see. He's inured to the poison. But every now and then the situation gets too much for Ian, and he has to have a new girl, or a dash off to Timbuctoo. I don't mind the girl, of course, unless she's too nice. Then it does seem rather hard luck on her. Ian sees that too; he tries not to fall for the nice ones. He's gone to China instead of the girl this time; and I dare say China'll do.'

'How long will he stay in--in China?' Jean asked unsteadily. She had to get something into her lost mind to bite on, because it seemed completely empty. All its landmarks were gone; and even if she had known what direction to take, there was suddenly no place at which she cared to arrive.

'One can't quite tell, can one?' said Beatrice, sitting down beside her. 'Six months or a year, shouldn't you think? It's rather a long journey for a mere week-end; and if there are to be scraps, Ian rather loves them. Poor old Reggie!

He would have enjoyed going too. Parliament will seem so stuffy! We're taking a house, you know, at Knightsbridge for the next few months. I suppose I shall have to run up to entertain for him. The children will stay here with Nannie. You'll help me, won't you? You won't mind going on ahead with Reggie and just getting the house straight?'

Jean searched Beatrice's serene, transparent eyes. There was no mockery in them, they were kind and just a little appealing. She awfully wanted Jean to go ahead with Reggie and get things straight.

'I'm afraid,' Beatrice added plaintively, 'that the kind of house we had to take--Char Lubbock, my youngest sister, looked at it--is sure to be full of gilt clocks and those very thin water-colours people used to like. Char's perfectly sound about beds and china, but I don't think she ever sees real furniture, she just sits on it. I'll follow, of course, in a day or two. I told Reggie I was sure you wouldn't make a fuss. I'm so glad you're not a "perfect lady" and don't have to feel things are improper or else somebody else's work. It does simplify life so.'

Jean looked a little doubtful. She was sure she wouldn't make a fuss, but she wished she knew what things she was to get ready and what impropriety she might be called upon to face.

'I'll give you a list,' said Beatrice reassuringly, 'and I'll run up myself awfully soon. I do just want, after the Christmas flurry is over, to get a few hours' peace with the children.'

For a moment Jean felt beneath the surface of Beatrice's polished calm the stir of something deeper, some hidden awful ache, perhaps, like that of her own heart when Beatrice had said 'China.' After all, weren't they together in this? Weren't they both without him?

'Of course I'll go,' she said quietly. 'I'll do anything you like to help you----' She broke off before the sudden freezing blankness of Beatrice's outraged eyes. Jean had broken the code of Windlestraws which implied that nothing ever really mattered.

Beatrice rose gracefully, and murmuring: 'I'm sure Reggie'll be frightfully pleased; he never has known how to answer a letter,' she strolled out of the room. If there was to be any trouble, she left it behind with Jean; but she made it up to her in her own way afterwards, for when Jean had finished her letters and went up to her room, she found it full of fairy begonias, sent up specially from the greenhouse. She knew then that all the desolation was in her own heart. Why hadn't Ian even come to say good-bye? Was he going away because she was the nice girl whom he, as well as Beatrice, thought it would be fairer to leave alone? That girl--the substitute for China--who might get too fond of him?

Jean's cheeks flamed. Did he think that inadvertent, matchless moment

when she had returned his kiss was a mere trap set for him, out of which he must scramble as best he could by going all the way to China? Couldn't he have trusted her? Anger burned in her heart more fiercely than shame. If he hadn't trusted her, Ian was a fool; not the man she had thought him, her equal and her friend. But didn't he trust her? Wasn't it a sign of his trust that he had agreed with her about the convict? Last night he had stood by her, on the unwritten law deeper than justice, which to Reggie and Beatrice was nothing but a sentimental farce. If he could see behind panic into pity, couldn't he see, through the momentary flurry of her awakened senses, the fair play that would have saved them both? But Jean flung this flattering fancy aside. It didn't mean anything if he had stood by her. Of course he was more intelligent than Beatrice and Reggie, and he had more heart; but he belonged to them.

Beatrice had let him go to China; but she wasn't unhappy, because he wouldn't have gone if she hadn't let him. Jean walked restlessly up and down her room between the pink, scentless trees of begonia. Their artificial prettiness stifled her. She flung her window open to the biting fog. She felt savage and wronged. She hadn't asked much of Ian; only to be left alone with her private joy forever, and he had made her private joy into a stinging shame. She wouldn't so much have minded if he had had the decency to face her with his cowardice. Supposing he had said: 'I couldn't, you see, live down that touch of flirtation in our relationship. I felt it did hold me a trifle, it might have led to more, and then where would we both have been? I'm awfully sorry, but it wouldn't do, you see; so I'm off!' She might have hated him for saying it, but she wouldn't have felt so desperately cheap. It would at least have given her a chance to answer: 'My dear man, I didn't myself attach the least importance to that moment in the fog; but do whatever you like--go or stay. I shan't mind which you do.'

Ian had done what he liked, without her leave; as if she was in need of a protection she hadn't asked him for, and as if he himself had to retreat from a danger which she had caused. His cruel chivalry had given her away; it had shown Beatrice Jean's need of protection. It was true that Beatrice neither blamed Jean for falling a victim to Ian's charms, nor wanted to hurt her for having won a momentary response from him. Jean was no more to Beatrice than a little burr which has inconveniently clung to a dress and has to be picked off. You didn't feel jealous of a burr, you picked it off and threw it into the nearest hedge.

The house at Knightsbridge was the nearest hedge. But would Beatrice have thrown her there if Ian hadn't given her away? That was the worst of chivalry--when people were trying to spare you, they did worse things to your soul than any brute could do to your body, and they gave you less chance to escape. Jean's wits had saved her from Reggie, but from Ian she had not been

saved.

A knock sounded behind her; Jean turned quickly, to see Mrs. Meadows filling the doorway.

'I beg your pardon, I'm sure, Miss,' said Mrs. Meadows in her deep, grave voice; 'I thought you might be downstairs with 'er ladyship and the vicar. Mr. Ian asked me to give you this note, 'e not having had the time to say good-bye to you--darting off like a wild tiger, without 'is sport stockings so much as looked through; a thing I always do myself, his housekeeper in the village not being much of a 'and with wool. Not a mouthful of dinner 'ave the three children ate, expensive presents being neither here nor there, with 'im rushing in like an earthquake to say he wasn't going to be with them for Christmas! If I may make so bold, Miss, you should shut that window; and if you could spare the time to drop in to the nursery later, it would give them something to look forward to.'

'Of course I'll come,' said Jean eagerly. 'I'd love to come!'

It made it somehow easier that there were other victims suffering from the same disaster.

When she was alone again, Jean read the letter, too quickly for joy, but not too quickly for relief.

'Dear Jean, I'm awfully sorry,' Ian had written, 'but it wouldn't quite work, I think. I'd have to be a brute to you, and I couldn't be now; I'd want to be nice. I know you'd be perfect as a friend if I were--what I'm not--free to be your friend. I think everything else will be all right; but you won't forget what I said about Lady Margaret, will you? I'm going to see her in town before I go. Please don't forget. Ian.'

Jean couldn't understand the importance Ian seemed to attach to Lady Margaret, but the rest of the letter she could easily understand. He hadn't thought her a fool or a flirt; he had liked her enough for a feeling he couldn't afford; and he had had the decency to tell her so. She was safe now. She could once more remember with joy that she had given him her love. His heart was still her home, and he had done nothing to spoil it; he had merely gone away and shut the door after him.

Suddenly she heard again in Beatrice's clear, clipped tones: 'He has gone to China instead of the girl, this time; and I dare say China'll do.'

CHAPTER XXI

NOTHING in Jean's former experience of London had prepared her for the little bird-cagey house, facing Kensington Gardens, done up by friends of Char's, who after all weren't afraid of colour. The furniture was brilliantly painted with fruit and flowers, the curtains were exotic, and it would scarcely have surprised Jean if she had been met on the threshold of the drawing-room by a screaming jay. The boredom of foggy squares and musty museums, of drab, dim weeks in Ladbroke Grove with a sister of her mother's, who expected Jean to sustain life on vegetable curries and to communicate chiefly with the Dead through the uncertain medium of the alphabet and a rickety table, gave way suddenly to the splendours of the Thousand and One Nights.

Jean hadn't dreamed, when Beatrice plaintively begged her to put the house in Knightsbridge straight, what she really meant was that she should go about continuously with Reggie. After a few hours her nerves grew accustomed to the violent oscillations of scarlet and orange, primrose and emerald; but it took her longer to accustom herself to the transformation of Reggie. The starved, discontented look in his eyes, the bitter lines about his mouth vanished. He became a sunny, shining young man with laughing eyes, effortlessly smart, and with quite an extraordinary interest in being pleased and being pleasant. He knew from morning till night what he wanted to do, and he made no mistakes in his choice of pleasures for Jean. She had to come into his every interest, but they widened out to include her own. Westminster was, of course, what they were ostensibly there for, but dancing, skating, the theatre, football matches, even an occasional concert were worked in.

Parliamentary debates were evaded to permit of Jean's bewildering visits to Madame Sylvia, the best dressmaker in London. Beatrice had told her before she left Windlestraws that clothes were part of her job, and that she would make herself responsible for them. 'You do very well as you are here,' Beatrice had critically admitted, 'but one's got to be really turned out for London. Take Reggie with you; he knows as much about clothes as he does about horses.'

The day after they had reached town Reggie reminded Jean of this important duty. 'You'll be so much more comfortable,' he explained, 'when you're all dressed up. You'll be able to look the cook in the face and be haughty to the housemaids. I assure you Royalty is nothing to me if my hair is the right length and I know I'm tidy, but if I've a smut on my cuff, or my shoes don't shine, I'd quail before a boy in buttons!'

'But I don't see,' Jean remarked doubtfully, 'why a secretary should need *three* dance frocks.'

'Well, you do dance,' said Reggie reassuringly, 'and with your feet and

ankles, if you'll excuse my saying so, it'd be crashing not to. Personally I find dancing quite extraordinarily helpful to my political ideas. I don't think I could get on in Westminster without it.'

'But you don't dance in the country,' Jean objected, 'and you don't need to dance with me in town.'

'No; but I hunt in the country,' Reggie explained; 'I don't have to confine my exercise to a miserable little dot-and-go-one in the Park before breakfast; and if I took to dancing with strange girls, it might be dangerous. You see, you keep my nose to the grind-stone, whereas if I got at all entangled with a frivolous young wench, she might turn my attention from politics to God knows what! I assure you I need most awfully careful handling.'

When Jean had finished with Madame Sylvia and Reggie combined, she wondered if she hadn't herself been turned into a frivolous young wench.

'Don't I look too much like a fashion-plate?' she asked Reggie dubiously.

'You look,' said Reggie, screwing his monocle deliberately over his eye and completely disregarding the advances of a famous mannequin, 'precisely as the secretary of a Member of Parliament should look. You could control nations.'

'It really has made quite all the difference to the young lady, if I may say so,' murmured Madame Sylvia complacently, rubbing her smooth white hands together. 'I've always said, "Give me skin and eyes, and I'll do the rest".'

'Well, you've done it this time,' agreed Reggie a trifle grimly. 'She'd break down a private view.'

It was difficult to help being pleased with so genuinely appreciative an audience, but Jean kept her wits about her. She saw that they wouldn't only be needed for her work, they had to act upon an indefinite process of Reggie's to which it was hard to give a name. This process consisted chiefly in his being awfully nice to Jean, nicer than any one had ever been to her before. He put no pressure into his niceness, he didn't want in the least to bore her; and it often took the form of his wandering off to his club.

Jean simply found that whatever she wanted, happened. The simple forms of pleasure--flowers, a right book, the best chocolates, and the constant use of a car, were the mere fringes of what she felt was going on beneath. There were so many things Reggie might have done, or said, or merely looked, which would have made her self-conscious and spoiled the open frankness of their new relationship, and he avoided them all. The only way she could put it was that Reggie did everything in the world to please her except make love to her. This omission was the way in which he tried to please her most. He always had enough to say to keep their companionship going and, if he preferred dancing or skating to conversation, Jean found that, with Reggie, she too preferred a more active life. His eyes, assured and candid, promised her the exact shade of

friendship she desired. It is true that they seemed occasionally to suggest that he knew he was being as good as gold and expected sooner or later to be paid for it. This troubled Jean a little, for there was no form of payment she could make, other than by being very sisterly in her manner and trying not to think too much about China. But as Reggie's goodness remained stationary, Jean's trouble vanished; after all, perhaps what he really liked was being nice. He couldn't be nice at Windlestraws, but there was nothing at Knightsbridge to prevent him from being as nice as he liked.

Reggie told her everything there was to know about China; they read the accounts of the fighting before they turned to their daily politics, and Jean had the benefit of being shown regularly the only communications received from Ian. These took the form of telegrams to say that he had arrived and sent his love; and later, that everything was awfully quiet but that he was having a lot of fun. There were rather longer communications from Beatrice, but they were equally vague. She seemed always to be on the verge of packing, contradicted by a telegram to say that as the frost held off, she must have a few days more hunting. Then the children developed a series of colds--nothing in themselves, but with 'grippe' about, Beatrice thought she ought to remain on the spot. Jean regularly shared these bulletins with Reggie, who otherwise held no communication with his wife; and he always looked reassuring and murmured that he was sure Beatrice was right.

Reggie went to Westminster, when Jean said that he must, and yawned obediently through an hour or two, while Jean sat taking notes, to be picked up afterwards and whirled off in the big car, with Reggie beside her, sometimes to supper and more dancing and sometimes just home to sandwiches and soup, with Reggie still beside her.

She brought him up short once by saying: 'Reggie, do you really think this is getting the house straight?' but he only replied, with one of his keen long looks, 'Absolutely; how could it be any straighter?'

Men came in sometimes to dine and play bridge; but of course they didn't entertain; that would have to wait, Reggie explained, till Beatrice really did turn up. His men friends were always charming to Jean, and Reggie never forgot to explain that Beatrice was practically in the train; they'd only come to span the smallest possible gulf and get things tidy. Reggie explained beautifully; he was never so easy as when he was making a point as if it wasn't of the least importance. You couldn't have put your finger afterwards on how he had worked it in, and yet it was always plain enough.

Jean wanted sometimes to tell him how awfully nice she thought he was to her; but while you are alone with a person who is being awfully nice, it is not particularly easy to draw his attention to it.

'Reggie,' Jean said to him one day, looking with astonished eyes at the

calendar, 'do you realize this has been going on for a month?'

'More like a minute,' agreed Reggie, laughing. 'But what exactly d'you mean by "this"?'

Jean hesitated; of course in a sense nothing had been "going on"; but Beatrice's absence, which had at first seemed a mere natural gap, had suddenly become more significant.

'You and I alone here together,' she said at last, 'without Beatrice.'

'We can't help it, though, can we?' replied Reggie sympathetically. 'We'd be charmed to see her, but we must respect the feelings of a fox-hunter and a mother--which did she happen to be last?'

'There was,' said Jean a little uncertainly, 'something or other to be opened----'

'Philanthropy,' said Reggie, grinning, 'is of course even more important than the nursery. Charity should begin at home, but not stay there--what? I've always thought a month was a ridiculous length for a honeymoon; haven't you? If you like a woman, it isn't half long enough; and if you don't like her, it's a damned sight too long. Are you beginning to get bored?'

'Of course I'm not,' said Jean defiantly. 'Besides, I've got my work.'

'Lord, yes! I forgot you looked on me as your work!' murmured Reggie. 'To tell you the truth, the hours I sit in Westminster hearing fellows jaw are the only ones I *do* get bored with. Let's go and dance.'

They went, and danced; but when Jean got home, she didn't, after her brief good-night to Reggie, go straight to bed. She wrote a letter to Lady Margaret instead. It was a mere non-committal line to ask how Lady Margaret was, and to tell her that she and Reggie had come up to town to get the house ready for Beatrice a month ago, and were still waiting for her. The house, she wrote, was ready, and the servants were perfectly satisfactory. Reggie hadn't made his maiden speech yet, but he had written it, and expected to get a chance next week. By then she hoped Beatrice would really have come up. She didn't mention China, but she was very sincerely Lady Margaret's Jean.

She wondered after she had written this innocuous appeal, if she ought to tell Reggie before she sent it. She had a perfect right to keep her correspondence to herself, but if she had thought it would make no difference, she wouldn't have written it; and wasn't the difference it would make a thing Reggie ought to be told? She decided to compromise. The next morning she sent the letter, but she meant to tell Reggie about it before she had time to receive an answer.

CHAPTER XXII

THEY were drinking coffee after lunch in the vivid mauve and primrose room, when the telegram came.

Heavy woolly flakes of snow crept through the grey air, pressed themselves against the window-pane, and vanished into moisture.

The leafless trees of Kensington Gardens, black and bare, cut queer zigzags into the sky, holding squares and oblongs of pasty light between their tortured branches.

A flock of crocuses, orange and purple in a row of window boxes, caught Jean's eyes with relief. London, its slush and grease, its dull tumult and nipt ungracious air, had not touched the crocuses--all the spring shone in their lifted cups. Jean's eyes met Reggie's across the flowers and she put the telegram unopened into his hand. She didn't need to read it to know what it contained.

Reggie leaned forward to share it with her. 'Hope put me up for a night or two arrive about six love to Reggie--Margaret.'

For a moment Reggie said nothing, then he made a savage gesture, crumpled the paper up, and flung it into the fire. 'How on earth does she know you're here? Why is she coming?' he asked angrily.

'I wrote to her last night,' Jean admitted. 'I told her I was here. I told her everything.'

Reggie's eyes held hers cruelly. She saw that he suspected her of dishonesty, as he might have suspected an unfortunate housemaid.

'Everything!' he said with controlled exasperation. 'D'you mind telling me what you mean by everything?'

'Only,' said Jean gently, 'that you and I were here alone, and had been alone for a month.'

'I suppose you know what she'll think of us?' Reggie demanded bitterly. 'She's as unscrupulous as hell, but as moral as the Catechism. She may excuse your besotted innocence, though she'll have to draw a long bow to do it--but she'll have me down and out! It won't only ruin our time here together, but after what she says to you you'll never trust me again! Couldn't you have spoken to me first? I thought we were friends!'

'Of course we are,' said Jean steadily. 'I know you better than she does. What could she say to me that would make me stop trusting you?'

Reggie was unmollified. He flung away from her gentleness in disgust. 'You've knifed me in the back!' he said bitterly. 'I was fool enough to think a woman like you would have more sense of fair play!'

'I haven't knifed you,' said Jean quickly. 'I would have told you I was writing, but if it's hard to tell you now when she'll be here in a few hours, it

would have been harder still if I hadn't known she was coming!'

'Why is it hard?' Reggie demanded, less angrily. He got up and came over to the sofa where Jean sat. He did not touch her, but the sense of his physical presence close to her was like that of a natural force turned against her. She wanted him to move away, as if he were actually preventing light or air from reaching her. He did prevent her from seeing the dancing crocuses.

'It's hard, because you mind,' she said at last, 'and I knew that, if I told you, your minding might stop me!'

'What if it had stopped you?' asked Reggie; 'd'you think it was an act of virtue to drag a damned interfering old hen between you and me?'

He gripped her shoulder with his hand, forcing her to look up at him.

'Reggie, something had to be dragged in between you and me!' Jean said quietly. She made no effort to release herself from his grasp, but the eyes which met his held him away from her. 'I might have just gone away,' she added after a pause, 'but I'm your friend. I didn't want to run away from you. I only wanted to safeguard our friendship.'

At last he moved so that the crocus-heads sprang back into her line of vision. 'There can't be any safe-guards between you and me,' he said fiercely. 'I'm madly in love with you. I've held myself in--but that only shows you how damned hard hit I am. You're safe because you've trusted me--but if you break that down by crying out for help, what do you expect me to do?'

'But don't you see,' Jean pleaded, 'if *you* aren't safe--if you want, I mean, what you can't get--something had to be done? I can go away if you like. I'm quite willing to go before Lady Margaret comes, but I can't stay on with you alone.'

He put his hand on her shoulder again, but this time he touched her as gently as if she were a flower.

'Come,' he said, his eyes burning down into hers, 'don't you feel what I feel--a little?'

'I don't want to be made to love!' said Jean quickly. 'I'm not like that! I can love quite easily without being made.'

'You're in love with Ian!' Reggie asserted. The fact hung between them for a moment, relieving the weight of his attack. Jean said nothing; it was Reggie himself who brushed his assertion away, as if it were insignificant.

'It isn't any good,' he said sullenly. 'If it were, I'd have left you alone. But you can see for yourself it isn't. She can send him off, or call him back, at will. He'll never be any other woman's. But she's chucked me out for good--I'm safe, and I'm yours. I've never been a friend of any woman as I am of you. I wouldn't hurt a hair of your head. You know that, don't you? Whatever damnable twaddle Lady Margaret tries to drive into your mind against me, I've been decent to you, haven't I?'

Jean moved as if to find a place where she could be at rest. She felt like a fever patient, tossed from one burning spot to another. Whichever way she turned the flame of Reggie's passion held her.

It would have been easier to escape from violence than from the pitiful urgency of his good will.

'I know it or I shouldn't be here!' Jean said gently. 'I haven't sent for her to protect me, Reggie--but to protect you. Because what you want's no good! I can't give it to you.'

'But do you know what I want?' Reggie surprised her by asking. 'If you think it's just to force or frighten you into being my mistress for an hour or two, you're wrong! I want you much more seriously than that--and I'd wait months for you if you asked it of me. This jolly time together hasn't been a trap! You could walk out of this house to-morrow and be none the worse for it, couldn't you? But it's been a sort of a test to see how things would work--and you can't deny it *has* worked--for both of us. D'you remember, you asked me once to tell you what it was that Beatrice wanted you to do--the thing I told you *I* wanted as well as Beatrice?'

'Yes,' said Jean under her breath.

She sat quite still now; she felt suddenly cold.

Reggie walked up and down the room with a jerky, uneven stride, unlike his easy effortless swing. Every now and then he stopped for a moment and stared out of the window at the interminable travelling flakes, which lost themselves before they arrived. 'It wasn't a plan at first,' he began defensively. 'I didn't know what Beatrice had got you down for; unless it was one of her infernally tantalizing little tricks to make me lose my head, and win Ian round to her side. She's been trying that on for years. But she never could make Ian give me the go-by. He always pulled up short. Well--I made a fool of myself all right over you, if that was what she'd planned--a hideous fool. It doesn't bear speaking of. I'd have shot myself if you hadn't given me another chance!

'Then, when Beatrice was laid up, something rather odd happened. I got awfully fond of you--but quite differently, not as if you were a pretty girl at all. I hadn't ever felt about a woman before as if I could trust her, I mean, not to score off me somehow. My experience of women has been that if you're decent to them, they always do you in. I believe in the whip-hand with women and all that, you know--but what I want to explain is that I've rather come round to another point of view as far as you're concerned. Beatrice knows that--I had the whole thing out with her after Lady Margaret came.

'Beatrice said that she saw I was honestly in love with you and that the only sensible thing for us to do was to try to come to some permanent arrangement. We can't divorce because of the children. And besides, I don't think Beatrice awfully wants to chuck Windlestraws. It's only me she minds. She said I could

make any settlements I liked upon you, and then we could all live there together. After all, it's a big place; and if I'd set her free for Ian, she'd back me about you!' Reggie stopped for a moment, but as Jean made no response he went on with renewed assurance. 'Nobody could say anything, even if they knew, and the chances are all against any one's knowing.

'Beatrice said it was quite a good life for a girl really, and that if you wanted children you could go abroad and have 'em, and that she'd adopt them for you, and bring them up in her own nursery. She's as straight as a die, you know, in her way. She'd never go back on you!'

Jean still said nothing. She couldn't drag her mind away from the violent colours in the room--the purple curtains, the bright yellow silk carpet. Even the crocuses got into her dazzled mind, and made it difficult to see exactly what Reggie meant. Her thoughts became a part of his rapid striding to and fro, of his pleased excitement over his plan, of his sense that brilliance and violence could always be trusted.

She could hear him saying that all it wanted was a little pluck.

Jean didn't feel shocked; she hadn't been very much surprised. After all, hints and premonitions of what they wanted her to do had stirred behind all her fears.

Of course this would be their plan, nor was it, from their point of view, at all a bad one.

From the moment they had agreed to make a handsome settlement upon her, they had both felt perfectly free.

They wouldn't have thought of making use of her if they hadn't so awfully liked her.

It was a plot; but they wouldn't think anything of that, provided it was a kind plot. They'd insured her against material disaster, and left her spirit to shift for itself.

'Beatrice thought,' Reggie went on after a long pause, lighting a cigarette as if the worst was now over, and he could afford a moment's relaxation, 'that you'd taken a fancy to Ian, but that it hadn't gone very far. So she got him off to China and suggested my bringing you here. I've been awfully afraid of boring you, but later on, you know, you could see a lot of people--awfully clever people--authors if you like. Beatrice could perfectly work it, or I'd take you abroad. I rather like travelling.' Reggie stopped in front of her, and gazed at her with appealing eyes, like a child trying to persuade an obdurate grown-up to turn into a tiger.

Jean felt it as positive cruelty to refuse to play Reggie's game.

'It isn't as simple as that,' she found herself trying to assure him, 'caring or not caring! Besides, don't you see it's all a lie? It would have, whether it was found out or not, all the ugliness of a lie.'

'But it's nobody's business but our own!' Reggie urged impatiently. 'Besides, darling, you'd get to care! I know a lot about women. If you'd let me try, you'd see! You aren't as sure of yourself now as you think you are! I don't think you'd have sent for Lady Margaret if you hadn't begun to care a little! Even if you aren't afraid of me, you've begun to be a little afraid of yourself.'

'I don't care for you the way I mean by caring,' said Jean inexorably, 'playing a woman to your man isn't real caring. I'd have to care a great deal more than that before I'd live a lie for you! I don't think I ever could, not if I loved you to smithereens! It's too sordid! You know I haven't much religion and I dare say I do know awfully little about life, but I know I want to be above board and clean. I wouldn't like to shuffle behind Beatrice's idea of straightness. You see, it doesn't even appeal to me *as* straight. What she calls coming a cropper seems to me a good deal straighter than living a lie! I can see the decency of divorce--because it's a kind of owning up; but ducking from under--doing what you want without paying for it--can you think it straight, Reggie?'

'But she won't divorce,' said Reggie earnestly, as if the fact of his not being able to get his desire one way proved the morality of his getting it in another. 'Besides, there are the children to think of!'

'Of course there are!' agreed Jean, 'but is that the way to think of them--fooling them? Do you like to think of me doing a thing that could be so horrible to a child? Is that what your respect for me amounts to?'

'I don't suppose they'd mind so terribly if they did find out,' said Reggie uncomfortably. 'They're frightfully fond of you.'

'I shouldn't be a person to be fond of if I did that to them,' said Jean. 'Reggie--do look at it straight! Would you like Bridget to know I was your mistress so that her mother could be her Uncle Ian's mistress?'

Reggie winced away from her words as if she had suggested something obscene which had never crossed his mind. Jean saw that what he did would always seem less serious to him than what he thought about it.

He fell back limply on his former assertion. Nobody would find out. Naturally, he went on with renewed complacence, Jean felt a little nervous, but the cure for that was simply to be in love with him. When you really wanted to do a thing, fear was one of the things that got out of your way.

That was the trouble with having brought Lady Margaret down on them. She would interfere with the process of Jean's getting to like him.

'I want you to promise me one thing,' Reggie finished; 'it isn't much to ask, since you've refused everything else. Will you let me see you alone after you've seen Lady Margaret? She's sure to ooze mud all over me, and I want a chance to clear some of it off. I want your word that you'll give me at least an hour?'

Jean looked at him with a momentary distrust. What card had he got still to play?

She felt worn out with their trickery. Her heart was so much more vulnerable than their hearts. She thought of Beatrice waiting in calm seclusion in the country with her children and her hunters; and she felt sure that Beatrice hardly felt a qualm. She had simply made sensible arrangements and she expected them to be carried out.

It was ridiculous to be so harried by an inner pity for beings so immune! What they didn't know, and what they would immediately have traded on, if they had known it, was the depths of Jean's pity.

Ian knew it because he had pity himself, he had gone away--with the blind ache of it--to China; but he wouldn't be able to get rid of it even there.

Jean wanted unbearably to give Beatrice what she wanted--to see that frozen beauty melt into joy--to break the awful strain of their perpetual frustration. And if she wanted it for Beatrice, how much more did she not long to give Ian his heart's desire!

She wondered that Reggie hadn't played that final card.

Was it that he had reached one of his strange moral limits as to what he thought fair; or was it that he didn't know that, to Jean, her virtue would have been a little price to pay for Ian's joy?

If they had been content to ask her simply for that! But to give her whole life to a lie was too tall an order for even the humblest spirit to swallow. She might still have to swallow it, but what she wanted now was time--time without undue pressure, to see what she could do for them decently and all of a piece, without violating what conscience she had.

Fortunately Reggie hadn't thought of appealing to her pity, and the thing for her to do was to get out of the room before he did think of it. They were both excited, and Jean was even more afraid of her own excitement than she was of Reggie's.

'I want you to leave me alone,' she said decisively. 'I don't mean only now. I mean for a long time. I've said "No" to your scheme, but I am the same person I was before I said it, and I want quite as much to find some way out for us all. Will you trust me to try to find it?'

'I'd trust you much more to find it, if you stayed here with me!' said Reggie eagerly.

'I may even do that,' said Jean quietly. 'But remember what I've asked! I've got to be left alone--if you make love to me, my way won't work--and your way never will! I'll see you alone after I've seen Lady Margaret if you'll agree to my terms.'

Reggie hesitated, then he said, 'My dear child, if I'm in the same house with you, with half a dozen locked doors between us, I'd still be making love to

you! What on earth do you think I've been doing the whole of this month?'

Jean stared aghast at this exposure of his niceness. It had all of it meant then exactly what she had thought it hadn't! Still it was her own wit she blamed for breaking down, quite as much as she blamed Reggie's efforts to ensnare it. She said reasonably, 'I suppose I ought to have seen, but I didn't. It's all been such fun that I thought it was only fun. I'm sorry----'

'But you needn't be sorry!' Reggie said seriously. 'That's what love-making ought to be! If you weren't such a puritan you'd see what fun it is!'

'But it isn't,' Jean broke out, 'really fun if I don't know what you mean--till now! You said you hadn't set a trap for me! If I can't think you honest, then I've got to get out of your lives!'

Reggie turned his hunter's face towards her in indignant astonishment.

'Of course I'm honest!' he exclaimed. 'I'm as honest as the day! I can't think what the devil you mean by doubting it!'

Jean had risen while he was speaking and moved, as if by accident, between him and the door. She stood for a moment looking back at Reggie, meeting with hidden amusement his clear indignant eyes. He didn't know what she meant! He stood there, in his splendid vigorous innocence, trusting in his unscrupulous instincts, free from all self-reproach.

It was Jean who felt devious and shabby for daring to try to escape from him.

'Well then--be a little more honest still,' she murmured, as, before he had time to grasp her purpose, she slipped out of the room.

CHAPTER XXIII

LADY MARGARET'S arrival was as smooth and bland as a summer's day. Jean, who had expected to rank as a culprit, found herself being treated with the consideration due to a cherished invalid. Reggie was out; when he came in, barely in time to dress for dinner, he was in a vile temper backed by a long series of cocktails.

He controlled his temper as he controlled his cocktails, but, in order to do so, his manner sank below zero. His solicitude had the edge of a knife and his compliments chilled to the bone.

All through dinner Jean fluttered helplessly from subject to subject like a tramp moved on by the police; only Lady Margaret remained benevolent and unruffled--looking very handsome in wine-colour and pearls--and full of racy innocuous gossip. After dinner, unable to face each other indefinitely, they went to a *revue*. Reggie declared that all the women had rickets and were as lumpy as last year's potatoes, and that the men's jokes were sodden with age, nor was there a turn you could face sober. He hurried them off to his favourite night-club, complained of the supper, danced with a famous film-star, and left Lady Margaret and Jean to the tender mercies of a stray acquaintance. Lady Margaret preserved a gracious geniality to the dregs of the evening, but Jean became a victim to panic. Her nerves ceased to flutter, they merely prodded her occasionally in the form of conscientious scruples as to whether she didn't do more harm than good by being alive at all. She sank into bed at last only to be roused to fresh terror by a discreet knock at the door.

It was Lady Margaret, her white hair looking as fresh as frost on a window-pane, dressed in a turquoise-satin dressing-gown trimmed with blue fur. She was too sorry to bother poor little Jean, but she'd run out of cigarettes. When she had been provided with a box, she sat down by the still burning fire, under a lamp shaped like a black dragon with a fiery red tongue. The carpet on which she sat was scarlet; and with the light behind her, all the remains of her beauty formed themselves into a triumphant whole. She was as handsome as if she were twenty-eight and she made Jean feel like a feeble bed ridden old hag.

'Well, my dear,' Lady Margaret began very kindly, but with an unmistakable twinkle in her frosty blue eyes, 'now I suppose you know what their great plan was?'

Jean felt a wave of inexplicable relief. The tooth was out and she hadn't as much as felt a twinge. All she had to do now was to go on with her lightened life.

'Yes,' she said eagerly, 'I know now! I was awfully stupid not to have guessed before. But I didn't--I only thought I was helping Beatrice by giving

her a rest. I thought she wanted Reggie taken off her hands. She must, at times, so terribly need a breathing space--but I didn't dream she meant me to take him off her hands--so completely!'

Lady Margaret laughed gently. 'In that direction,' she said, 'you couldn't be too complete. But you should have thought of your own life. You ought to have written to me at once. This month together was far too long, far too risky, and of course, as you must know, from a worldly point of view, utterly suicidal!'

Her smile had gone now; she spoke with a grave sincerity.

'But I don't belong to your world,' Jean objected, 'a girl earning her own living has a different standard. You can be straight or not as you like, but you have very often to be in a position in which only you yourself know if you *are* straight or not! There is no one in my world who would think the worse of me for being in this house alone with Reggie, while I was working for him; I told my father what I was doing, and he wrote back without making any comment at all. It wouldn't have occurred to him to make any. I only got frightened when I saw that there really wasn't any work to do except going about with Reggie; if he'd only gone about with somebody else I shouldn't have minded at all!'

Lady Margaret listened to Jean's defence with tolerant amusement.

'It's a very odd standard,' she murmured. 'Still, you know, I'm quite prepared to believe that nothing *has* happened. That's why I came up. But you know, my dear child, that no one who knows Reggie would give you the benefit of the doubt! In our world, girls do very odd things--quite as odd as this little trip of yours, but they don't do them innocently. And if they're found out they have to suffer the penalty. Reggie and Beatrice have both of them taken, as I was afraid they would, a very base advantage of your having a different code.'

Jean felt a sudden sympathy for her fellow culprits. 'After all,' she said defensively, 'I'm grown up. I don't see that either of them was really to blame since I agreed to what they asked me to do!'

'You didn't quite know what you were giving your consent to, though, did you?' asked Lady Margaret drily. 'You signed a contract, which it was their duty to see that you understood. I'm afraid that my daughter, let alone Reggie, was guilty of rather sharp social practice.'

'But they haven't done me any real harm!' Jean exclaimed eagerly.

Lady Margaret raised her delicate eyebrows. She finished her cigarette, as if to get it out of the way before she made a more serious point, and then leaned forward impressively.

'Haven't they?' she demanded. 'My dear child, are you quite sure they haven't done you a very great wrong? Don't you realize that what Beatrice

meant was to make you impossible for Ian!'

A twinge of the pain she had expected to feel caught Jean. Her spiritual surgery wasn't, as she had hoped, successfully over; it had hardly begun.

'But--Reggie----' she faltered.

'Ah, what Reggie meant was what he always meant,' replied Lady Margaret coolly, 'to get you somehow. I dare say Beatrice wanted to give a famished dog a bone as well--but that was the least of her intentions. She is quite used to Reggie's starved state and she doesn't really mind it. She expects him to forage for himself; and you must admit he knows very well how to! What she really wanted was to be sure that no other dog would look at the bone after Reggie had touched it!

'Ian, you see, *does* belong to their world--not to yours, and he judges social blunders from their point of view. No maiden lady is quite so particular about a girl's conduct as a man of the world is--if he means to marry her. Boys may marry fast girls--men of the world marry safe ones. From Ian's point of view, you see, you're no longer a safe one.'

Lady Margaret paused. There was kindness in her regret but she made the regret sound deeper than the kindness.

The knife had gone home now, and Jean needed a moment or two to control her voice before she answered: 'But, Lady Margaret, there was never any question of my marrying Ian.'

'Nonsense,' said Lady Margaret, scratching a match-box sharply to light a fresh cigarette. 'Then why do you suppose she packed him off to China? You may be sure she felt very shaky about him before she'd consent to that expedient! Do you suppose for a moment that any one of them considered your feelings? My dear, they didn't even consider poor Char's!'

'Poor Char's?' Jean asked, aghast at this sudden introduction of a fresh victim. Lady Margaret nodded.

'Ah, then they haven't told you?' she asked between fresh puffs of her cigarette. 'It surprises me Reggie didn't use that particular card! I can understand Beatrice leaving the subject of Char alone! If she ever felt remorse, she must have felt it about that poor baby of mine! But remorse or no remorse, Beatrice left her in the dust, where she would leave you--without a scruple--if she ever got you there!'

Jean said nothing. This wasn't the Beatrice she knew, but it might be a Beatrice she would have to know.

'Char's marriage wasn't a success,' Lady Margaret went on after a brief pause. 'Montague Lubbock is rich, but he's the worst kind of a beast! She had the odd kink girls have for a rake. Her father begged her not to marry him, but she wouldn't even wait till her first season was over. A week or two of it was enough for her, and she's had to have five years! A few months after this

marriage she went to Windlestraws alone. You can't call Char exactly pretty; she's a thin stick of a girl, with large eyes, and a mop of curls. Very made-up and a little wild. By that time she was pretty reckless. Ian took to her at once. It went as far as such things can go. I don't think Beatrice did anything particular to stop it. Char practically shouted it from the housetops. She might as well have hired a man to walk in front of them with a red flag. It went on till the only possible or decent thing was for Char to get a divorce and remarry; but that never came off. She didn't divorce; she and Monty just do as they like--under the same roof! Char had to get over Ian the best way she could, and she never has got over him! Ian went off to Rhodesia and shot lions.

'There's no ill feeling at all. In my family the girls all stick together. But there it is: if Beatrice wouldn't let him go for Char--whom she's really devoted to in her way--she's not likely to lift a finger to save you!'

Jean looked fixedly at this picture of Beatrice. Wasn't there a difference between not lifting a finger to save her and deliberately kicking her into the mire? Beatrice hadn't saved Char--but she hadn't tried to get Char lost.

Jean remembered Beatrice's kiss and those strange tears, which had so suddenly sealed their friendship. Were such surrenders of no account whatever?

'Passion,' said Lady Margaret, reflecting, 'makes beasts out of women. Men are beasts, poor dears, so one doesn't notice the difference so much; but women are brought up to be nice, and I think on the whole they *are* nice till they get bowled over. That's the way you must look at Beatrice, you know--she's been bowled over.'

Jean gave a quick, deep sigh. She too had been bowled over. She hadn't known how utterly, until she saw herself as spoiled for Ian. But she knew well enough that, even if Beatrice had done the spoiling, she wouldn't want to damage her in Ian's eyes. What she minded most was that Beatrice should be damaged even in her own.

Lady Margaret noticed the sigh; but she didn't accept it as a tribute to Beatrice; she thought of it as a confession of Jean's feelings for the evasive Ian.

'There's something,' she said more cheerfully, 'that Beatrice may have overlooked. Ian won't like it, when he knows what they've been up to. He won't like it at all. He'll guess your point of view, even though he doesn't share it, and he'll know they've taken advantage of it. I will say that for Ian, he never takes an unfair advantage, even with poor Char! She practically hung herself round his neck and insisted upon remaining there! Char herself told me he ran away from her three times, and warned her that whatever happened he couldn't marry her. I don't say his annoyance with Beatrice will lead to what we want, but it may very well lead to something which Beatrice doesn't want, and *that'll* be all to the good!'

'Ah, but it won't!' cried Jean with a little gasp. 'Why should it?'

She sat up in bed and pushed away the embroidered sheets and the brilliant green and gold brocaded coverlet, which weighed her down like lead, and burst into a sudden wild frenzy of tears. To have everybody disappointed all round--what good would that do? She had a reckless impulse to leap out of bed and fly to Reggie; there at least was a human being to whom she could give something definite that he wanted.

Lady Margaret said soothingly, 'Never mind, my dear, it'll pass. That's all you can say of bad moments--or of good ones either--though we don't think of it at the time, unfortunately. The best thing you can do is to come home with me. Of course we won't hurry away. We'll wait for Reggie's famous speech. Saturday will suit perfectly and look quite presentable to the servants. I'll find plenty of work for you to do, and it'll keep Beatrice quiet! Of course, directly she hears of my turning up here, she'll be down like a wolf on the fold! But by the time she gets here, I shall have abstracted the lamb! She'll only find another wolf, as fierce as herself, and we can comfortably leave them to tear each other to pieces!'

Jean shuddered at the memory of their civilized, polished tearing. The hard cruel lines would come back into Reggie's face and she would have helped to kill the happy shining boy whom Beatrice had never seen.

'How can we be comfortable,' she whispered through her tears, 'when they're hurting each other?'

Lady Margaret was silent for so long that Jean dried her tears and looked up at her. She thought she had never seen Lady Margaret look so like a mother.

'I know, my dear, I know,' Lady Margaret said at last, 'but you see we can't do anything about it. That's what one has to learn! They will act the way they want to act. They do tear each other to pieces! And if you were here, they'd only tear you. The best thing we can do, and so I suppose the kindest, is to come away, and try to forget their predatory ways! Remember too, that they do get a certain satisfaction out of the habit of tearing!'

'But what shall I do?' Jean objected, 'after the time with you is over--I can't help them any more, can I? And you don't want a secretary just to annoy Beatrice! You'll find me a log on your hands--and heaven knows what I shall find myself!'

Lady Margaret shook her head reassuringly.

'Logs don't get on my hands,' she said cheerfully. 'I sit on them, and make them useful. And if you're useful you cease to feel like a log. But don't misunderstand me--I have no wish whatever to annoy Beatrice. I think she's my favourite child. But I do want to see her leading a more settled life. As to what'll happen later on--one can't tell of course. Come to me for a few months and find out! Time is the one human agency I have the slightest confidence in!'

'But what do you expect to have happen?' Jean abruptly demanded.

Lady Margaret shrugged her shoulders and stretched her tiny jewelled feet nearer to the fire. 'I expect the worst,' she said cheerfully, 'but I work for the best--and on the whole, neither of them happens. Probably you and I will grow mildly bored with each other. Beatrice and Reggie will mark time, Ian may come back with a Chinese wife, or as things are so unsettled over there he may never come back at all! But what'll happen if you don't come with me, I'd rather *not* be called upon to face! Your life, my child, would be ruined. Beatrice would have done something base, and, though you may not think much of my morality, to have my favourite child act basely is a disaster I'd give a good deal to avoid. And when Ian came back again, I think something very like murder might take place.

'I dare say you'll think I'm exaggerating, but I'm not. A dear old friend of mine, for instance, ended his life very abruptly, with two trained nurses and a male attendant--all excessively careless, of course--by drowning himself in the lake of Como. In the newspapers it was described as mental depression after his wife's death, and very right and proper of course--still I happen to know he killed his wife--under the very sharpest kind of provocation--and I doubt if the depression after her death was caused by it or the fact that he hadn't killed her before. The strain had gone on just too long, if you know what I mean. Such things do happen when very powerful people with very strong wills live at cross-purposes under the same roof. If Reggie and Beatrice were ten years older they might settle down and live for their children; but I hardly think they'll do that just yet, unless they're obliged to!'

'But I needn't stay with any of you,' Jean objected. 'I could just get another job! I must leave Reggie now, I see that. If I go and Ian stays away, things can't get any worse, can they?'

'Of course Ian *might* stay away if he's annoyed enough,' Lady Margaret said thoughtfully. 'One wants to keep that up as long as possible and I don't see a better way, you know, than by your coming to me. Reggie would never leave you alone if you were anywhere else. The one place where he won't come to look for you would be my house. You'll find it uncommonly dull, of course, after Windlestraws, but I doubt if you'll find me as boring as just poking your dear little nose back into a museum or wherever it was you took it out of!'

'I'm not afraid of being bored!' Jean answered Lady Margaret. She had never even envisaged this particular danger until she had heard it mentioned at Windlestraws as if it were a fatal form of disease. 'And I admit I *am* a little afraid of Reggie. He can be so awfully nice! Of course I'd like to come to you--if you'll leave me quite free and won't make any more plans! You see I'm a good deal more afraid of plans than I am even of Reggie!'

'Poor child,' said Lady Margaret kindly, 'no wonder you're afraid of them!

You shall do just as you like! What *can* I plan, if it comes to that, except to give us all a short respite before anything desperate happens?'

Lady Margaret rose with a little shiver, stirred the dying coals with a practised hand, extinguished the dragon's tongue of flame, and bending over Jean, kissed her a kind good night.

'I really believe you *are* a good girl!' she murmured as she turned to go, 'although I don't in the least know why I *should* believe it!'

CHAPTER XXIV

JEAN peered anxiously down into the oblong space beneath her. She felt as if she were in a church without an altar. The choir stalls ranged up the long dusky nave, at the end of which no light shone. A member had been talking passionately and for a long time about blackberries. Nobody shared his passion. His voice ran on and on continuously like the sound of a stream through a silent meadow. A Cabinet Minister came in, looked hastily about him, and retreated.

There was the same inconsequent air which Catholic churches possess; where single worshippers come and go upon their own concerns, and islands of intensity isolate themselves from the general sea of indifference.

In a few minutes Reggie was to make his maiden speech. Jean knew it by heart; word by word, thought by thought, she had built it up around him. It had seemed a good little speech, taut and seaworthy, in the intimacy of the mauve and primrose room with Reggie's admiring eyes upon her; but in the historic, perfunctory hall, what would be left of the brittle sentences she and Reggie had strung so painstakingly together? She had forgotten the ardours and the splendours of history, which in this silent air must keep them company.

A ship in the dock can look as large and secure as a cathedral, but once the Atlantic widens out around it, it shrinks to the size of a cockle-shell.

Jean's first impression had been that the House of Commons was too indifferent to matter, her second, coming hard upon it, was that for such a building, soaked with so many crises, no words could be significant enough.

Lady Margaret had driven with them as far as Victoria Street, where she had stopped to pick up Char. A sound behind Jean made her turn her head. Lady Margaret was beckoning genially towards her, dragging in her wake a thin slip of a girl, with large sombre eyes, and a slash of scarlet for a mouth.

Char extended a hand as thin as a claw; her dark, haunted eyes searched Jean's face with unsmiling curiosity. She sat down beside her, and Jean felt as if the seat still remained unoccupied.

There was so very little of Char and what there was seemed always to be somewhere else.

Lady Margaret murmured, 'Has he begun? Is he nervous? Is the Prime Minister there?' The man upon whom the fate of the blackberry seemed to hang sat down abruptly.

There was a short formidable pause before the Speaker gave an imperceptible sign in Reggie's direction and Reggie rose very collectedly, his monocle screwed firmly in his eye, and began to speak in an easy measured voice without fumbling.

Jean thrilled with unexpected pride. She felt as a fond mother might feel whose child is behaving well at a party.

The House gave Reggie a considerable attention, the reporters even scribbled a few notes.

Jean noticed with relief that the quality of attention deepened. The speech wasn't too long and it wasn't too clever. Reggie gave the House facts and figures on the agricultural situation which were closely and concisely handled with a pleasant ironic flavour.

There was one well-made taunt which was definitely funny, and which was greeted with loud laughter. At the end of Reggie's speech there was a round of more than perfunctory applause.

Jean leaned back with a long sigh of relief. It was over and nothing awful had happened. Reggie was followed immediately by one of his leaders who made a graceful and kindly allusion to his speech. Lady Margaret tapped her triumphantly on the shoulder with her lorgnettes.

The slight shadowy figure by her side murmured in a husky voice, 'That wasn't very like Reggie--I suppose it was you?'

The eyes of the two girls met, and Jean felt a curious sensation, as if she knew Char better than she knew Lady Margaret, and better than she would ever know Beatrice.

'He's cleverer than people think!' Jean murmured loyally.

'He's much nicer!' said the husky tired voice. 'If you're in a hole--he's kind.'

Lady Margaret intervened and Char dropped back into a moody silence.

They dined with Reggie in the House; he had to go back after dinner to hear the end of the debate. A couple of fellow-members dined with them, so that there were no moments of intimacy--only the pleasant genial chaff, dipping in and out of personalities, to which the evenings at Windlestraws had long ago enured Jean.

The great thing was to be as agile as possible and never to remain long in one place. Reggie was rather more jovial than usual, his agility was remarkable, but wherever he lit, or through whatever mental contortions he carried his easy chaff, he never addressed Jean directly.

He talked of her very amusingly and kindly, but he never so much as met her eyes until dinner was over and Lady Margaret and Char were already in the car. Then while his friends exchanged their final witticisms he managed to speak to Jean unheard.

'Sit up for me,' he said quickly, 'or come down later--but let me see you somehow to-night alone--promise?' Jean promised; but though she promised she was afraid of the look in Reggie's eyes. It was too happy and too confident.

Lady Margaret was full of praise, praise of Reggie and of the party, the occasion and the Prime Minister--who had at the last moment looked in--and

even, when she remembered it, praise of Jean.

Nothing, she exclaimed, could have gone better--the whole thing had been perfect; and there wasn't any reason why Reggie, if he would only stick to it, shouldn't have a *real* political career!

'I wonder why people never say "real" unless they don't mean it?' drawled Char. 'You know when anybody says "She looked really young," they mean, "She looked as old as the hills, poor thing, but let's be nice about her!" That's what you mean, mother, you're just being nice about Reggie. We know quite well that he'll never do anything very grand unless Miss Arbuthnot does it for him. He'll get through on his pluck--like he did to-night; but he'll always be an "also ran".'

'Really, you children are too dispiriting for words!' said Lady Margaret impatiently. 'Jean sits like a clam--or is it an oyster?--muffled in her own cold-shouldering thoughts, and won't say a word--and you, Char, sound positively nasty, and yet you heard what the Chancellor said--"a solid contribution." If only dear Beatrice had been there!'

'Wouldn't she have been charmed!' gibed Char with a grim little laugh. 'But dear Beatrice, Mummy, never will be there--that's rather one of the points against Reggie's career, isn't it? Dear Beatrice would love him to have it, but she doesn't care enough to walk across the road to help him to get it!'

'Oh, but she takes the deepest interest----!' Lady Margaret began defensively.

Char laughed again with increasing mockery. 'Come, mother,' she said, 'you needn't be a humbug with us! I think we all three know, don't we, where Beatrice's "deepest interest" is likely to fall? I should be able to show more enthusiasm for Reggie's career if any one, including Reggie himself, really meant anything whatever by it.'

'He thinks a great deal of his country,' said Lady Margaret with dignity, 'and I'm thankful to see he's begun to take his position seriously.'

'You'd be still more thankful, wouldn't you,' said Char maliciously, 'if he could only be prevented from knowing what his position was! Here's my house, Miss Arbuthnot, come and see me sometime if you care to. I'm not usually as nasty as I feel to-night. I liked your speech.'

Char slipped out of the car, wavered for a brief moment on her lighted doorstep, like a figure on a slate, before the great sponge of night wiped her swiftly away.

'She's a strange child,' Lady Margaret murmured. 'She doesn't seem able to get over things!'

Lady Margaret spoke as if her daughter was suffering from a slight physical ailment which could be easily corrected by a pill.

It was on the tip of Jean's tongue to say, 'But can't you see that what's the

matter with her is a broken heart?'

But she pulled herself up short, for she knew that Lady Margaret had as fierce an intolerance for spiritual disaster as a Christian Scientist feels for the *faux pas* of physical pain. 'If only she'd have a baby!' Lady Margaret said thoughtfully as the car slowed up at the door, 'everything would be *quite* all right.'

CHAPTER XXV

If she was going to give Reggie a midnight interview, Jean made up her mind not to do it secretly. She felt that she owed it to Lady Margaret to give her a chance to disapprove. 'I'm going to wait up for Reggie,' she said with a touch of defiance in her voice, as she followed Lady Margaret into the hall.

'Are you?' murmured Lady Margaret with a placid indifference which threw Jean's honesty back on her hands. 'Well, I think I'll toddle off to bed. All my compliments can wait till to-morrow. What a dreadful place this hall is, isn't it? They've made it look like a baby's funeral. So stripy too--black rugs--white china--and all this preposterous stained oak! I'm afraid you'll get very moped sitting here all by yourself--I should turn on the gramophone!'

Jean refused the gramophone, but she knew that she would have liked Lady Margaret to stay and challenge the shifting patterns of her will; but Lady Margaret kept her disapproval for the faked staircase up which she presently vanished.

Jean sat down on a black divan under an umbrella-shaped black-and-white lampshade. She felt like some one at a railway station not quite sure of his train. What was she going to say to Reggie when he came in flushed with their mutual triumph? It had been quite plain in her mind before she saw Char; she wasn't going to do wrong to right anybody; now irrelevantly, but with a dominating persistence, the image of Char rose up before her, like a ghostly warning. Char wouldn't allow Jean to take an easy moral view of the situation. If Beatrice wasn't set free to hold Ian's baffled love, there were going to be more Chars, and more Reggies--and more mad rushes to distant spots of an obstinately small, and far too easily traversed, globe. And yet when Jean said to what was left of her conscience, 'Very well then, I'd better, I suppose, give myself to Reggie!' Reggie sank away from her and Ian absorbed her whole being.

She couldn't see his face when she tried to summon it; she saw instead the rose garden, or the white gate leading to the moor; she saw far more plainly than the emphatic black and white around her the soft bloom of Windlestraws, its slow accumulation of taste, the residue of forgotten minds, which time had fused into a personality of its own. All these outer things were Ian, so that there was no escape from him. Everything either reminded her of him for herself--or made her think of what he must have meant to Char.

It was Reggie's house, but all that she and Char had found there had been Ian.

With a start of surprise she heard the click of Reggie's key in the lock and knew that the moment of decision was upon her.

Reggie came in without seeing her, and she had time before he caught sight of her to realize that it was no use counting on her conscience or her mind. She would act, when she had to act, on something that was more stubborn than either.

It was easy enough to dispose of Reggie in an imaginary world which, except as an obstacle, he had never entered, but when she caught sight of him, very tall and debonair, very serene and confident, she was seized by a curious sense of never being able to give in to him.

He was too big and too bland, too sure of himself and of everything around him. She remembered in a flash his first raking appraising glance, and not all her real affection for him, not even her pity could withstand the deep resentment of that memory.

Reggie's eyes moved quickly over the hall, and picked her out with satisfaction. 'So you're here!' he said with a long comfortable sigh.

He moved forward lazily, chose a large armchair opposite her, and sank down into it with enjoyment.

'I was rather wondering where I should come across you--whether I'd have to shell you out of some hidden fortress, or find you on the edge of something uncomfortable, ready to pop off at a moment's notice, if I don't mind my p's and q's! Well! I am minding them! You'll have to stay here for hours!'

He looked genially about him, crossed his long legs, and shook his shining foot to and fro. He had been in a hurry to join her, but he didn't seem in a hurry to begin to talk. He met her eyes smilingly, but the friendliness of his smile was no indication of what he really felt.

Behind his friendliness he carried his hunter's weapons. Gratitude wouldn't put him off his guard--nor would affection move him.

'I don't want to hurry away,' Jean told him rather too quickly. 'Lady Margaret knows I'm here. It doesn't matter how late it is really. I'm so awfully, awfully glad, Reggie, that the speech went off so well!'

'Oh, she knows you're here, does she?' asked Reggie, the smile in his eyes deepening. 'She had to put that in her pipe and smoke it! Well, she won't like it, but she'll leave us alone.

'I'm glad you were pleased with the way things went in the House. We do, you know--you and I--go awfully well together. Hasn't that struck you? The voice of Jacob and the hairy arm of Esau combine to collar the blessing all right.' He took out his thin cigarette-case and leaned back with a contented chuckle.

'I never knew,' he went on lazily, 'that a partnership between a man and a woman could work so easily. D'you realize that all these weeks we've never had so much as a jar between us?'

'It's been the work,' Jean suggested. 'You know you've liked it. You must,

to do it so well.'

'Oh, come!' Reggie murmured. 'Couldn't we come to an end of putting the house straight? I do like politics--only of course you realize that I'm no more capable of hanging on alone here than an A.B. is of navigating a ship. But with you--well, I have an idea that we might make a respectable career between us. Wouldn't it be rather fun?'

He paused, and Jean felt an undercurrent of excitement beneath the lightness of his speech.

He wasn't going to make an emotional appeal, he was trying to be perfectly reasonable so that she shouldn't be frightened. He hadn't asked her to sit up for him in order to shake her to pieces, but merely to put before her a sensible proposition which she could refuse or accept.

But in spite of the easy tranquillity of Reggie's manner he was excited. He had discovered something which interested him beyond his personal life. Jean herself had put this new weapon into his hands. He had always thought before that passion was an end in itself; all his easy opulent youth he had been at the mercy of his own desires; but to-night he had realized for the first time that beyond his pleasures lay a field for his powers.

He could escape from his domestic shipwreck and from the narrow circle of his wounds. But if Jean left him, he would sink back, a hundred times worse off than he was before, with a fresh wound which might prove mortal. In a hesitating laconic way, with jokes and little pauses, he began to talk of what politics might mean to him. He had never in his life made an appeal to a woman's sympathy; but in a sense he was doing it now, he was trying to make Jean see what he would miss--besides herself--if she failed him.

'Of course I'm a hopeless Conservative,' he admitted, 'those particular spots I'm afraid you won't succeed in washing off your leopard. You don't mind, do you? They haven't seemed to matter so far. You've always seen what I was driving at, and helped me to get it straight.'

Jean shook her head. 'I'm not afraid of working for you,' she explained. 'You see, my gods are their own defence. What you do or what you believe won't hurt them. In a sense, the better you serve your party, the surer I am that sooner or later my gods will win. They're not *in* politics--they're behind them. But Reggie, don't go on--you make me feel such a brute. I'm going away with Lady Margaret for two months to-morrow. I don't know what will happen at the end of them; but I must have time. I can't make a decision, which may change all our lives, between one cigarette and another! I'm too excited! I'm too interested! Any plan I made now I couldn't trust!'

The smile died out of Reggie's eyes; he dropped his cigarette and leaned forward. 'But do you think you have a right to go away and make such a decision without me?' he asked gravely. 'Are you sure you know how far----'

he stopped abruptly, hesitating while he held her eyes, for a word which would express how far he thought that they had already gone. It was the first time Jean had seen Reggie's eyes searching for something that he couldn't find. 'Look here,' he said after a pause. 'I'd like you to believe me. I'd be true to you. What did Lady Margaret tell you about me, I mean about my life?'

'Nothing,' Jean said quickly, 'that I didn't know--I mean she didn't say anything against you. It wouldn't have mattered if she had. I shouldn't have believed it; but she said something I minded, she said you'd known, both you and Beatrice, an important thing you knew I didn't know, and that you had kept it from me!'

Reggie looked puzzled. 'Something or other bad I was letting you in for?' he asked with a frown. 'But I don't admit that what I want for you *is* bad! It isn't quite what Lady Margaret wants! She doesn't like spokes in domestic wheels; but hang it!--when the wheels don't work anyhow!'

'Something,' Jean said miserably, unable to meet his anxious eyes, 'something that you've made me for other people!'

Reggie was silent for a moment.

'Because of our being here alone together?' he asked finally.

'Yes!' whispered Jean. 'She said nobody in your world would ever think me decent again!'

He looked at her in blank astonishment.

'But you don't care about my old world, do you?' he asked.

'They'd think that anyhow, you know, from the moment I had a secretary who wasn't a fright! But they'd swallow you perfectly, of course, as long as Beatrice meant them to. We all of us think the most frightful things about each other; and I will say this for us--nine times out of ten they're true! It isn't altogether my fault either, is it, that this happens to be the tenth time? Honestly, I don't quite see how I've let you down!'

Jean couldn't make up her mind to go on. How could she tell Reggie what he had made her look to Ian?

But Reggie was not stupid about emotions when he himself was emotionally roused. After a time her silence told him what she meant. He said gently: 'You mean that you don't mind what the bally old world thinks of you--but you do mind about Ian?'

'Yes,' Jean said under her breath, 'I mind about Ian; but I mind about you too, Reggie. I mind your letting me seem like that to him.'

Reggie sank into an intensity of thought, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands, his eyes bent on his shining patent-leather shoes. 'I see,' he said, looking up at last, 'you mean it makes me look such a cad? Rather sweet of you to mind that, if you think I am one. But, don't you see, I shouldn't be a cad if you'd only been good to me! After all, I wasn't taking Ian away from you! I

was simply offering you rather a good alternative! He'd gone off on his own--without making you any offer at all, hadn't he?'

'But,' Jean persisted, 'I didn't know what I should seem to Ian! How could I tell that he'd think it all right for me to work for you at Windlestraws and all wrong for me to do the same thing for you in London? You knew, you and Beatrice, what he'd think of me--and you meant it to happen without my knowing!'

Reggie thought this over carefully, as if he were trying to be reasonable but couldn't honestly understand the value she attached to her point.

'Well,' he said finally, 'I don't think you know that I *was* very sure you didn't know! How can one tell what a girl like you knows? Sometimes you behave as if you were about sixty; and at others as if you were about six. The truth is, I knew that Ian wasn't much good for you anyhow, and so what he thought about you might be counted out. However virtuous you were, or he thought you were, wouldn't bring him up to the scratch.'

'But Reggie,' Jean hopelessly protested, 'don't you realize that I never thought about Ian like that at all? I knew he didn't want--wouldn't *ever* want--to marry me, but I did want him to think I was--well, fit to marry. Don't you see that it's his *thoughts* I mind!'

'Well,' Reggie admitted after a long pause, 'of course I see your point, but to tell the truth, I think it's pretty far-fetched. If I got my way you'd have made an arrangement that does instead of marriage, a perfectly respectable one from my point of view, and from Ian's, but on a different scale. If I don't get my way you'll be off, and none of us will set eyes on you again!'

'Yes, but I was safe in his mind!' Jean persisted. 'Don't you know what it means, when you like a person, to feel sure of their thoughts of you? Why, Reggie, it matters more than anything else in the world! Once their thoughts of you are wrong, everything's wrong!'

Reggie moved restlessly. 'I'm sorry!' he said abruptly. 'I didn't see it like that. I've never thought very much about people's minds myself, not till you came along anyhow. I know I did feel it rather when I thought you despised me; and I'd feel it worse still if you despised me now.'

Jean thought for a moment, then she said gently: 'I don't despise you.'

They were silent for a long time, then Reggie broke the silence with a sharp sigh. 'Look here,' he said, 'perhaps you'd understand rather better what I was driving at, if I put it this way. You met Char to-night, for the first time. What did you think of her?'

Jean looked at him in astonishment, how had he hit upon the centre of her thoughts? All the time they had been talking she had seen Char.

'I thought she was--broken----' she said after a pause.

'Poor little goat!' said Reggie. 'Yes--she's damaged goods. I don't want to

point a moral, but that you see *is* what comes of Ian's love-making. He can't carry it beyond a certain point. He isn't to blame, he tries to escape women, he goes off on all kinds of jaunts to get away from them, but they hang on to him like leeches; and then of course things happen--and you see what kind of things! Char's done for! She couldn't get over Ian, and because she couldn't have him, she's gone the deuce of a pace. You wouldn't do that, I know, but you're letting him take the edge off your life. Do you think I'm such a beast to you because I've tried to stop it?'

It was between them again--the incredible mental dishonesty with which he always tripped her up! He thought he had a right to fool her for her good. He was the benevolent despot smearing facts with the poison of his good will.

'But I ought to have known!' Jean said fiercely. 'Can't you see that, if I'd known, I could have chosen? What you've done is to take away my power of choice from me! But you can't do that! I shall still choose! I won't give myself to a man who's tricked me into his arms!'

She saw in a flash that she shouldn't have used those words. She had thrown down the barriers which were her protection. Reggie got up quickly; his voice, his eyes, his whole being, underwent a swift and dangerous change.

'I haven't tricked you, darling,' he said. His voice was a caress; his eyes held hers in a fierce embrace. He had put away his reason and his friendliness.

'But you'll have to let me take you,' he said, moving towards her. 'You've got to stop talking now--then you'll understand!' He knelt in front of her, his arms round her waist, his head on a level with hers, his eyes holding her eyes. 'Come into my arms!' he whispered.

What was the use of saying 'No' any more?

Ian was lost to her, but she could still free him--she could still free Beatrice and save other Chars!

She could make Reggie happy. All she had to do was to stop struggling against something in herself which was as hard as any stone. This little cold scruple might melt if she let Reggie melt it. She had no horror of the hands which touched her waist, nor of the eyes, which watched her like a hawk's for the first sign of yielding.

She believed that Reggie would in his own way be true to her; but she resented his way.

If she yielded to him now, he would always fool her, and he would always believe that fooling her was right.

She moved rigidly back from the pressure of his hands and closed her eyes.

'If you take me, Reggie,' she said, 'I *shall* despise you.' She felt his grip tighten, and then suddenly relax. She did not think that she had fainted, though her brain felt empty and her resistance was at an end. A long time passed without a sound.

When she opened her eyes she was alone.

CHAPTER XXVI

WHEN Jean thought of Tunbridge Wells, she saw it always in terms of gravel, very smooth, very golden gravel, meticulously combed and raked as it was combed and raked at Rockland Lodge. Thousands of large solid houses rested upon this soil; curving sweeps of gravel ran up to identically majestic front doors. The rusty bracken on the commons echoed the golden soil, and the inhabitants themselves had the clean, hard consistency of gravel.

Lady Margaret's house was a solid yellowish slab of stuccoed brick, set at the end of an avenue of cold pink rhododendrons.

A monkey-tree broke the lawn like an oath, and a group of copper beeches had a meretricious air, as if they had been transported direct from pots.

Everything had been done to make Rocklands look like a country house, but it remained a villa. 'You can call it what you like,' Lady Margaret confessed frankly, as they drove up the broad yellow drive one pale February afternoon, 'but you can't, of course, think of it as a *home*! My son's got my home, you know, in Shropshire, a quaint old place one could live in and keep one's self-respect; much smaller than Windlestraws, but it has character. This building looks like a half-witted child a fond mother tries to pass off as all there! I do it myself sometimes but I know it's an idiot--look at the way those windows bulge! I've really tried to do something with the garden, but do what I will it looks as if it came straight out of a catalogue for bulbs!

'When my husband died and I knew I'd got to be as dull as ditch-water for the rest of my life, or take my chance with another man--which at fifty is really *too* much of a business, I thought I might as well do the thing properly, go where all the old ladies go and what people call settle down. This nice tidy sandy healthy convenient place is as settling as a suet-pudding. The roads are well looked-after; and my neighbours have much the same incomes, religion, and begonias, that I have myself. You'll find as you grow older, these are the things that matter. When one's young, one likes to have intellectual companionships and all that--but at my age, one prefers a community of kitchen gardens. I can get quite fond of anyone whose peas are poorer than my own.

'I like low-church clergy too, and there are a lot of them about. This soil is excellent for roses--there's a strip of clay over there by our hideous garage; but carnations, I confess, refuse to grow for me--do what I will for them, even common pinks turn ragged. I have an excellent bridge four and I'm really interested in the hospital. Ah! there are my dogs! I only keep white West Highlanders now; they're mild as milk, but they have to be washed once a week.'

A series of quick-firing automatic yaps broke all round them, and out from the shrubbery rolled three sausage-like creatures, white as table-napkins, with enthusiastic eyes and short emphatic tails--it was difficult to avoid stepping on them, as all emotion drove them under the feet of those they loved.

Jean felt a strange relief steal over her, from the moment she stood on the golden gravel and patted the nearest low white dog.

There was no one in love with her here, no ardour and no agony.

She, too, could settle down to placid afternoon teas and white West Highlanders.

Lady Margaret went constantly to church and took an active part in the work of her parish. She visited the sick with cheerful unconcern, but she never came home with their pain in her chest. Pity, once she had put it into action, ceased to concern her.

When a girl got into trouble, Lady Margaret dealt with her in an open-handed sensible manner, gave her what she needed to see her through her physical disaster, told her she was a silly little fool and had better not do it again, and washed her hands of the matter.

She helped most of the sad cases brought to her by her favourite clergy, but she never involved herself in any of them, and preferred broken legs to anything more tragic and less definite.

When Jean asked her if she wasn't upset at the lapse of a drunkard she had taken endless trouble to get cured, Lady Margaret shook her head with mild amusement.

'No, my dear,' she said, 'I'm not! One drunkard more or less in a reeling world--not even in one's own family--what does it matter? That poor Mr. Archer is almost too young and too tender to be a curate, he takes things to heart so! Such a mistake! Of course, one does what one can, but as to letting it interfere with one's tea--! You saw for yourself, while he was telling us about Graves being found in a ditch--quite a good place for him really--he actually stuck in one of Emmet's best scones!'

'Lady Margaret,' Jean broke out in perplexity, 'are you really religious?'

'Religious!' exclaimed Lady Margaret in astonishment. 'My dear child, have you been a week in my house and not found that out? Why, it's one of my principal interests! I don't know what I should do without my religion! Of course, I know I don't have family prayers; perhaps I ought to, but modern servants do dislike them so--and there's always the difficulty about the bacon! Is it to be ruined by being kept hot--or is it to get cold on the sideboard? No cook likes to be left out of prayers if one has them--besides, it looks rather odd to say she must miss her prayers because of your bacon!'

'I don't mean that quite,' Jean ventured. 'You see, I've been brought up an agnostic, but I thought there was something else--people who really believed

in God--and I awfully envied them that feeling! What you say about prayers and bacon doesn't sound quite the same!'

Lady Margaret looked a trifle put out. It was the only time that Jean was to see her, even for a moment, at a loss; then she poured fresh boiling water into the tea-pot, and leaned down to stroke the oldest of the white West Highlanders.

'My dear,' she said gravely, 'I believe everything the church teaches. I find it so much simpler. I'm quite sure there's a God, I've prayed to Him all my life, and it's been an immense help to me. As to immortality, I believe in it of course, and if at moments I don't like growing old and feel a little uncomfortable about the next world--and one does feel like that sometimes, if one hears a good sermon or has a sore throat--I remind myself that most people are dead, and none of them seem to mind it. One hears a great many complaints about life, doesn't one? And there are people I know who would certainly grumble--however dead they were--if there were anything to grumble at. I can just imagine my husband if he wasn't being properly attended to! Well, since there are no complaints I fancy there's nothing very much to complain of! I don't believe in Hell, you know, and a great many of the clergy don't either! Even dear Mr. Archer, who takes such uncomfortable views always, says it's only remorse; and I've never let that trouble me for a moment!' But as Lady Margaret said these last words, a faint frown came between her brows. She brushed it briskly away and said firmly, 'One does the best one can, you know, and consequences shouldn't concern one!'

Jean opened her lips to speak and shut them abruptly. What stopped her was the sudden memory of Reggie's face when he told her that his mother-in-law had tricked him into his marriage. Had Lady Margaret never seen him look like that, or heard Beatrice say that she would like to have her room and all its treasures burned--with herself in it? And were those bitter consequences of her actions beyond her concern?

'I believe in putting my burden on the Lord,' Lady Margaret finished piously, throwing a pink cake exactly into the open jaws of a tensely prepared dog. 'And now, my dear, if you're ready, let's go out for a nice brisk walk.'

Jean had heard once from Beatrice since her arrival, a frank and friendly letter deploring her mother's sudden onslaught of propriety but refraining from blaming Jean for having given way to it. She wrote that of course Jean had pulled Reggie quite splendidly through his first speech, and ought to take a little holiday, but she hoped she would come back to Knightsbridge--wasn't Char's taste too awful?--as soon as ever she felt rested. Beatrice was there now, entertaining like mad, and dancing the soles off her feet--but it would be worse in May, when she really must have some one to help her. Reggie sent his love and seemed quite happy pottering about Westminster.

Jean had neither seen nor heard from Reggie since he had left her in the hall.

She had a feeling that he wasn't angry, he wasn't even perhaps disappointed. He was simply being superlatively good.

She wished that she hadn't the further impression that Reggie was being good, with the intent, watchful patience of a deer-stalker, lest he should get, for a moment, to windward of his sensitive prey.

CHAPTER XXVII

CHAR'S telegram dropped like a stone into the mild glassy stillness of their life. 'Must have rest and change may I come for a week or ten days love Char.'

Lady Margaret read this appeal out loud without enthusiasm. She would take her of course, she explained to Jean; she always did take any of her daughters whenever they demanded it, but she couldn't quite see what Char was up to.

She never rested, and as for change, it was greatly to be desired that Char should change some at least of her habits, but it had not hitherto been from Char herself that this desire had emanated. A mere difference of background was unlikely to effect any improvement.

'Of course it may be an answer to prayer,' Lady Margaret finished dubiously, 'but it's *not quite* the kind of answer I should have expected.'

Char arrived late the following evening and instantly demanded a cocktail.

She looked startlingly ill; her wrists and ankles were as thin as matches, no enamelling could hide the hollows of her cheeks, and her eyes, large and remote, stared out of her face with a grave astonished helplessness.

She was, so she declared, perfectly fit. Doctors were addle-pated sharks, and there could be nothing the matter with her, except perhaps a little too much dancing. She stayed in bed until twelve next morning, when a picturesque young man in a Sunbeam called to take her out. Char exclaimed vaguely that the air would do her good and that the young man must be 'Molly,' and came downstairs dressed in scarlet leather with a cigarette pinned to the corner of her mouth.

She demanded a latch-key and returned some time after midnight. This was the rest and change she wanted, and she repeated the treatment every day for a week. Lady Margaret usually saw her for a few minutes before the car drove up, and Jean often met her on the stairs on her way down.

On these occasions, curiosity flickered in the depths of Char's eyes, and sometimes a gleam of sardonic humour, but she very rarely returned Jean's smile.

When Jean went past Char's room on her way to bed, and glanced in to see that her fire was burning and sandwiches spread out against the prodigal's return, her eyes rested wistfully on Char's rainbow-coloured pyjamas, and wandered uncontrollably over the wide dressing table sown thick with tortoise-shell and gold. She wouldn't have known what to do with all Char's little boxes--still less could she have handled the lithe young man with the smooth crop of hair whose roving blue eyes were a little opaque from repeated cocktails.

She didn't wish to spend her days dodging murder through a chilly spring in a racing Sunbeam--and yet these symbols of another life made her restless in her own.

Nothing ever happened to her except the repetition in her mind of all the things which at Windlestraws had nearly happened.

Lady Margaret asked no questions and expressed no sympathy, but she added detective stories to their Mudie list.

One night when Jean found it impossible to sleep and disheartening to stay awake, she heard a series of strange sounds in the hall.

At last something might be going to happen. Burglars, it is true, seldom make continuous sounds, but there are other audible disasters, and Jean felt relief rather than fear, as she ran to the head of the stairs to meet them.

The front door was swinging wide, and all the lights were on.

Char had let herself in, but she couldn't reach the staircase, and in her effort to do so she had upset two chairs and a small table. She was drunk, but it was only her limbs which refused to obey her mind; her eyes meeting Jean's eyes were definitely conscious.

When Jean had half dragged and half carried her onto the sofa, Char leaned back gratefully. 'Gimme a cigarette, for the love of God!' she whispered, but when Jean had lit and given her one, Char dropped it on her leather coat, and began to laugh. She laughed softly at first, and with a certain control over herself, but after a time helpless laughter shook her. She buried her head in the cushions, her body writhed and twisted with laughter, she sobbed so wildly that Jean thought that she would break herself to pieces. Char looked up at last, her eyes still brimming with tears and laughter. 'Can you beat it?' she demanded. 'Can you beat it--you and I sitting here together--you as good as gold and as quiet as a glass of milk, and I after nine cocktails and a night with Molly--and both of us sick as cats in love with Beatrice's man? I know I'm drunk--but it *is* funny! It doesn't do me any good being drunk--or you any good being sober. Beatrice has it all!'

Jean felt no shock at Char's involving her in her own disaster. There was even a kind of relief in finding that her deprivation of Ian wasn't a private matter. Too many women had known it. She was not a solitary adventurer but part of a procession. Jean only demurred that Beatrice should be pushed so ruthlessly out of their company. 'How can you say she's got it all?' she demanded. 'It must be worse to know that you are loved--loved like that--and not be able to enjoy it!'

'Pooh!' said Char contemptuously. 'Beatrice does enjoy it--her way of enjoying things has always been cutting us all out. She makes it worse by being respectable, I think. Worse for Ian, of course, and worse for us--and a damned sight worse for poor old Reg. If she'd step off the track, he could get a

divorce and be free; but she'd see us all in Hell before she'd get her shoes wet!'

'I don't think Beatrice sees it like that----' Jean said hesitatingly. She felt as if Char was talking of a part of Beatrice which was only a part. If you took her actions, perhaps it was true enough, but actions were so little a part of any person--even for a person whose whole life was made up of actions, dreams played the larger part. But Jean couldn't say to Char that she trusted Beatrice's dreams. Char lay back on the cushions watching her; the despair in her eyes had vanished; she looked pathetically friendly, like a child who has put aside its toys to help a grown-up person.

'You don't want to brood!' she said to Jean abruptly. 'I know what I'm talking about. You want to stop making excuses for Beatrice and hankering after Ian--brooding took the kick out of me for months! And then I made up my mind just to look on the whole thing as a toss--you've come off and got covered with mud and bruises, but you get on again and ride hell-for-leather at the next fence. I've got all my kick back now. Lots of other men are keen on me and I hardly know which is which. I take any good time and any good fellow that comes along! Why don't you do the same, or if you don't like my pace, take on poor old Reggie and play the one man stunt? You'll be all right with him. Beatrice has treated him like dirt--and he can behave like dirt to the wrong girl--but you've got him eating out of your hand. Why not take him?'

'I don't think I want to take him,' said Jean reluctantly. 'But you're quite right, I don't want to hanker either--if I had to hanker, I'd fall back on Reggie to stop it, but I was quite happy here--till you came!'

'But you can't go on like this!' Char assured her. 'All this old woman--prayer book--garden bulb dope doesn't work at our age. I know mother is fun--but she's not a life--and she's as cold-blooded as an iceberg. You'd have gone melancholy mad if I hadn't turned up. It stands to reason if you can get some kind of a man, you've got to have one, doesn't it? What else is there?'

Jean looked round the hall as if she might find an answer from its pale chintzes and its deliberate spaces. She hadn't always needed men, she said to herself--every day of her former life had been full of its excitements and its efforts. A flying energy had filled her heart, so that she never felt the weight of hours. But she could not deny that these last four weeks with Lady Margaret had been as interminable as a siege in a beleaguered town. Why should she need the veiled provocative conflict she had roused in Reggie to cover the sharp ache of her frustrated love? 'I can get over it,' she said half to herself and half to Char. 'Surely I can get over it? I have to earn my own living, you know, and I like work. Perhaps it's been too easy here--with too much spare time--and all round one lovely things. If I can do without Ian--why can't I do without other men?'

'That's all pride and eyewash!' Char said with a sharp sigh. 'One can't do

without other men. Do you suppose stuff like earning your own living is as good as dancing? You want something quicker, with zip to it, to get Ian out of your head. Sooner or later you'll break out, or else you'll turn sour and grow plain! What I advise is, put your last ounce on dress and get a bit of your own back!'

'But Reggie,' Jean objected, 'hasn't done me any harm--why should I work off my disappointments or whatever you like to call them--on him? He's had a bad time already by liking a woman who doesn't care for him--why should I let him in for fresh trouble with me?'

'Trouble!' said Char derisively, 'being in love isn't trouble for men--once you let 'em take what they want! It isn't real trouble for a girl either--unless she takes it hard--as we've both had the ill-luck to take Ian! Having a love affair with a man you don't care about is as easy as eating an oyster. You don't have to try to please him--just because you don't care, you do please him! I've learned the ropes now, and I can live as I like, and I'll try to pass the tip on to you. Once you start caring you're done. A man knows you're on the hook, and you're worth as much as mud to him. Even if he cares too he won't care long. Ian cared for me--a little--for a few days. Enough to do what he thought I wanted and what I made him think he wanted, and then because he's awfully decent, he started in being nice to me instead. I don't say it mightn't have gone further for both of us--for you and Ian too--if Beatrice had let it--but trust her not to let it! She likes his being amused, but she isn't ever going to let another woman hold him! Of course when I saw he was just being nice, I shed him; it broke me to do it, but I could do that much--some girls can't even do that. I don't know what they told you about me. I let most people think what they like, but I don't mind telling you the truth. Beatrice had me down there to keep Ian quiet. Well! I did keep him quiet for a bit, and it was worse for me than what I'd gone through with my rake of a husband.

'I was awfully fond of Monty once--he's my husband you know--but he cured me by being so damned rotten. I couldn't go on liking him. But you can't get over Ian that way because he won't ever be anything but nice.

'You've just got to keep a stiff upper lip and give the whole thing the chuck. That's what I really came here to say to you. There's nothing in the hand! Pass!'

'You came down here to say it to me?' Jean asked incredulously. 'But you've been here a week and haven't spoken to me?'

'I know,' Char admitted. 'I was afraid of you. I had to get lit before I could talk. Truth will out when you're drunk--or dead, they say!' She stopped abruptly, shrinking against the purple cushions. 'D'you know, that doctor man,' she murmured incredulously, 'rotten old goat in Harley Street, told me I'd be dead soon if I didn't take a tuck in somewhere. He must have been talking

through his hat!'

'Oh Char!' Jean said quickly, 'I don't know--you do look ill--couldn't you--be quieter?' Char's deep eyes clung to Jean's face, and then they moved slowly with grave astonishment to her own hands--to the silk coverlet Jean had drawn over her, to the cigarette, unsmoked, which had fallen out of her mouth and burnt a hole in the scarlet leather of her coat.

'It makes you jumpy, thinking of death, doesn't it?' she whispered. 'Nothing for it--but, sooner or later, that little black hole in the ground. All the stuff we feel about each other, and our looks, and our fun, eaten up by worms!'

Jean nodded. 'But that's only the end,' she protested. 'Holes in the ground don't count, it's caring for people that counts! That's why I can't take a thing like living with Reggie lightly. What happens to me when I am dead I shan't know--so the worms don't matter--but what happens to me while I'm alive matters.'

Char gave a little sigh.

'Then don't bother,' she agreed, 'let Reggie slide. Some other man will be sure to turn up--sooner or later.'

'But you see,' Jean ventured cautiously, 'it *is* rather a worry, Char, for if I don't give in to Reggie I seem to be letting everybody down. Reggie himself--and then--and then Beatrice and Ian. You know I care for both of them more than I do for Reggie!'

'You care for Beatrice?' Char exclaimed in blank astonishment. 'After what she's done to you--you'd do a thing like that for her?'

'I don't know if I can,' Jean said uncertainly. 'I don't want to, but I'm trying to think I can.'

'Well I'm damned!' said Char slowly, raising herself off the cushions and leaning on one elbow to stare straight into Jean's eyes. 'Does she know it?'

Jean shook her head. 'I don't,' she said a little sadly, 'know what she knows.'

'Well, for God's sake don't tell her!' Char hastily exclaimed. 'She'd work it to the bone! Hold off for a little and see what happens. You've got something none of the rest of us have--if you've got a life of your own. Better hold on to that--and not let her filch it!'

Jean hesitated. 'But don't you want me to do what Reggie wants?' she asked. 'Haven't you been advising me to?'

'Yes, I did at first,' Char acknowledged. 'I thought you ought to have something--but I'm not so sure now--if Beatrice wants you to do it, there'll be a crab somewhere. You won't get much out of it, I mean! Perhaps if you were to wait--and not give in--you might get everything. What does mother say? I think she likes you and she'd never want what she calls "a good girl" to go wrong! She wouldn't mind marrying you to God-knows-what--if he had

money--and let you take your chance, but she'd see that the banns were properly called three times and the marriage lines were in your pocket!'

'I haven't talked to her about it; I'd take your advice if I took anybody's,' Jean said slowly, 'but there's nothing for me to wait for. Except just to be sure in my own mind what I can do for them. I shall live my own life, somehow, without what we both want--and can't have--and you must do the same with yours! Only stop killing yourself!'

'I can't live any other way,' Char said faintly. 'I can't--forget--Ian--any other way.'

Jean wanted to take her in her arms--but she remembered how at Windlestraws they had never wanted any one to share their pain. She tried to think of some kind joke to share with Char instead--but she couldn't think of a joke that was kind enough to share with Char.

'I'm so afraid of being--alone--in the dark!' Char whispered. 'Gimme another cigarette, will you?'

'I'll stay with you,' Jean murmured, 'if you'll come up to bed. You shan't be alone!'

It horrified her to find she could lift Char without an effort. Jean put her to bed and sat with her until the long dark fringe of Char's lashes swept her hollow cheeks.

When she saw that Char was asleep at last, and that the dark had taken away from her all fear of the dark, she rose softly and left her.

It was four o'clock, and the stout comfortable house felt oddly empty and forlorn. Jean went to her room, and opened a window that looked over the garden. There was nothing to see but the sharp shallow twinkling of a few late stars and the tortured shadow of the monkey-tree which squatted like something monstrous and obscene upon the open spaces of the lawn.

Jean leaned far out of the window, hoping that the shrewd March air would lift the dense oppression from her heart. Was it as ineffaceable for her as for Char--the curious one-sided burden of their love? What had Ian done to them that they could not forget him?

She did not ask herself any more what Beatrice had done; at last she knew.

CHAPTER XXVIII

It was Reggie's making no sign which made everything so plain to Jean. If she went back to Windlestraws she knew now that it would mean going back to Reggie. He would wait for a long time and his significant silence would be punctuated by Beatrice's friendly letters, all about primroses and what she was going to do with the rock garden. But if Jean could hold out long enough there would come a moment when Reggie's silence, which was now so full, would empty itself and she would at last be safe. It would be like the feeling of a patient on the operating table when the anæsthetic takes hold of him and he is carried away from the tyranny of consciousness. Jean longed for the moment when her conflicting, wavering, threatened will would be brushed aside, and she could find herself freed from a personal decision.

All through the March days when the east wind pricked like a thorn and the harsh light flickered without resting on the neat overcrowded hills, she fought Reggie's silence. She had not decided--she could not decide to disappoint Windlestraws; for it wasn't only Reggie--or only Beatrice--or only Ian far away in China--whose happiness hung on her decision; it seemed as if the house itself, with all its grave beauty, was silently waiting to know whether she would heal its hidden wound, or let it become mortal.

Char never referred to their confidence, but she sometimes looked at Jean with eyes that showed her that she too was waiting.

They couldn't pretend any more that the sudden collapse which followed Char's last wild jaunt was just being run-down.

Even young Lord Molyneux, looking up at Char's window with his shrewd glassy eyes (for Char wasn't able to walk downstairs now), hadn't been deceived.

He drove swiftly away with a crease between his brows, and sent down a box of enormous roses from Piccadilly; but he never drove up the long yellow drive again.

It was only while she was with Char that Jean lost the sense of being hunted by Reggie. She hadn't to make up her mind while she was nursing Char.

There was very little to be done for Char; she lay very still--half the time with her eyes shut--as if it was too much trouble to open them. Every now and then she liked Jean to turn on the gramophone and play to her 'Dance, dance, little lady!' or 'Put on pace, Priscilla!'

These stimulating tunes brought the faint colour into Char's cheeks, and a light into her fading eyes.

What images they brought before her, Jean never knew, but she could see

that to Char they gave a comfort which prayer might have given to a religious invalid. Her spirit found in them a channel for its communion with the unseen.

There were hours when Char was better, when she could take a little nourishment and when her flying pulse steadied; but on the whole Jean had to admit to herself that the field of their encouragement narrowed.

Every day something more had to be relinquished. At first Char sat up every afternoon for an hour or two after tea, then she sat up to have her bed made; and then there came a day when she did not sit up at all.

The little guarded efforts of an invalid's life slipped gradually beyond her strength. She never admitted that they wouldn't come back. 'Just for to-day,' she would say to Jean, 'you do it'; but the smile in her eyes made a deeper admission. It was for Jean's and Lady Margaret's sake, not for her own, that Char said, 'Just for to-day----'

Rain fell, and drove away the harshness of the light. From where she lay propped up by pillows, Char could see a slice of the gravel drive, which led up to the front door, and a strip of sky where the southwest wind tossed shining clouds. Char liked to watch the roughness of the wind in the trees; and day by day to see the little differences of the thickening buds so nearly green. She had a hidden calculation with their misty sheaths. 'If only one chestnut would come out before----' she said one day wistfully to Jean--and then quickly, 'Of course I don't mean before anything particular!' But trees and the two long rows of imperial-skirted daffodils which marked the drive meant less to Char than the gate itself. Through the gate she could see tradesmen enter, or little wandering, bustling dogs; kind ladies would call, bringing, to tempt dear Lady Margaret's daughter, books which Char would never have been able to read, even if she had been well. Curates, abashed by frequent denials, hurried in with their rather shamefaced ministrations.

One day, Char, glancing out of the window, said hurriedly to Jean, 'Don't get up and look--but there is a friend of mine coming up the drive; go down and talk to him for me in the drawing-room. Mother's out.'

'But won't you see him yourself?' Jean asked anxiously.

Char shook her head.

'Not till I'm prettier,' she said with a faint smile, 'but you can give him my love.'

Jean went obediently downstairs. She wondered why Char hadn't told her who her visitor was. She opened the drawing-room door, and all the cinerarias--a purple and crimson and harsh metallic blue--seemed to rush to meet her dazzled eyes; for, behind them, stood Ian.

'I've met Lady Margaret,' he said quietly. 'I know how ill Char is. She's--she's dying, isn't she?'

Ian looked much older, he was sunburnt and thin, and there was even a

slight streak of silver in his black hair. It was astonishing how tall he was. 'I try to think she isn't,' Jean answered after a pause, 'when I'm with her. She's just the same, only something in her seems to have stopped--but not her pluck. She may be dying--but she's just the same Char!'

She moved away from Ian, and sat down behind the shelter of the cinerarias. Over their dazzling heads Jean could look at him more easily, and take in more slowly the strange delight of his presence. She wouldn't go back to Reggie. After all, she needn't have struggled so hard with her conflicting will--the stream had caught her at last, and was bearing her rapidly away. She dropped her eyes so that Ian shouldn't see how fast she was being carried.

The room had the stillness of a Sunday at Tunbridge Wells. The evening sun streamed through the windows from the gravel terrace. The 'Observer' lay open on the table in front of them. The French Empire clock ticked musically against the ordered silence.

She heard Ian say at last, 'I suppose you know it's all my fault?' His eyes rested on her accusingly as if he dared her to stand up for him.

'Char doesn't think so, Ian!' she murmured, without meeting them.

'Oh, well! She's no judge!' Ian said impatiently. 'Char'd always try to get any fellow off unhung. I deserve to be hanged, of course--and yet I'm damned if I could help it! It's all been part of the same thing--being free and yet never being free! You saw it for yourself! Of course I ought to have left Char alone. I ought to leave all of 'em alone. But what are you to do when you're made of flesh and blood--and don't get anything--either way? I swear she chucked me of her own free will!'

'She told me that she had!' Jean breathed gently.

'And you jolly well know she didn't!' Ian contradicted her savagely. 'I couldn't go through with it, and she saw I couldn't--and saved me the trouble. Afterwards, there were other men of course--but there needn't have been! Between us--we did for Char!'

'I expect she liked to save you trouble,' Jean said quickly. 'She's had that anyway.'

They were both silent for a moment. When Ian spoke again the anger had gone out of his voice. He spoke diffidently, with little pauses, glancing quickly at Jean and then away from her, as if he were meeting her for the first time in the flesh; up till then he had been talking only to her spirit. He knew her spirit with an intimacy which surprised them both, but he knew less well this Jean who sat opposite him on a chair. Their thoughts had grown together during absence, but they were daunted by each other's alien presences.

'I suppose you know,' Ian began a little stiffly, 'why I came back from China? I was going to stay away a year at least!' Jean shook her head. 'Lady Margaret, when she found out--when she went to London, you know--wrote to

me. What on earth made you go off like that with Reggie alone--to London?'

'Why shouldn't I?' Jean demanded hotly. 'I was working for him! What did it matter where I did the work, or who was with me?'

'But at Windlestraws there was--you were with Beatrice!' Ian objected.

He had said her name at last. Instantly they were pulled up short as if her physical presence had suddenly come into the room.

'Of course Lady Margaret,' Ian went on after a startled pause, 'told me--I mean I'm not such a fool--it isn't a question of what happened. It's simply that you should never have been in any such position. They did you a great wrong.'

Jean shook her head. 'I dare say they meant to,' she said quickly, 'but they didn't do it. They did me no harm at all. Reggie was most awfully good to me, and it was only when I saw what he wanted me to do, that I sent for Lady Margaret. I did it for his sake more than for mine; and because even if I couldn't do what he wanted, I should have liked to do something. I didn't want to be hurried. I hadn't really--even when Lady Margaret came--made up my mind.'

When Ian spoke again his tone was perceptibly colder. 'I have no right to ask,' he said, 'but I admit I should like to know if you have made it up yet?'

Jean was silent. Silence seemed made of the hot light in the cinerarias--and of the puzzling flash in Ian's eyes; she didn't want to put words into it, and see the light go out.

'Of all the hideous idiotic blackguardly tricks this plan of theirs seems to me to have been the worst!' Ian went on at last angrily. 'Why on earth should a young girl he dragged into our beastly mess, to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for us, and least of all you? Besides, haven't you the sense to see that it wouldn't work?'

Suddenly, the anger Jean had never felt either with Reggie or with Beatrice flared up in her against Ian. She had a confused sense that he was blaming her for an illusion she had lost long ago, on his account, and couldn't now lay her hands on.

'There isn't a single thing the way I thought it was!' she said breathlessly. 'I thought it was so beautiful at Windlestraws--I thought you all knew how to live--and you don't! It's like knives under roses! And Reggie seemed a beast and I found he wasn't! And you seemed--well, you seemed a friend and I found you weren't! I've had to think it all out again, to trust Reggie--to wonder about you--to feel ashamed of myself!--and to see Char like this! This plan they made--is it after all such a great wrong? If I did what Reggie wanted, I'd make him happy--and there'd be no more Chars! I don't think I'd feel ashamed any more, if you were all happy!'

Ian got up and walked past her to the open window. 'You're talking nonsense!' he said with his back to her. 'What have you got to be ashamed of?

As for this infamous trick of theirs, if you were in love with Reggie it would still be intolerable, but there'd be some point in it; but you're not going to tell me at this time of day, that you *are* in love with Reggie, are you?'

Jean approached this assertion cautiously, but she saw that she couldn't risk it. Fond as she was of Reggie it would be a lie, and worse still, an unconvincing lie, so that she took refuge once more in silence; Ian might make of her silence what he chose.

He turned round at last from the window; he hadn't taken her silence for consent, for he went on almost impatiently. 'Then what would you be doing it for? To give Beatrice and me a show we both of us know damned well we oughtn't to take? Is that your idea of morality?'

Ian's eyes fixed on hers went too deep; they forced her to cry out suddenly: 'It isn't only you! It isn't only you I'm fond of!'

'You mean,' he asked, ignoring her desperate disclaimer, 'it's this business of Char's--you want to stop there being any more such disasters? Do you honestly think that Char's dying of it won't stop me? I'm a bad flirt but I'm not as bad a one as that. I'd go into a monastery rather than see another girl mind like Char.'

'No! No!' said Jean quickly, 'you misunderstood me--I don't mean only Char--I don't mean you're a flirt; and if you were it hasn't anything to do with me! Oh, don't look at me like that! Don't look at me! Why should every one be starved all round?'

He was quiet for a time after this outburst. Jean had covered her face with her hands, but she could have heard him if he had spoken and she would have known if he had moved. When he spoke again it was very reasonably and kindly, as if he had hidden even from himself what she had let him see.

'I've thought of a much better way,' he said, 'the way Lady Margaret thought of all along--and to tell you the truth I came back thinking of it too, only I hadn't the cheek. If you'd marry me the coast will be clear. There won't be any more Chars then, and Reggie--if she'll let him--Reggie will go back to his wife.'

'If she'll let him?' asked Jean incredulously. 'Oh, but Ian, she won't!'

'Never?' Ian asked her, appealing to Jean as if his own decision awaited her verdict. 'Never?'

'Never!' said Jean softly.

'But you and I,' Ian urged after a pause, 'you and I would be happy--Jean, that would be something? I went to China because I was getting too fond of you--and I've come back fonder--how are you going to fit that in?'

Jean looked away. 'I'm not going to fit it in,' she said stubbornly. 'It hasn't anything to do with me. You belong to Beatrice.'

'Oh, come,' said Ian, laughing rather disgustedly, 'I'm not a sofa cushion--or

a piece of cake. I don't "belong" to anybody. Besides, I may as well tell you, I saw Beatrice just now in London--she came up, they both did, to meet me--and we've had an awful row!'

'Awful rows don't matter,' said Jean uncompromisingly. 'They're only one of the signs that you do belong to her. You're angry now because you think they did me a wrong; but what kind of a wrong was that compared to what I'd be doing her, if I married you?' Jean felt that Ian was standing close to her, although she no longer saw him. Suddenly she felt his hand on her shoulder and, without her volition, her hand moved up to cover it.

'There!' he whispered, 'don't you see? I'd make fierce love to you if you were at Windlestraws again; I couldn't help it, and what would happen then? Do you want to make me rob Reggie of both of you? It's you--it's the kind of thing you say--that I like best. It's you who drove me to China and it's you who have brought me back!'

Their hands broke apart. Jean rose to her feet and faced him.

'You're angry with Beatrice now,' she said steadily, 'but you won't always be angry with Beatrice--remember her a little!'

Ian swung quickly away from Jean--but by his agitation he showed her how complete his old possession was.

Beatrice had come back into the room again. She stood between them effortless and serene; not even her living presence could more have proved her power.

Ian stood with his back to Jean; once more he stared out at the yellow gravel and the black twisted tree; then he said without turning round, 'If Beatrice herself asks you--will you agree to marry me?'

'Yes!' said Jean unhesitatingly. She wasn't afraid that she would ever be put to that preposterous test. Before he had time to turn round, and to look into her soft betraying eyes, she had run quickly out of the room.

She paused for a long moment outside Char's door before she dared go in and find out what more, since that long talk with Ian, Char had had to let go.

CHAPTER XXIX

AT first Jean thought there was no change in Char. She lay as still and flat as spilt milk beneath the peacock-coloured eiderdown. Nothing moved but her eyes. Jean felt them rest upon her with the grave accusing fixity of the dying. They asked her a question--and they went on asking it, while Jean moved about the room, pulled down the blinds, turned on the shaded bedside lamp, and sat at last where Char could see and hear her without effort.

'Well----?' Char whispered. There was a new force in the fragile emaciated face; Char's will had awakened and was stemming back, for a brief moment, physical disaster. 'What did Ian say to you?'

'A lot about you,' Jean murmured waveringly, 'and about Reggie and Beatrice. He'd met them first in London. They came up to meet him.'

'And they had a most awful row, of course,' Char assisted Jean's uncertainty with a reassuring smile 'They would have, you know.'

'But how did you guess?' Jean asked, astonished. 'Has Beatrice written?'

'No, nobody in our family ever writes, and if they did it wouldn't be about rows. We send wires. But naturally Ian would be furious. He liked you awfully. He's come down here to marry you, hasn't he? That's partly bad temper, but I should think quite a lot of it's love.'

'Most of it's love,' Jean acknowledged, 'and some of it *is* bad temper, but neither the love nor the bad temper is for me. They're both Beatrice's. That's where Ian makes his mistake.'

'He did ask you to marry him, though?' Char persisted.

'Yes,' Jean admitted, 'he did. I don't quite know what he thought it simplified, but he was under the impression that it simplified something; besides, no doubt, he'd threatened Beatrice with it in London. It was a *beau geste*! And that is all it was! I wouldn't care to marry on one.'

'Ah! you're too proud!' Char murmured. She frowned a little, and moved uneasily. For a time it seemed as if her brain were too weak to follow Jean's thoughts; but her purpose had not weakened. She was only waiting to find a fresh approach to it.

'It's not true what you say,' she went on at last in her thin thread of a voice. 'He's his own to give now--not hers--and he does want you! Beatrice didn't want him to go to China--but he went! That's why I'm sure she is losing him! She's held on to him too long--and she's hit too hard at you. Men are like that--they can't stand your being unkind to another woman!'

'Ah, but Beatrice breaks all the rules--and still wins!' Jean said in a low voice. 'Have you forgotten what she's like?'

A faint smile stirred in Char's grave eyes. 'Cut me in little bits,' she

murmured, 'and every little bit could tell you what Beatrice was like. But I know what Ian's like too. He isn't quite like her, though she thinks he is. You're safe if you want him! Take him!'

'Ah, but I can't take him!' Jean cried out. 'Don't you see I can't--not like that--not for myself!'

'If you can't take him for yourself, take him for me!' said Char earnestly. 'If I were dead and you were married to Ian, I should feel as if it were me doing it! I'd feel it was worth dying for that! If you won't marry him, then nothing--not even dying--has been worth while!' Her smile had gone out of her eyes now, she spoke with her last strength. After she had finished, they were both silent for a long time. Jean rose to give her some champagne; she put more fuel on the fire, and closed the window to shut out the chill of the foggy evening air; but she was conscious that these little actions did nothing to lift the weight of their one thought.

Suddenly Char said: 'If Beatrice herself asked you to marry him, would you?'

Jean looked up startled at the repetition of this question. 'She might tear me up to make a pair of gloves for his hands if they were cold,' she answered at last, 'but she won't ask me to marry him. Why should she? She's talked to me. I know what she feels. She doesn't mind starving him body and soul!'

Char couldn't quite grasp what Jean meant. In her world, people hardly noticed whether souls were fed or not--but there was something which she knew Jean didn't see; and which she could help her to grasp. 'She might think it would be a feather in her cap, marrying him off to you and still keeping hold of him,' Char suggested. 'What I want to know is, would you do it--for my sake--and his--and your own--if Beatrice did ask it?'

'What good would it be if I did?' Jean objected. 'It would be the same kind of thing, really, as forcing myself to go to Reggie--only the other way round! Ian doesn't want me in any way in which I want to be wanted!'

There was a long pause, then Char said faintly: 'You don't know what a man wants from a girl if he wants anything at all! Or what you can make it lead to! If he marries you, Beatrice won't keep him!' Char's voice slipped into silence; her eyes closed, as if their heavy lids could never lift again. She hardly seemed to be drawing her breath, it passed so lightly and so uncertainly through her parted lips.

A coal fell from the fire with a thud; and everything in the room seemed to stand out to Jean in an unforgettable clearness; the empty champagne glass by her hand, the little row of medicine bottles, and, over in the corner by the window where it had stood for days untouched, the gramophone. Ian had brought Char daffodils and tulips, and French anemones; the nurse had filled a table with them and stood it where Char could see it--not too near the bed.

Jean's eyes rested on the lovely yellow and scarlet cups, the petalled globes of purple and pink anemones. There was a strange tension in her brain between the thoughts of Char--who would not outlive these flowers brought for her pleasure--and the question Char had put into her heart. Would she, if such a strange obligation were really thrust upon her by Beatrice, be able to take it? Did Ian belong to her? And if he did, was belonging to a person enough--when you could come to pieces under another woman's smile? Or was Jean after all only, as Char had said, 'too proud'? It didn't, Jean said to herself at last, really matter, for Beatrice would ask her no such thing. She was safe to be without Ian all her life, and to carry the image of him in her heart forever.

She looked back from the brilliant anemones to Char's shadowed face. Very slowly the long fringed lashes lifted, and Char spoke again. 'Will you do something for me?' she asked.

'Anything!' said Jean.

'Then ring up Beatrice. Tell her to come here to-morrow. Tell her if she doesn't come I won't be here to come to long. That'll bring her--she's full of family feeling!'

'Do you really want her?' Jean pleaded. 'Want her I mean for herself--not to ask her ruthless things about us--which wouldn't be any use?'

A very faint smile passed over Char's white lips.

'I want,' she said slowly, 'to look at her--before I stop looking at anything. You must admit she's worth looking at. If I was a horse that had missed a jump, I think--I think I should like to look at it again--to think I could clear it--before I knew that I couldn't clear anything. Ring her up, quickly, or I'll get mother to!'

Jean obeyed her. She stood interminably, with her hand on the receiver, while Char's eyes, now wide open, looked as if they would never shut, their strange gravity lit by derision. At last Jean heard far away--that familiar clipped voice--'Lady Falconer is speaking.' But when she said 'It's Jean,' she was surprised by a curious pause, as if something incredibly like fear held Beatrice's voice back before it went on with 'Oh, it's you, Jean, is it? How nice of you to ring me up. How is Char?'

Jean gave Char's message in Char's own words.

'Is she really so awfully bad?' Beatrice's shocked voice replied. 'Tell her I'll come to-morrow morning; of course I'm frightfully busy, but I'll put everything off. Poor little Char! I'm frightfully sorry. So will Reggie be! I could motor down to-night if you think it's necessary? Is there anything I can bring? Has she seen Sir Hitchings Brown, the great heart man?'

'A great heart man's been here,' Jean replied a little drily. 'I think to-morrow will do.'

Again there was a strange perceptible pause before Beatrice said with her

usual decision, 'Very well then, about lunch time. My love to mother--and to the poor child of course. Oh, by the by--I hope Ian's with you? I sent him down. She's seen him, I suppose?'

'She hasn't wanted to see him yet,' Jean answered, 'but he's here.'

'Well, ring me up at once if there's any change--won't you?--or if you think of anything I can bring. Good-bye.' Jean put down the receiver--dismissed as if Beatrice had said to her at Windlestraws, 'Thank you *so* much!' which always meant 'Please go!' And 'I sent him down'--that was for Jean to remember after she'd gone.

'She'll come!' Char whispered, 'and her "love" of course! I know what she'll do always! She's done right all her life--that kind of right. Well! it's not for me to talk. I haven't done any kind.'

Jean came back to the bed, some instinct told her that Char's strength was ebbing faster still; but the eyes, looking up at her, still laughed.

Jean rang a bell and the nurse came in hurriedly. 'You mustn't talk any more!' she said quickly to Char. 'It's very bad for you!'

The smile in Char's eyes deepened. 'I've always done what's bad for me,' she whispered. 'It's too late now to start the other thing!' Nevertheless she stopped talking; she took what they gave her; she did what they told her. She did more than they could tell her. She held on to her fast ebbing life with her unbroken will.

The doctor came and went. After his too cheerful departure, Jean found herself for a few minutes alone with Lady Margaret. Lady Margaret looked for the first time discouraged. She seemed prepared to admit that Char was more than a little run-down.

'She's had a lot to stand,' she said to Jean regretfully. 'I don't quite know how much of this illness isn't her marriage. One did the best one could--it was a good match. One knew Monty was a rake, but a great many rakes aren't brutes. Monty happened to be both.'

Jean looked at her with swift compassion. Lady Margaret's face was set and expressionless like a mask. Jean knew that what she had just heard was a confession; but Lady Margaret was not waiting for Jean's absolution. Nor had her confession been made to Jean. She had stood for a moment at the bar of her own judgment seat; she had sentenced herself and there would be no reprieve.

'I shan't send for Monty,' she answered after a brief pause, in her usual voice. 'Char hasn't asked for him, and I don't see why she should be bothered, do you? He must have known how ill she was when she came down here. Death-bed reconciliations are most upsetting, and as you don't have to go on afterwards I can't say I see much point in them.

'I'm putting Beatrice in the Rose du Barry room. I think it's quite a good idea of Char's to have her down to-morrow. You might just remind Ashburn

for me that Beatrice likes savouries, not sweets.'

CHAPTER XXX

BEATRICE, whose beauty was like a naked thing stripped of all expression, came quickly up the shallow steps into the hall and took Lady Margaret into the frozen stillness of her arms. Neither of them spoke; Lady Margaret stood stiffly for a moment in Beatrice's embrace and then withdrew herself, as if she had walked into an unknown room by mistake. Beatrice said: 'Can I see her?' and Lady Margaret made a queer helpless gesture towards Jean, and retreated into the drawing-room. Beatrice looked up at the stairs with the sightless eyes of a statue; they did not change as they met Jean's, but without a word she followed her.

Halfway up the stairs they both stopped suddenly because the sound of Char's heavy cardiac breathing reached them through the closed door.

When Jean opened the door, Char's eyes met hers, but they slipped past Beatrice as if they were skirting a precipice. The nurse rose up from a chair by the bed and moved out of earshot. Char seemed the only person who was unaware of her hoarse rattling breath. It made speech difficult for her, but in the swift acceleration of death she had no time to notice any single obstruction.

Beatrice knelt down by the bed. Jean closed the door softly behind her and crept downstairs. She found Lady Margaret among the plants in the conservatory; purple and red cinerarias blazed hotly all around her. Lady Margaret moved among them with her usual efficiency; she seemed purposely cut off from Jean, or whatever news she might bring, by a sea of colour. But as she glanced briefly across the wall of flowers, she saw that Jean had brought her no fresh news.

'Of course the doctor doesn't want her to see Beatrice,' Lady Margaret observed, as if she and Jean were already in the midst of a conversation, 'but Char insisted, and the doctor thought it would be worse for her to be crossed. She could always get round men. Ian will do very well at Haddons; we can telephone to him at any time. I thought he'd be better out of the house. Men always feel so uncomfortable when there's illness about; they want to smoke, poor dears, and think it wouldn't be nice to. Percy Archer called again; he suggested praying with Char, but I asked him to take the dogs out for a walk on the common instead. I don't think she's up to being prayed with, do you?'

Jean sat down for a moment on a green bench; she wasn't feeling sleepy, but all the cinerarias closed suddenly over her head. When she woke up, Lady Margaret was still moving about with a watering-can, although it was empty.

Beatrice stood in the doorway. She laid a light hand on Jean's shoulder.

'I should go up to Char now, mother,' she said in her clear incisive voice; 'she's quite happy and peaceful.'

Lady Margaret put down the watering-pot and said: 'Tea'll be in at five.' Her eyes rested on her daughter's for a brief significant moment; they found what they looked for, and then she moved quietly away.

'Don't get up,' Beatrice said to Jean; 'you must be frightfully tired.' She opened the garden door so that they could look out together on the smooth green lawn.

The wind had dropped its boisterousness; the pale sky was full of high and shining clouds. A faint blue mist like the bloom upon autumn fruits clung round the trunks of the copper beeches. The light upon the leaves was silvery and thin. A pink-breasted chaffinch flung out his phrases in swift jets of sound, as if his life was in his song.

Beatrice, standing by the open doorway, took in the neat and shining garden with a deep satisfied breath, but Jean's eyes were dull; they could no longer pass on what they saw to her fixed mind. She wanted to go back again to the safety of Char's room and to the oxygen cylinder.

At last Beatrice came away from the open door and sat down beside her.

'Jean,' she said very gently, 'I have made up my mind to something--that may rather surprise you--I should like you to marry Ian!'

Jean had never seen Beatrice look at once so approachable and so uncertain. Something had happened to her upstairs, which had shaken her out of her fixed securities. She was shaken as she never would have been shaken by any physical danger.

Jean looked at her stupidly with eyes which couldn't take in the immensity of Beatrice's concession. Did she know that her sacrifice had come twenty-four hours too late, and that the object of it had already given himself away? It wouldn't do to tell her--to blast her magnanimity with such a shock would, Jean decided, be a shabby thing. She had seen her own dignity go by the board so often, that it was hardly worth holding on to, but stupid as she was, she might still preserve Beatrice's unruffled dignity. A queer image dashed through her brain of a hurrying Botticelli nymph holding out a cloak for Venus approaching the shore on her shell. Beatrice waited patiently, not even Jean's lack of response quenched her exalted kindness. The shell drew near to the land propelled by propitious breezes. Beatrice gave a glance to see if the cloak were there--and stepped serenely off onto the shore.

'I dare say you felt a little shocked at my other plan,' she went on. 'Ian was, I know; but then men are so dreadfully conventional, aren't they? Especially if they've been rather fast themselves. But as I told Ian, nothing really matters nowadays if you can keep it out of the papers. If you hadn't liked the way things worked, you could perfectly have married someone else. Reggie wouldn't have stopped you, and you'd have had a really good settlement--that's what Ian didn't seem to understand. Neither Reggie nor I would have dreamed

of your running any pecuniary risk. I only wish Reggie would settle ten thousand pounds on me without conditions! You would have been frightfully independent really, and that would have kept Reggie on his best behaviour. I'm positive it would have answered beautifully if you'd only liked him enough. You could have kept him in hand before, you know--when there was that little flare-up at Windlestraws--if you'd been plain-spoken enough! I've always told Reggie I loathed him; and he quite took it in. The trouble with you is, as I told you before about that convict, you're too sentimental.'

'But I do like Reggie!' Jean protested. 'I couldn't tell him a thing like that! You don't understand! You can't "arrange" love-affairs! Or mix them up with money! How could I be free with ten thousand pounds tied to me? And how could I be unkind against Reggie's heart?'

Jean knew she wasn't being really lucid; there seemed altogether too much light around her. The blazing cinerarias beat like blows upon her jaded senses; her eyes were dazzled by the serene yet searching splendour of Beatrice's eyes. They gazed formidably at her, as if they could pierce behind the armour of her clumsiness to the secret agility of her soul. Jean saw that what Beatrice really felt was that Jean was being slippery.

'Then if you really like him,' she brought forth triumphantly, 'what on earth's the difficulty? If I could tell Char that----!'

'No! No! No!' protested Jean, 'you couldn't! Not like that! Of course I like Reggie! But it would take more than liking, to do the thing you mean! To be his mistress in his own house, with the children loving me--and Ian there with you----! Of course I'd do it if I could! Don't think I'm such a beast as not to want to help you! But how could you--how could Reggie--think of money! It's just that! And it isn't as if I'd let any mere silly baseless feeling for Ian stand in the way--the more I feel for him, naturally the more I want to have him free for what he really wants! And I know what that is! But how could I *be* what Reggie wants? I shouldn't be able to give him anything? The real me--couldn't breathe! I'd be crushed and hateful! I've thought it all out--I've over and over again come up to it in my own mind--but I couldn't do it! I'm sorry! I can't even explain--but I can't only *do* things as if they were sums on a slate, I've got to *be* them first! Since I'm not Reggie's lover I couldn't be his mistress! Don't you understand?'

'Of course I understand,' said Beatrice rather stiffly; she paused, giving Jean the impression that she was slightly shocked. Once more Jean was driven to the perplexing fact that to deal earnestly with the immoral was to the mind of Windlestraws distinctly dangerous, whereas simply to be immoral was, if you took it lightly enough, quite good taste.

'Naturally one can't help one's feelings. But it's what I call being sentimental to give way to them; and as to the money--one wouldn't dream of

sacrificing a girl's prospects however slightly--I don't admit we're *really* sacrificing them--and not putting anything down. What you don't seem to see is that one can *always* do what one has to! I'm the mother of all Reggie's children, aren't I? You can hardly suppose I *liked* it. But I thought it was fair to give him a boy. Well! I've given him one! But I don't see why I should sacrifice the rest of my life to him--and Ian's as well--when Reggie's been unfaithful to me right and left from the start! Of course you may perfectly say that *I* was obliged to--once I was his wife--and you're not in the least obliged to make the other arrangement. But if you can't marry Ian and don't want to marry anyone else, if you do like Reggie and haven't any money or position to sacrifice--but rather one to gain--I can't see really why I'm to blame for thinking out a situation which would suit us all round!'

'I don't think I do blame you,' said Jean faintly, 'I only can't do it.'

Beatrice raised her eyebrows and slightly shrugged her graceful shoulders. 'Well, there it is!' she exclaimed with good-natured exasperation. 'You don't like the plan--so I'm willing to give in to the marriage. Ian won't make any objection. He likes you--just as you like Reggie, rather more perhaps, or in a way that suits us rather better. He'd quite like you to be his wife.'

Jean sat with her shoulders bent and her head bowed as if she were trying to escape a storm in which she'd been caught. She felt as she had felt when six months earlier Beatrice had said, 'I dare say China'll do.'

Well--China hadn't done, and now it was Jean's own turn; she was to obtain her heart's desire by being an expedient.

'I'm sure,' Beatrice went on with disturbing kindness, 'that you didn't mean to be unfair. A girl is awfully at the mercy of a man like Ian. He has only to look at her. I don't really blame you--even though you knew at the time all about us!'

'Yes, I knew!' Jean admitted, stumbling readily into the hole which she saw that Beatrice had prepared for her. 'I knew.'

Beatrice paused a moment in order to contemplate Jean's ignominious position, then she repeated more kindly still: 'I don't blame you and I do still like you. Even after you've married Ian, I shall go on liking you. Your being married to him will change nothing really. I simply see it as the next best thing!'

'The next best thing?' Jean stupidly echoed. 'But why is it a good thing at all? If he is only doing it to be nice to me, and you're only letting him do it to please Char? It's no use making a marriage out of the House that Jack built, is it?'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Beatrice impatiently, 'you always say such funny things! What has the House that Jack built got to do with marrying Ian? But even if Char hadn't made such a point of it--and being so knocked up

one naturally doesn't like to refuse her--I had decided not to let the situation go on as it was. It's really too boring all round! Mother was right when she said: "Even another roof and a separate tea-kettle would be something!" We can't go on, Ian and I, forever meeting each other on the stairs can we? You see, he says if I make him lose his head he'll blow his brains out. Well--I shouldn't outlive him--and then there's the children to think of! You know I always think that kind of thing is awfully shabby!' Beatrice turned her gaze upon Jean with a deep imperturbable candour. She was being noble, but she wanted at the same time to be perfectly straight. The whole of her beauty was pointed like a weapon at Jean's heart.

Jean took time to meet this fresh attack before she said, 'And if I did marry Ian, would it be any better?'

'I shouldn't give him up,' said Beatrice thoughtfully, 'but, on the other hand, I should of course play perfectly fair. It *would* be better for Ian. It settles, you see, the question of other women. Marriage will make him happier and less restless; he'll have enough with the two of us. I don't grudge him that kind of happiness, I never have! It's true I've never till now risked a permanent arrangement for him. But when things get too tiresome it's often a good thing to double your risks. I'm doubling mine in asking you to marry Ian, but I do ask it.'

Beatrice was so unconscious that Jean's risks counted that it hardly occurred to Jean to notice them herself, but she couldn't help wondering what would be left of Ian by the time Beatrice had finished giving him away.

'But what,' she asked instead, 'is the exact advantage to you--apart from Ian? Why should you--now, rather than at any other time--double your risks?'

'It's an advantage to me,' said Beatrice promptly, 'to have a good conscience; I haven't had one for several years, and really I'm not at all sure that it hasn't been one of the things which has bothered me most. I've always felt uncomfortable about poor little Char. If I do this, I consider that I've wiped off that score--and so does Char. She says she'll die without having a grudge against me.'

Jean felt this explanation impossible to answer. Instead of speaking, she found herself listening with intensity for any sound from the other part of the house. No sound came; and after a decent pause she got up and murmured: 'Well, of course if you wish it, I will marry Ian. But I think I'll just run upstairs now, if you don't mind.'

Beatrice faded away; the harsh glare of the cinerarias faded. Jean closed the door between the conservatory and the drawing-room softly behind her and ran upstairs.

Halfway up she stopped short, because something more frightening than Char's heavy breathing had happened: she couldn't hear it any more. Her heart

moved about in her body fumblingly, like a blind man in a room full of furniture; but once she had opened the door of Char's room, all her fears left her.

Char was lying a little lower in the bed than when Jean had last seen her, and her features had a shadow across them.

The nurse said in a low voice: 'I've tried the salt injection, Miss Arbuthnot, but it hasn't worked!'

Char's eyes were open and still smiled. 'You--just--hold--on!' she whispered as Jean bent over her; then her breast rose slowly once or twice as if to release her struggling breath. It was like watching a bird beating against glass, and not finding the open window which would set it free.

At last the window opened and the bird was gone.

Lady Margaret looked down unflinchingly upon Char's empty eyes. For a long time she neither spoke nor moved. When she saw that Jean was aware of her presence, she came round the bed and moved the oxygen cylinder to one side.

'You might tell Alice, my dear,' she said to Jean, in her usual voice, 'to come here and help nurse attend to things.'

Jean cried out in a loud voice: 'Oh, no! oh, no!'

She knew it was dreadful of her to make a noise in so quiet a place; but she could not bear to think of Char's becoming one of the things which had to be attended to.

CHAPTER XXXI

THEY were married as quickly as possible. The ceremony was a mere postscript to Char's funeral, as if to fix in Jean's mind once and for all how little difference her marriage was to make.

Her father hated weddings, so she was married in London from an aunt's; but Jean had a fragmentary interview with him at Victoria Station before she and Ian went abroad.

Jean thought that her father looked very much older, and as if his life with Carrie had accentuated in him his sense of the past. They had a queer speechless meal together; or rather it would have been speechless if it had not been for Ian's tact. They were grateful for his ready interventions, but Jean saw that although her father liked him, he couldn't understand why Jean had thought it necessary to marry him.

Both Jean and Ian had been glad to leave England, but at first it seemed as if a thick layer of dullness had settled over their hearts. The snow-capped heads of mountains, the delphinium skies, the bright floor of the Mediterranean seas, were less real to Jean than Char's temperature chart and the small table by her bedside with its ordered row of ineffectual drugs. Ian was extraordinarily nice to her, but Jean felt that she was simply travelling with him by accident and that there would be nothing at all surprising in his getting out and leaving her at the next station.

The dullness wore away after a time, and Jean began to feel another absorption. She hardly knew whether it was easier or harder to find that every unuttered wish and every indication of a habit of Ian's was the secret quarry of her heart. She asked nothing more in the world than to know what he wanted and to give it to him.

Once Ian said tentatively to her: 'Shall we go back?' and Jean said quickly 'No!' and once Jean said to Ian more urgently: 'Are you *sure* you don't want to go home?' and he said consideringly but quite as firmly, 'No!' That was the beginning of their love-making.

Passion penetrated their friendship without altering it. Perhaps, Jean thought wistfully, it had not altered it enough. Her whole consciousness changed, but the object of her consciousness remained the same. She thought before their marriage that she had given to Ian all she had to give; but she knew now that what she had had to give was nothing compared to the new life which welled up in her heart.

The only thing she had to be really careful about was to hide this treasure. What Ian liked was to be left perfectly free, not even to be thought of with tenderness, unless he was in the mood for it. He liked to spend most of their

time in hard physical exercise and to play bridge in the evenings. Jean learned to guard her eyes, so that she could look at Ian dispassionately as if he had nothing to do with her. Even when he made love to her, he never spoke of love.

She found out that to express any of her emotions was immediately to erect a barrier between them. What she was to him or what he was to her must remain unchallenged or it disappeared.

There were moments when Jean felt that she was more to Ian than he himself realized, and that he was deliberately hiding from himself how much she was to him. It was a secret which Jean mustn't be aware of, but which she sometimes felt she shared.

In return for her silence, Ian always considered, before any of his actions, Jean's slightest advantage or disadvantage; but he would do this unobtrusively so that no one but Jean herself should know how deeply he was considering her.

They had to go home before the problem of their relation to each other had been finally solved. Reggie could not make up his mind whether or not to buy a farm; and although he hadn't himself suggested their return, Beatrice wrote that the poor dear was awfully fussed and bothered. He didn't know if he was justified in buying it and yet there was the danger that some hideous radical might buy it if he didn't.

Beatrice's letter was addressed to Jean, who immediately handed it to Ian. His only comment on it was a quick uncontrollable sigh.

He made no secret of the fact that he dreaded their home-coming.

'It'll be such an awful bore settling down,' he explained to Jean. 'Heaps of people you hoped you didn't know will pour in to call; and once in, they keep turning up. You can't swamp people out in the country as you can in town. It's the worst kind of gate-crashing.' Neither of them admitted what was the real object of their dread.

Jean knew Ian's home by sight; it was as easy to pick out from the dreamy little market town as a well-dressed passenger in a bus; but she had never been inside it. It was a small Georgian house with a flat roof, built with narrow rose-red bricks, into which the purple bloom of grapes had gradually soaked.

The lintels and the flight of steps which led to the front door were dazzlingly white, and the brass knocker gleamed like gold; a small garden, mostly lawn, stretched out behind the house, enclosed by rose-red walls.

'Of course you won't think anything of it after Windlestraws,' Ian said apologetically, as they stood together in the shining golden-brown hall.

'But it *is* Windlestraws!' Jean exclaimed, and she saw that Ian was pleased with the answer and quite unconscious of the pain which lurked behind it. The furniture in the hall had the smooth polish of a ripe chestnut, and the chintzes

were like a handful of newly picked sweet peas. Nothing was out of place or could be improved.

Jean could almost see Beatrice moving about the house with a light efficient hand, pulling out a curtain or setting back a chair.

As they crossed the hall, they were met by the delicate pungent scent of freshly cut roses. Roses streamed and glowed in every nook and corner of the spacious rooms. The house was empty and yet Beatrice stood there inflexibly among the fragile presences of her flowers. Jean wanted to say, 'How sweet of her!' but she found that she could not say it without revealing a strange distress, and glancing at Ian, she saw that he too wanted to say 'How sweet of her!' but it was pleasure that he found it necessary to hide; so that in the end neither of them said anything about the roses which Beatrice had sent to welcome them.

'Of course you can change anything you like,' Ian said quickly as they paused on the threshold of the drawing-room. But Jean shook her head. She saw in a quick glance that to change anything at all was to change Beatrice.

On the day of their home-coming nothing more formidable happened, and the next morning Mrs. Meadows came with the children and apologetic messages from Windlestraws to say that Beatrice and Reggie were awfully sorry, but they had had to go across country to see some shorthorn cattle.

Mrs. Meadows had a new manner to Jean. She treated her with a greater deference, dashed with a touch of consideration as if Jean were the victim of a rather important accident.

The children fell upon her with an ecstasy, but after their first expression of it Jean noticed a vague difference in their relation to her. It was as if, now that Jean belonged to their uncle Ian, she was less their own; although Ian himself was simply, as he was on each of his returns, more their own than ever.

Jean wondered afterwards if it were really an accident which left her to face Beatrice and Reggie, for the first time, alone.

She was in the garden when she heard the ring of their horses' hoofs and Beatrice's clear voice, as sudden and cold as the touch of ice, 'Jean! Jean! d'you mind coming round to the gate? We won't dismount!'

Jean hurried round to the front of the house, her heart hammering in her ears. She had a blurred impression of Reggie on a gigantic flea-bitten grey, and Beatrice looking down at her with her sidelong Leonardo smile.

'It's frightfully short notice,' Beatrice said, 'but we're only just back--do come up to dinner to-night, won't you? This is our state visit. Elderly married couple calling to encourage bride; but you don't look as if you needed any encouragement, does she, Reggie? Marriage suits her!'

'Can't tell whether it suits her or not,' Reggie drawled composedly. 'Marriage hasn't got the mark of Cain to show it up--like the other thing.' Jean

was aware that Reggie wasn't going to look at her. He was going to be comfortable and friendly, and he wouldn't funk the coldest and the crudest of jokes; he had seen Jean, seen her before she had had time to decide which of the two she most minded meeting, and he had grasped that it would be the simplest plan not to meet her eyes at all.

The flea-bitten grey, which had from the first been making crab-like movements to show his distaste for gates, now gave a more determined display of impatience, and Reggie, lifting two fingers to his cap, set off down the road.

'It's awfully nice to have you back,' Beatrice said, deepening her smile as she released 'Ladybird.' 'Eight-thirty to-night, then!'

There was nothing in this brief and cordial reminder to make Jean sink down in a flurried heap on a spotless white bench, under a laburnum tree, and say to herself, 'She's seen Ian! She's seen him already! And that's why he said we weren't to bother about the Windlestraws people till they turned up!'

Far off she heard the mellow sound of the church clock striking four. The deep tones of the bell shook the soft air, and would not let it go. She looked through the golden screen of the laburnum with dimmed eyes. The placidity of the lawn was unbroken save by the spectacular efforts of a blackbird pulling out of the emerald turf an elastic, never-ending worm. Was she going to become a long passive thing--like the poor worm, to be pulled and pulled at, but never really finished?

It wasn't Ian who represented in Jean's troubled mind the expertness of the menacing blackbird. Ian didn't pull continuously enough--and it wasn't Reggie, who had turned his kind eyes away from her as she now turned hers away from the defeated worm.

Jean heard the gate click; all her fears vanished as she rose quickly to meet Ian.

She saw by a swift glance at him that it wasn't one of the moments when she must hide the light in her eyes. He was almost as pleased to be back as she was to have him back.

'Shall we have tea out here?' Ian asked her smilingly.

Tea came out at once as if by magic, the little gate-legged table from the hall, the Queen Anne silver tray and tea-set Lady Margaret had given them for a wedding present, and the lovely old Worcester cups which had belonged to Ian's mother.

Ian sat down beside Jean with a little contented sigh. The sun made pools of light between the flickering shadows of the mulberry leaves, and the blackbird, having swallowed the last of its worm, sang with exultant joy.

'It's the nicest thing in the day,' Ian said, with a quick look at her, 'to come home to tea here--in the garden--with you!'

Ralph, the starched and immaculate parlour-maid, confronted her with a

silver kettle.

'Why don't you pour the cream in first?' Ian asked Jean idly; and Jean felt her fingers tremble against the thin sides of the cup. Hadn't she always seen that Beatrice poured the cream in first?

CHAPTER XXXII

IAN acquiesced promptly when Jean asked him if they mightn't take the short cut to Windlestraws across the moor. 'You could have the car,' he added a moment later. She wondered afterwards if this was what he would have preferred; but it was too late to retreat. Was he afraid of the May night, of the familiar walk, of his old memories? He didn't look afraid, on the contrary he looked particularly kind and reassuring; but just before she left him to dress for dinner, he said with his back turned towards her: 'If you don't mind--I don't think I should wear blue!'

It was a wonderful evening for a walk. The moor stretched away on either side of them, limitless and bland; the sky was a stupendous field of darkness hung with golden worlds. They strolled in silence over the short turf, drawing in the fragrant heather-scented air with an equal delight.

Through the iron gates of the Park the beech avenue stretched away before them, still and dark.

Suddenly, the trees fell back, as if they were awed by a ghostly presence. Before them in an open space rose the high, silvery phantom of the house.

Jean had forgotten how Windlestraws could assert itself. The sky dwindled; the sickle moon, with Hesper tethered close to her slender hoop, stood like a toy upon the nursery floor. Jean's heart sank as she took in again the arrogance of the massive walls, the cold privacy, the matter-of-fact supremacy of Windlestraws.

You could get into it, but you couldn't be part of it. It made no claims; but it was in itself a claim. She no longer knew what Ian felt; the frowning chimney-pots, the impenetrable walls had repossessed him, shutting Jean out of his mind. She caught a glimpse of his face from the lights at the front door; it was as hard as if it were carved in stone.

She wasn't any more the wife of this silent man at her side. She was Beatrice's secretary, the strange girl he had hardly looked at, in the rose garden; and Beatrice was Windlestraws.

There was no party to meet them; but--to take off from the sharp edge of their intimacy--Beatrice had cleverly invited the vicar and his wife.

Jim and Vi Eversley had always been friendly to Jean; and the only difference they made now was to be more friendly. They welcomed Jean as if she was not only the very nice girl they had always liked, but some one who had put them under an obligation.

Jean guessed at once what the obligation was. They had both loved Beatrice; her support of the church, the efficient strength of her friendship, were their mainstay; but their mainstay had a flaw in it.

The Eversleys had a standard higher than their age and circle, they couldn't return Beatrice's friendship if they disapproved of her conduct. They had always tried to think the best of her ardent friendship with Ian, but before the steady uncontrolled passion of her eyes, their faith in her had taken on a shaken and dubious air. They had assured themselves that Ian was only her cousin--her childhood friend--and that between her and Reggie's comrade-in-arms there could be nothing but a touching platonic bond, common to them all three.

But their hearts had often failed them, and now they were reprieved. Here was Ian safely married to the nice girl of their dreams--and the nice girl devoted to Beatrice--what could be more satisfactory? Their moral, unimaginative horizon was at last tucked neatly in.

Vi kissed Jean; Jim wrung her hand till it ached.

The dinner was an immense success. Jean sat between Reggie and Jim, with Vi opposite her, and Ian and Beatrice sat side by side, not too far off for the splendid reassurance of Beatrice's smile to carry. It didn't matter what they talked about--politics, the parish, flat-racing--behind the screen of their plain, comfortable talk brooded the satisfied Goddess of Peace.

Now nothing was wrong any more. Now dear Beatrice was the perfect wife and mother the Eversleys had always staunchly asserted her to be; the pattern great lady to whom they could give the grateful homage of their well-bred unsophisticated hearts. Dear old Reggie, too, how happy he must be to see his old comrade settled at last and safely married to that nice, useful, sensible girl, Jean! A little high-brow perhaps, with the dim menace of a History First in the background (the vicar had never been very sound on history) but so modest and unassuming about it, and not at all anxious to cut any one out or draw attention to her physical charms--and that was a good thing too, for every one knew that dear old Reggie was a trifle harum-scarum!

Jean, watching them help themselves with temperate zest to the best dinner Beatrice's French chef could devise, felt the undercurrent of their relieved and cheerful thoughts.

They were good people, and she liked them; and they thought she was safe! Her eyes met Reggie's for a brief moment and caught in them the gleam of an answering derision. Safe! She had been safe once in this very room, when she had so lightly embarked on the story of Strindberg's 'Father,' and watched, with an onlooker's security, the ripple of danger cross the placid pool of their talk. It was their danger then, not hers. They had tempted her out upon the still deep waters--and left her in a leaking boat.

After dinner, the Eversleys, Reggie, and Ian played the first rubber of bridge while Jean and Beatrice sat by the open window looking out on the terrace. Jean couldn't remember what they talked about, but the blue of

Beatrice's dress she could remember--for it was the same blue as Beatrice's eyes.

At last the words began to take shape in her mind. 'You're like the rest of us now,' Beatrice was saying with a faintly regretful sigh. 'Before you were married, you know, you weren't like anybody else. I used to be awfully afraid of you. I felt you were full of odd romantic sensitive feelings--and I'm afraid I'm rather roughshod. I just poke about all over the place, without particularly minding what I say. But now after a few months of knocking about Europe with dear old Ian, you seem--if you don't mind my saying so--to have turned from a soft-shelled into a hard-shelled crab! I shan't be afraid of you any more. You've got the married woman's armour on! We can say what we like to each other. It's much more comfortable, isn't it? Ian looks awfully well, you know!' Beatrice smiled at Jean with the same encouraging applause that the Eversleys had given her. It was as if she too thought that Jean, in doing very well for herself, had done very well for all of them. And nothing in that long first evening at Windlestraws made Jean's heart sink deeper than that cruel moment of Beatrice's approval.

Behind what she said lurked her implacable power. Beatrice was pleased simply because her scheme had worked. Ian was so little Jean's and so much her own.

Jean turned her eyes away from the pitiless scrutiny bent upon them. It was a mercy that the rubber was over.

Jean, who was the weakest of the players, continued to cut out, but this time it was Reggie who joined her.

'Shall we take a turn on the terrace?' he asked her. 'I'll get you a cloak or something. It's quite warm--rather a decent night.'

Jean, as she paused by the bridge table on her way out, met Vi Eversley's kind uncritical eyes. Once more they said to her with empty reassurance: 'Yes, it's *quite* all right now--even going out with Reggie in the dark isn't a thing any of us need worry about!'

Ian didn't meet Jean's eyes at all; he was too busy keeping his own away from Beatrice.

They walked the whole length of the terrace in silence. Below them stretched the sunk garden; and beyond the garden, the darkness hid the moor.

'If I can, I'll see you through!' Reggie said at last. 'I'll be, I mean, just what I am now. I dare say I ought to hope that your marriage will smash up; but I assure you I don't. On the contrary, I hope most awfully everything will turn out all right.'

'How can it? How can it?' Jean whispered passionately. 'You can see for yourself----!'

'Oh, I see what you mean, of course,' Reggie took her up quickly. 'She's

playing her hand for all she's worth! That, you know, is the way you might have expected her to play it! But there are cards she hasn't got. She's as clever as sin; but however clever a woman is she can't hold a man who's happy with another woman! Make him happy and she's done! She can give you some bad half hours; but you've got the pull!'

'What do you call the "pull"?' Jean demanded fiercely. 'Being there on his hands, when he doesn't want to have me there?'

'Well----' said Reggie thoughtfully, 'being on the spot longest isn't such a bad card if you know how to play it! As long as you don't nag or pine or fling yourself off your base in one direction or the other, he'll rather like your being accessible. It isn't, you see, as if he hadn't a fancy for you. He didn't marry you, I take it, for the sake of being bored! On the contrary, you amused him, and still do. I'll give you a straight tip--with a man like Ian the only really fatal thing is to let him give himself away. You know what I mean, don't you? Never threaten his self-control. He can get through all right if you let him save his face. Make him do all the fighting with Beatrice. You just keep smiling; and if you can manage it--look the other way! What made you marry him, by the by? You didn't mean to do it when you left London, I take it?'

'No! Oh, no!' said Jean, 'I didn't mean anything! I wanted to think out some way that might make things easier all round. But I never thought of this! It was Lady Margaret's plan, of course--and then Char's! And at last it seemed to be Ian's! He was quite straight about it. It wasn't, you know, exactly love. He never said it was; but he did want to have me somehow or other in his life. Still, I wouldn't agree--it seemed so silly! I thought it would all come down like a pack of cards. Not even Char's dying----' she broke off abruptly.

Reggie said nothing. She could see in the dark the glow of his cigarette--a point of fire; she could see nothing else--and hear nothing; only the wandering air brought her the distant scent of roses.

The silence pressed upon her the image of the little flickering life of Char.

'It was Beatrice herself,' Jean said at last gravely, 'who made me do it. I think she meant it in good faith, Reggie.'

'Yes,' said Reggie after a pause, 'if she knew what good faith was, perhaps she did.'

Jean thought that a curious thing for Reggie to say. It went deeper than she had supposed his thoughts had ever gone.

'You said to me once,' she reminded him, 'that Beatrice was straight as a die.'

'Well----' said Reggie reluctantly, 'I dare say I did. But that was before I knew what straightness was. I know it's different now--not so damned easy! I used to think being straight was going bang through things, sticking to your word, standing by your guns--you know the old *clichés*?

'Well--it isn't. You've got to know what you're banging through and smashing up first! You've got to find out if your word's worth keeping--before you're really straight. You've taught me that.'

Jean didn't answer him. She felt for a moment as if she had taught him more than she knew herself. Had she made Reggie the kind of man she wanted to marry, simply by marrying Ian?

They stood by the lighted window, and their eyes met. She was struck as she had never been struck before by the depths of Reggie's loyalty.

It wasn't only massive like a rock, it was as clear as a stream. It hid nothing from her, and it promised her a strength which the shimmering iridescence of her present life did not promise her. She could hear Ian's voice through the window, every tone of it was like music to her; but when it hurried a little, and it was hurried now, she knew that it was because he didn't feel really safe.

'Will you promise me something?' Reggie asked, turning away from the lighted window once more into the friendly dark. 'Will you promise to tell me if anything goes really wrong? I should awfully mind your not coming to me about it.'

Jean didn't answer him at once; she was too touched and too unsure of the future to be in a hurry to make fresh promises. But after a pause she found herself saying, 'If anything does go really wrong, I think it would be to you I should want to turn.'

CHAPTER XXXIII

JEAN knew that if they had not behaved so well she could have borne the whole situation better.

It was what Beatrice and Ian denied themselves, not what they gave to each other, which struck straight at her heart. They trod the path of Duty with unfaltering feet; but they were treading it side by side.

Jean knew that they never saw each other alone; they met only in public.

There wasn't a joint in the armour of their virtue for anything so clumsy as the truth to penetrate.

Beatrice had made their marriage, and as long as it didn't interfere with her she intended to let it alone.

A wife on the hearth didn't matter to her if she could remain the Image in the shrine; and as long as Ian hovered perpetually before that Image, Beatrice was satisfied.

What time and attention he had to spare, Ian gave to Jean; but devotees rarely make good husbands--except to fellow devotees.

The walls were too thick for Jean to hear Ian moving about in his dressing-room next to her bedroom, but she knew that in a few minutes he would come in.

He still made a point of smoking a last cigarette with her, before he went off for the night.

He would wander about the room in his pale yellow pyjamas, touching with intimate fingers the ornaments on her dressing-table, or bending with absent-minded intentness over her flowers.

He would sit on the edge of her bed, his handsome head flung back, and discuss familiarly with kind laughing eyes the trivial topics of their day; but sooner or later the bad moment came. Jean would see that he was laughing and talking on purpose to prevent anything more intimate from taking place.

He was trying to make up his mind whether to kiss her good-night, or just to manage the right kind of cheerful inconsequence so that he could slip inconspicuously away, without the finality of a kiss. He wasn't really afraid that Jean would haul him over the coals for any of his omissions, but he made her afraid that rather than hurt her feelings he would force the note of his own.

She knew that she mustn't let him do that, for once compulsion enters into the region of any human relationship, the spirit escapes. She must destroy in him all sense of obligation.

She heard his light knock at her door, and summoning all her strength, she called 'Come in.' She knew what she meant to say; but she waited for Ian to get over being charming first and he went on longer than usual.

She helped him for a time with his vain kind pretences, but when at last he reached the final illusion and bent over her for a good-night kiss, she struck out suddenly.

'Ian,' she said, 'you needn't kiss me, you know!' She saw behind his quick laughter the sheer panic in his eyes. Panic however was better than pretence. She felt that she could deal with anything as definite as fear. 'Sit down,' she said quietly, 'and let's really talk now--we shall both feel better after it.'

Ian mastered his fear in a flash. He reseated himself on her bed, and took her hand in his.

'What nonsense you talk!' he said laughingly. 'You're awfully easy to kiss! And if I didn't like it I shouldn't do it any more than I should do it if you didn't like it. Thank God, we're both awfully civilized! Only I'm never quite sure, you know, how much you do like it!'

He gave her a swift appealing glance. He wanted her to let him off. She had only to say 'Well--I don't so very awfully like it!' That would save her pride and free his own. But she had gone beyond any mere desire to save pride; there was something in them both which she felt was more worth saving.

'That's part of what I mean,' she said steadily, 'you were sure before! You knew I did like it!'

'Before what?' he asked, not meeting her eyes, but smiling a fixed smile as if what they were saying must be kept a little jocular at any cost.

'Before we came--here,' Jean said quickly. 'Don't be frightened! I know what you're going to say--but don't say it--don't say any of it! I couldn't believe it! We mustn't be lovers--not even half lovers--until we know where we are!'

Ian looked up at the ceiling, he glanced out of the window, he looked down at the hand which he still held in his own, he looked everywhere except into Jean's steady eyes.

'It's all right really,' he said to her at last. 'Of course it shall be just as you say--always! But don't make a mistake. I'm not the slightest bit different--honestly--to you, I mean. I'm only--I'm only----' his voice broke suddenly and she felt the hand that was holding hers tighten unbearably over it. 'I'm only awfully bothered sometimes--all round.'

'I know,' she said softly, 'but Ian darling, it would bother you less, if you wouldn't try with me to pretend anything at all! Just *be* bothered and let me be bothered with you!'

But he couldn't accept her co-operation. 'I should hate that!' he said quickly. 'Don't you see my whole point is----' he narrowly escaped saying 'our whole point'; but he picked himself up gallantly and even met Jean's eyes on it, 'my whole point is that you shouldn't be bothered at all. I didn't marry you to drag you into any cursed little muddle of my own!'

'But I don't mind being bothered!' Jean smiled back at him. 'I'd ever so much rather *be* bothered with you than have to go off alone pretending to be comfortable without you! It isn't a success being spared! We didn't marry to make heroic hermits out of each other, did we?'

Ian laid her hand down on the bed, and clasped both his own over his knees. It was as if he feared the current of sympathy, which she felt run between them.

'It's frightfully nice being married,' he said after a pause. 'I've told you ever so many times--when I'm off with Reggie, I'm always thinking how jolly it'll be to get back to you. I don't feel in the least like a hermit.'

'But we must go further than that,' Jean pleaded. 'Not much further, Ian! Only a little! Just far enough not to pretend that even if it is nice to see me here, you aren't bothered! You're bothered far more just now than you need be! Because you keep wanting to be more to me than you feel like being, and you think I want it, and that makes you feel worse!'

He bowed his dark head further on his knees so that Jean could only catch a glimpse of his profile; but though he had moved further away from her, she saw that he wasn't so frightened.

She could talk as much as she liked about their relation to each other as long as she didn't drag Beatrice in. Ian would have to fight to defend his god, but he wouldn't have to fight about anything else; and he didn't want to fight Jean at all. Not only because in general he was too good-tempered to desire a fight; but because he cared far too much for Jean to bear to lift his hand against her.

'Well,' he said after a long pause, 'in a sense I suppose that's true. But if you're a good wife, and you see I happen to know that you are, you must expect rather more of a good husband! And I don't happen to be a good husband, at least not just now. Naturally that rather bothers me; it should, you know. But must we talk about it?'

'Don't you think we must?' Jean asked gently. 'It'll be easier afterwards. It isn't as if we had to be angry or stupid--we are, as you say, thank God--civilized. We don't need to invent scapegoats or atrocities, and yet I think we ought to find out what each of us really means!'

'Ah--well,' said Ian with a little helpless sigh that had a hint of relief in it, 'if we must--we must, but you do the talking, I can't. I'll just listen! and stop you if you're wrong!'

'All I want to say,' Jean went on after a little pause, 'is, that you mustn't worry about me at all! If you give me a little--because you think you ought to--I shan't like it; but if you give me nothing I shan't mind nearly so much. I'm human and I've got to mind--and it'll be much nicer of you to let me. We can still be friends as we've always been. It's difficult to explain what I mean--but

if you keep trying to be part of a lover to me, I know I should lose everything; but if you will leave me quite alone, you might one day be able to give me everything back! And I shall know it is everything then, because you won't be able to help it. You won't be trying any more!'

They were silent for a long time.

Ian sat quite motionless, his hands clasped tightly over his knees, his head bent, his eyes fixed on his hands. Jean was so close to him that she could feel the tension of his taut muscles. At last he said without looking up: 'That's all very well; but you don't see what a damned dog in the manger I feel! I've taken you away from Reggie, who adores you--and that's not all I've taken away from him; and the very money I live on comes from his pockets! Not that I care so awfully about the money, somebody else would get it for my job, and I work my best for him. But it's a pretty poor show when you come to think of it. Reggie's my best friend. For years he's stood from me--all that he's had to stand; and he's never rubbed it in. Even this business about you--I know he feels pretty sore. We had one torndown row--but he hasn't let it make any real difference! But when you remember how I slung it into him for really wanting you--! Then I walk off with you under his nose, and let you down afterwards--in a way he never would have done! Sometimes I'd quite awfully like to be dead!'

'You haven't taken me away from Reggie!' Jean protested. 'I didn't belong to him to take! If I'd done what he wanted--and I very nearly did do it--it wouldn't have been for him; and I still shouldn't really have belonged to him. That's why I didn't do it, simply because I *knew* I shouldn't! It wouldn't have been fair to palm myself off on Reggie as really his, when I wasn't--and never could be! I'm quite all right by myself, but I care enough for you not to want you to be dead, and I'm quite sure that Reggie doesn't! After all, you *are* his best friend--he's still got that!'

'Yes, that's awfully sweet of you!' Ian murmured, 'and you may even be right about Reggie--but it doesn't help me to particularly like myself!'

Jean thought this over carefully. She couldn't tell Ian that if he kept back half the price--half the price of anything--he couldn't like himself. He might be able to grasp this as an intellectual truth, but his consciousness was too saturated with Beatrice to let him give up their crowning delusion.

'There won't be any new trouble about Reggie,' Jean said finally. 'We're--Reggie and I--as far apart now as if there'd never been anything between us. Our marriage is our own affair--it isn't Reggie's business to feel reproachful about it; and I happen to know he doesn't. If anything bad should happen I might go to him for help--he's been awfully good to me, and I'm fond of him in every way but *the* way, but as long as you and I can talk to each other about what we feel, nothing bad *has* happened!'

Jean stopped, breathless. She watched anxiously what she could see of Ian's troubled face. He looked up at her at last, and let his tortured eyes rest steadily upon hers.

'Any other woman but you,' he said slowly, with the colour rushing over his face, '*would* make our marriage Reggie's business! You have only got to lift a finger and he'd be at your feet again. He wouldn't scruple to be your lover--and how could I blame him? But, my God, how I should hate it, and how little right I have even to tell you that I'd hate it! Sometimes it seems as if I'd queered every pitch there was!'

'You haven't got it to hate!' Jean reminded him quietly, 'and you never will have, Ian!'

He buried his head in the cool white sheets close to her hand. She touched his short curls with her fingers, but she didn't dare to draw his head against her breast. He might have liked it then, but he might afterwards be sorry that he had liked it.

'Don't you think,' she whispered, bending down over him without touching him, 'that if we hold on, just trusting each other--just liking each other--it *will* come out all right? Only, Ian, there is just one thing----' Jean hesitated, she felt that he was listening to her with his whole being, but that his whole being was a protest against her saying the thing he feared. She mustn't say anything against the Image in the shrine. It was still there--and he still worshipped it. 'If you could,' she said at last, 'not mind how far you go--if you understood, I mean, that the way back to me is just to go as far as you care to go, and that I've not been looking at you, not bothering about what you do--don't you think that one day you'd really come back?'

He remained hidden and silent for so long that Jean thought he had refused her her one hope; but at last he got up, without letting her see his face, and walked towards the open window. Above the shadow of his shoulder she could see a little moon, a slender, lemon-yellow crescent resting on the branches of an apple tree. She put out the reading lamp by her bed, so that they could speak to each other, if they had anything more to say, by the faint light of the little moon.

'There's one thing you don't realize,' Ian broke out, as if the darkness helped him to speak. 'I'm frightfully fond of you. I'm pulled both ways. I'm not only disloyal to you.

'I thought I'd mention it in case you didn't quite understand. As to what you suggest--I can't because of Reggie. I've always known it would be better for myself, but Reggie couldn't feel about it as you do--not even now. It would be the last insult. I can at least spare him that. I know what you feel--that the wrong is there. It is, of course, but not to a man in the same sense.

'If you don't want me to shoot myself--I won't. You have my promise;

that's about as far as I can go to oblige you. And as to coming back--I've never left you; but there are some things we can't do, while we're so divided. Don't let's talk about it any more. We'll be friends as you said and I'll try not to--I mean--good-night!'

Jean knew that Ian had gone, because where she had seen the solid darkness of his shoulder she now saw the whole hoop of the glittering moon.

She gave a long sigh of relief; she hadn't said what he would have minded; and yet, without saying it, she had said all that she wanted to say. She got up and pulled down the blind, because even the faint light of the crescent moon was too strong for her.

CHAPTER XXXIV

CHAGFORD lay fast asleep in the drowsy afternoon light; it hardly stirred as a stray motor flashed through it, or the old cobblestones echoed to the footsteps of one of its slow-paced citizens. The sunshine smouldered on the grey stone walls, the trim gardens blazed with colour. But after the gate of the doctor's surgery clicked behind Jean, everything wore a more adventurous and less drowsy air.

The earth under her feet had a buoyant substance and the sleepy high street thrilled with invisible life. Jean walked along sedately, but she felt too happy for such a crowded place.

She told her wildly beating heart that the birth of a child couldn't have the romantic simplifications of her radiant visions; and yet she could not drive them from her thirsting eyes. She passed swiftly through the town and lost herself in the solitude of June lanes. Here there was no disturbance from the infrequent traffic, only yellow-hammers beat out their shrill restricted messages of joy and then, with a whir of golden wings, dropped into the screen of brambles.

The hedges leaned over Jean filled with wild roses, and the tall shadows of ferns. From time to time she came to a five-barred gate, and stood for a moment to watch the red Devon cows idly swishing their tails in comfort, knee-deep in buttercups and wild parsley. The heavy-headed elms held the sunshine in a net of green and gold; but the world was still too near and too enclosed for Jean's flying heart. She was glad when the lane abruptly ended, and the moor rose up all around her, soft as a breast to lean on.

Bushes of gorse burned in the afternoon light, and made a screen of gold between her and the white road which led to Windlestraws. She stretched herself at full length in the heather, and lay still. A hawk hovered high above her head, his brown wings pinned against the light. A row of harebells quivered on the edge of a low bank. Larks threw jets of song into the azure air.

Jean's heart slowed down; she ceased to think of Ian or of herself, or of that strange new being which was to be a part of them both. A heavy golden bee zigzagged past, making a sound like summer singing to itself. Peace, which possessed the air, began slowly to fill her whole body, until the walls of fear which enclosed Jean from the outer world fell away from her and set her spirit free. Even the hawk balancing above her head could not hold the life it struck at; the flesh would be at its mercy for a shuddering moment, and then life, that untamed captive, would escape. The dishevelled hampered thing it caught was not the creature it had struck at. The memory of Char came back to Jean, for the first time without pain. The unborn within her, or the dead without, had no

separate existence. She herself was no longer an individual, but a mere carrier of life; yet she had never felt herself so much alive before.

The sun sank slowly; the heather and the tall spires of the fading ling were bathed in liquid light. Far away, above the blue hollows of the moor, the grey chimney-pots of Windlestraws grew dark against the sky. The sight of them drove Jean back into herself; and she remembered time.

She hurried home to be met by Ralph's respectful voice, faintly tinged with reproach, 'If you please, Ma'am, the master has been in some time waiting for his tea.'

Jean joined Ian in his smoking-room. He looked terribly tall and young. It was strange to think that in this new and deepest sense his beauty now belonged to her. He could no longer keep it all to himself, or stand behind it, as if it were a wall he did not want her to see through.

'D'you know it's after seven o'clock?' he asked her with a note of barely controlled impatience in his voice. 'Where on earth have you been?'

Jean hesitated. She felt like a child whose toy is roughly snatched from him and his place in the universe darkened by an angry God.

'Only on the moor,' she said in a small subdued voice. 'I didn't notice the time--the gorse is out.'

But Ian wouldn't accept the gorse as an excuse; he sat down at some little distance from her with a frown between his eyes. How could she tell this handsome, rather cross young stranger that she was going to bear his child?

He had been playing tennis at Windlestraws, but could hitting balls across a net have established so strong a contact with Beatrice as to destroy their new relationship?

Jean had felt so sure, since their talk together in the moonlight, now that they were only friends they could remain friends always.

'She thinks,' Ian said abruptly, 'that you might go there--uninvited, sometimes--she was expecting you this afternoon. You never go there if you can possibly help it!'

Jean didn't say anything; but she made the mistake of fixing her eyes rather pleadingly upon Ian. She wanted him to remind himself of the reasons she had for not going to Windlestraws; he went on disgustedly, shutting himself up in his own sense of grievance.

'It's somehow as if you thought you weren't wanted, or had to be coaxed--rather stuffy and suburban, don't you think?'

Jean felt a swift rush of anger. She could have forgiven him better if she had believed the insolent phrase to be his own; but her instinct told her that it was Beatrice's phrase.

Her eye rested on him for a moment, taking in the supple strength of his long spare body, the beauty of his sinewy well-shaped limbs, and the fine

deceptive lines of his head and throat; what was the use of all this athletic majesty, when the man within it was a poor sunk slave? She looked away from him towards the garden, where moths and shadows troubled the still light.

'If it's grand to be sure you're wanted,' she said after a long pause, 'and beggarly to sometimes doubt it--I'm afraid, Ian, I'm on the side of the beggars.'

'One doesn't need to be stuck-up,' Ian said stiffly. 'It's enough to behave naturally!'

'And what makes you think it would be natural for me to wish to go to Windlestraws, invited or uninvited?' Jean asked with a bitterness which surprised herself. She had not known that she was so angry until she heard the sound of her own voice.

'I beg your pardon,' said Ian coldly. 'Of course, if you feel like that about it, there is no more to be said. You must not go there again, and I must go there as seldom as I can make it compatible with my duties.'

'You make me say more than I mean,' said Jean, roused beyond her power of control. 'That is an unfair advantage to take of any one whom you have tried to annoy. I should like to go to Windlestraws sometimes, but not often, and only when I know definitely that I am wanted.'

'I don't know what you mean by trying to annoy,' Ian answered, turning his frosty blue eyes on her with a punishing directness. 'Your own conduct strikes me as pretty provocative to start with! You leave me to go by myself to Windlestraws, and when I take the trouble to come home early on purpose to find you, you don't turn up till after seven o'clock. I suppose you went off alone on the moor in order to punish me for being at Windlestraws at all?'

Jean drew a quick surprised breath. How bad Ian's conscience must be, to make him so wildly suspicious of her motives! They were quarrelling with the desperate unreason of lovers, who know that beneath their deepest insults lies an admiration which is deeper still.

'I can't believe,' Jean said quietly, 'that you can really think I stayed out to annoy you. I simply forgot that such a thing as time existed!' The grudge they had against each other was too serious for them to afford a quarrel.

She saw by the sudden lift of his brows that this seemed odder and more annoying to Ian than if she had desired to punish him; but the obvious sincerity of her tone forced him into a reluctant apology.

'I'm sorry,' he said curtly. 'I see that I made a mistake; but what on earth can have happened to make you forget tea?'

Flurried and unbalanced by fatigue, Jean fell into the worst of blunders.

She said, without any preface, 'The doctor tells me I'm going to have a child.'

Ian shot to his feet, his face hard with anger. 'I'm damned if you do!' he exclaimed fiercely. 'I don't want a child from you! It would be unendurable!'

Jean heard the door crash behind him, but the moment was so intolerable that, for a long time after Ian had gone, he still seemed to be standing above her, glaring down at her with his pitiless blue eyes.

Her mind tried to lift itself back into action; but she could not turn away from Ian's anger--nor think straight under it.

Only one thing stood out clear in the broken whirl of her thoughts: the child must be born.

The shadows ran in from the lawn and took the colour out of the shining furniture; everything in the room grew formless and grey.

The door opened softly and Jean heard Ian's voice again without any anger in it. He was desperately ashamed, but for a time she could not say anything to soothe him; he had killed something in her which had protected both his nerves and hers.

'Look here,' he said hurriedly, 'I'm frightfully sorry for what I said just now. You must think me the worst kind of a brute. The whole thing took me completely by surprise, and I lost my head. You see, I hadn't expected or wanted a child: I thought we were pretty safe for it *not* to happen. It's bound to make such a perfectly different situation for us all. Don't you see that for yourself?'

Jean was glad he had not turned on the light; he could not guess what he had done to her, unless he saw her eyes.

'What kind of a new situation must it make?' she asked painstakingly. 'You aren't obliged to care more for me, or to be more with me because I have a child. It should make it less of a bother in your thoughts to know that I have something of my own.'

'Oh, I know it's quite natural!' he said quickly. 'You have every right to want it, and to expect me to want it too! But it isn't, is it, as though there were only you and I to consider?'

'I hadn't thought,' said Jean heavily, 'that about this particular thing there could be any one else!'

'I'm afraid,' said Ian in a tone of considerate candour, 'that there is some one else whom I am bound to consider. I ought, I know, to have talked out this possibility with you before, but we have never been, have we? by way of discussing our personal relationship--except the other night when you cleared up a lot for me and made things easier all round. I admit this a more difficult business; you took my point of view then--you were even more Catholic than the Pope--and now I gather that you don't?'

'I don't think I do,' Jean admitted cautiously, 'but I am not altogether sure yet that I know what your point of view is.'

'I'll tell you,' Ian said, leaning forward to light a cigarette and turning on the lamp by her side, as if he were already more at his ease. 'Beatrice's one

stipulation--no! hang it!--that's too strong--the thing I know she felt most about our marriage was that she couldn't stand another woman's being the mother of my child. She's always tried to persuade herself and me that Reggie's children were in a spiritual sense mine and hers, and she can't stand my having any others.

'She's unfortunately the kind of woman who most awfully cares for children and likes having them; and she's wanted mine more I believe in a sense than she's wanted me. She consented to our marriage partly because Char made her, and partly because she knew I wanted it. She thought I should be less lonely and more settled, and she knew that I was awfully fond of you. She thought she could accept all that my having a home implied--but not a child! I think she has accepted our marriage most loyally--you see she happens to be awfully fond of you too; she's told me, and I know it's true, that she's never cared for another woman as she cares for you. You don't know what a brick she's been, or how easy she's made everything for me. You've left it all to us, and never asked any questions--it's been part of your unbelievable tact, and we've awfully appreciated it! You haven't lost by it, I can assure you! I've never seen her alone; I haven't had as much as a real look or a real word from her since our marriage. Even Reggie's awfully admired it in her--he's promised her a sunk garden on the other side of the lake for her rock plants.'

He stopped abruptly, for he wasn't quite sure if Jean hadn't laughed. She'd made some kind of queer little sound, but he decided after a moment that it couldn't have been laughter, and went on with renewed confidence. 'After all she's been through, you know, I couldn't bear to ask anything more from her!'

Jean didn't, for a long time, say anything. She sat motionless with her hands in her lap, looking out at the gathering dusk. The bats cut the softness of the grey light with their swift black bodies, and moths on tawny wings came in and flung their softness against the cruel light. Nothing else moved--and everything was silent.

'And you yourself,' Jean asked at last, 'quite apart from Beatrice, would hate to have another woman bear your child?'

She had to ask it, but she felt no suspense. She had passed beyond emotion; she only wanted to see quite clearly what she had to do. Ian fiddled with the racket across his knees; he flung his unfinished cigarette away and lit another, and when at last he spoke, he weighed each word as if it were dangerous and might break something.

'You're not "another woman" to me, Jean,' he murmured, 'you're much more than that! I can't tell you what I'd like or what I wouldn't like, if I were free! All I know for certain is that I've cost the woman I love frightful pain. I can't ask her to stand any more--even if I'm hurting you. I don't ask myself whether I'm hurt or not--that doesn't matter. I'm always doing what I hate,

hurting one or the other of you. But I do know I'd rather go on as we are. I don't want to have to face any fresh complication. I beg of you--before it's too late--to put an end to this one!'

He held his hands out with a sudden gesture, as if to take her own, but Jean drew back from him.

'It's too late now, Ian,' she said gently. 'I don't mean physically, but spiritually, too late. The child must be born. I shouldn't have asked for one against your will; but I can't destroy what exists. What I've got to spare isn't you--or Beatrice--or myself--it's the child.'

Ian drew back into an impenetrable silence. Jean felt it stiffen around them; his tenderness and pity were no longer for her. She was the bondwoman who must go out into the waterless desert with an unfathered child. She got up quickly, and would have fallen, if Ian had not sprung forward and steadied her with his arm. She leaned against him for a moment, only for his help.

She knew that she would never lean against him in any other way.

As soon as she could move, she pushed him gently away from her with trembling hands.

'Tell Ralph I don't want any dinner!' she whispered; but although she was spared dinner, Ralph came into her room inexorably with a hot-water jug, and found her lying face downwards on the bed.

The figure on the bed was no business of Ralph's, but she pulled down the blinds a little reproachfully; for it was quite obvious that, with her mistress lying there, it would be impossible for her to turn down the covers.

CHAPTER XXXV

JEAN hurried through the damp lanes, dark with rain-soaked leaves, and across a pallid stretch of moor. The heavy clouds pressed the last light out of the sky; the beech trees closed over her head like a dark curtain. Every now and then a rigid brown leaf detached itself and slid noiselessly through the still air.

In the open spaces of the Park, smoke rose from burning leaves in columns of blue mist. The azure smoke reminded Jean of the bluebells which grew in spring under the beech trees. Her mind was full of broken images, and haunted by a panic fear. She was going to tea with the children for the last time; no one else would be there. Beatrice, Ian, and Reggie had gone off cub-hunting, to a distant meet, and no one knew it was good-bye but Jean. She wanted to slip away as leaves slip from a tree, hardly falling so much as floating through the innocuous air--she felt that would be the right way to leave a husband. Good-byes were always dangerous; they suddenly meant more than you had anticipated.

The great house rose smoothly in front of her, grim and dauntlessly arrogant. She had hoped to see it with the sunlight on it, and to find late roses in the rose garden. But the light had gone. The massive and yet slender lines of the building, the cowled chimneys and precipitous roof frowned at her darkly. Rain drew between her and the garden. Jean touched the bell; she was kept waiting longer than usual; it seemed to her she might never get in. Once seated before the nursery fire, with Oliver at her feet and Bridget and Anne pressing themselves against her knees, Jean regained her sense of composure. If she had been pursued, nothing had caught her, and if she had been haunted, the spirit which had found her was Peace.

Mrs. Meadows moved softly about the room clearing away the tea-things. The leaping flames of the bright wood fire shone on the harness of the rocking-horse and turned Oliver's curls to gold.

Jean looked into the fiery caverns of the cedar branches and wondered what story she should tell the children this last time. She took Bridget on her lap and drew a footstool against her knees for Anne, but it was Oliver's face she looked at while she told the story.

He lay stretched on a fleecy white wool mat, one hand stroking the fox terrier's supple back, while the other propped his chin. He gazed deep into the fire, as if to watch the story move in the flaming ashes. 'Once upon a time,' Jean began in a low voice, 'there lived an Emperor and a nightingale.'

It was not too sad a story, she thought to herself. If for a while the Emperor lost the true nightingale for the sake of the jewelled toy which was only a toy, in the end the toy broke, and the nightingale came back to save the life of his

royal but undeserving friend. When Jean had reached the Emperor's illness, and the sham nightingale broke and could sing no more, and no one but the little scullery maid behind the kitchen door could find the real nightingale to save the Emperor's life--she looked up suddenly and saw that it was no longer Mrs. Meadows knitting who sat opposite to her. Some one else had come in and taken her place so quietly that none of the three children, intent on the Emperor's fate, had even noticed his entrance.

'Make him come back, Jean!' Oliver demanded imperiously.

'Yes, make the nightingale come back, Jean!' Reggie murmured under his breath.

'Why, it's Daddy!' Bridget cried. She slipped from Jean's knees and ran to her father's. Jean drew a deep breath and went on with the story. She felt rather than saw Oliver retreat from the rug and stand against her knee; she took his hands, which tightened over hers, and fixed, like Oliver's, her eyes upon the fire.

The red heat of the logs glowed a deep rose-colour, flickered, grew pale; and crumbled slowly into white ash.

The Emperor recovered; no one could mend the broken nightingale, but the nightingale of the woods had returned and sang to the Emperor, as he used to sing, for love. 'He couldn't have him in the Palace, you see,' Jean finished. 'He had to be quite free to sing, but when the Emperor agreed that he should live in the woods, then the nightingale came and went, and sang more than ever.'

'Didn't the toy mind?' Oliver asked in a low voice, 'having to be shut away broken in a drawer?'

'No,' said Jean firmly 'the toy didn't mind, because it had never minded anything--not even the Emperor--not even its own song.'

Mrs. Meadows came back into the nursery and inexorably announced bedtime. There was a roar of protest, dwindling under her tranquil firmness into a muttering docility.

'Not much of a story,' Reggie asserted when they found themselves alone. 'I don't like all that flying away on the part of the nightingale. Jean--I came back early on purpose--tell me, what are you up to?'

'Have the others come back?' Jean demanded by way of an answer.

'No,' said Reggie, 'they won't for ages. The Eltons have kept them--they'll put up the horses for the night, and send Beatrice and Ian back in their car for dinner. I'll see you home first.'

Jean sank back into her chair. There was very little light left from the fire, she turned on Mrs. Meadows' sewing lamp, so that the intimate hush of the half-darkness was broken.

'I think you might have let me know,' Reggie said after a pause; 'this is good-bye, isn't it?'

'Yes,' Jean admitted, 'but I don't mean it to sound like one. I couldn't say it to you--please don't move--I only mean I didn't want to! Good-bye is like breaking something. I want to go away as easily as I came--let me go easily, Reggie!'

Reggie had shifted his position so that he could keep his eyes upon her face. 'All right! all right!' he said soothingly, as if he were speaking to a nervous horse. 'I won't make any fuss. But you remember your promise, don't you? If things went badly wrong, it was to me you were to turn? You must admit that they've gone pretty badly wrong?' He paused; but Jean admitted nothing. She knew that it was no use to try to evade the passion of his sympathy. She only wanted not to break down under it, for to break down under it would be to let him see how dire the plight they had plunged her in really was.

Jean didn't really mind how much she gave herself away to Reggie, but not to give *them* away, not to let him think they had done her any irretrievable harm, burned in her like fire. If only she could evade his hunter's instinct and yet keep untouched the beauty of his loyalty!

'I know what's up, of course,' Reggie began again, when her silence had exhausted his patience. 'I suppose there may be more damnably selfish ways of taking a thing; but even in my career, exposed to a good deal of that sort of thing and guilty of a good deal more of it myself, I don't think I've ever quite seen the beat of this wanting to stop your having a child! I'm glad you're obstinate, and I hope you're angry. Naturally I should awfully like to know exactly how the whole thing does strike you, and what you mean to do about it?'

'I'm so afraid of breaking down,' Jean murmured reluctantly, 'that's why I'm not sure if I can tell you. I mean to go away--but I don't want to be angry about it. That would be a real defeat. You see, I must have been stupid and clumsy to let things come to breaking-point at all; I want to get away if I can before they actually break.

'They aren't selfish, they're in their way quite beautiful, but their beauty now is like a bruise. I can't reach their far-off minds, and when I try to, we hurt each other.

'Yours is far off too, Reggie--but you want me to reach yours; as for my own mind, I think I haven't got any left. I only know what I've got to do: I must have this baby. I don't know yet where to go, but when I go I shall never come back. I thought Char was right about Ian, but she wasn't, or else it's too late. He doesn't in any real way want me.'

Reggie turned this over carefully before he answered. 'Well, look here,' he began, 'I thought you'd say something like that! Although I'm damned if I can see why you don't want to be angry. Being angry's sane; they've behaved like

brutes, and it would clear the air if you saw they had, and let them know it!

'But personally I don't think you're right about Ian--he'd have played fair if she'd let him. He liked you, all right--he does still--but he's under a spell. 'Member Circe and the swine? Well, Beatrice is Circe. She can make any man behave like a pig if she wants him to. But I think you're right to cut the painter all the same.

'It's gone too far to stop. Beatrice won't let you have that child if she can help it. She'd tip you out of a car first. She's tried fair means, but if she doesn't get her point that way, she will another. She means to get it!'

Jean moved restlessly. 'I don't know,' she said, 'I haven't seen what she really feels yet--only through Ian, that isn't enough; and through you is worse still--because you're always so angry with her. I'd like to see her once, as she really is. I think that's what I'm waiting for. I don't believe she wants to do me any real harm!'

Reggie gave an impatient groan. 'I wish you weren't so infernally merciful!' he said. 'The rest of us aren't. I've reached the end of my tether. We needn't go into the kind of time I've had since this marriage of yours. I dare say you know as much about it as I could tell you, but I think there's something owing to me on it; and something more owing to me after the way you let me down in London! I've been pretty good about it, haven't I? But it's mounted up. I dare say you think I'm the kind of man who wouldn't look after you as you are now--but I'm not. I'm as domestic as a mother cat. I'd love to look after you--and that's what I think you owe me. You want to go away, and I suggest taking you. We can go where you like--Channel Islands, Norway, or the Hebrides--I've got an island up there, with some awfully good fishing and a kind of little shooting-box we could live in. The storm would burst then, and Beatrice this time would, as the papers say, "accept her freedom." She won't get Ian any other way; and she'll be afraid of losing him altogether by having driven you off. She'll take the plunge and let Windlestraws go. To do her justice, she'd never give up the children; but she won't have to, you see, once I've bolted with you.'

'And what will Ian do--to do him justice?' Jean asked under her breath.

'Well, I'll be fair with you,' said Reggie, looking straight into her eyes. 'I'm inclined to think that if you chuck Ian, he'll chuck Beatrice. He'd do it now if you played your cards properly. You said you were afraid of breaking down, talking to me! If you *did* break down, talking to him, you'd get him! I make you a present of that!'

'Oh, not that kind of breaking down,' Jean murmured, 'not just to "get him," Reggie!'

'Oh well, there you are!' said Reggie impatiently. 'Only don't say you're not proud. You're worse than any of us! Come off with me anyhow. I'd do the

proper film act--"marry the girl I love," and let everything else rip! You and I--close-up--Beatrice retreating with Ian and the children--respectability written all over her! That's her game! By Jove, I never thought I'd live to let her play it out! But I'll stand even that for you!'

Jean looked doubtfully at him, his eyes had their hard fighting sparkle. She saw that Reggie was still playing a game. It was a new one and he meant to play it fairly, but it was still a game.

Jean could now have all that Beatrice had ever had. She could be mistress of Windlestraws instead of shivering like a frightened super in the wings; but Reggie wouldn't be any different--he'd simply have, for the sake of getting what he wanted, put up higher stakes.

'You frighten me, Reggie,' Jean said gently. 'I can't do it--and you know I can't. You'd have *not* to frighten me before I could think of it! In the long run, you see, I know you wouldn't like it! A nameless little scrub of a girl, ruling all this--and so badly, after Beatrice! Your friend's wife, too, taken away from him; and your friend's child, instead of your own three children. You think it's worth while to get me, because I'm like rather a rare kind of tiger--worth an awfully expensive expedition. But you'll shoot such lots of other tigers far more cheaply! Don't look like that! I know that's only part of what you feel for me, and the other part has nothing to do with wanting to get me--and that's mine forever!

'Your liking me as you do is the one thing I've got to be proud of! It's funny, isn't it, when you think how it began? And it's ended in your being the best friend I've ever had. I'm more grateful than I dare to say, and far fonder of you than you can believe from what I'm going to ask you! Let me go, Reggie darling, and don't try to find out where I've gone to! Be nice to Ian, that's all you can do for me. Don't let me break up your friendship, because when I first came it was all you had, and if I've spoilt that, I've spoilt everything. I wanted to be nice to Ian too, but I see I can't because I'm a woman--and women can't be very nice to men who don't love them!'

Reggie got up suddenly and began to walk about the room.

'They can't always be very nice to men who do!' he said at last with his back turned to Jean. 'However, you needn't worry about either of us. I've got a lot of things I didn't have when you first came. My career, for instance, I'm going to keep that up somehow. And I'll try to be a decent father and see that Oliver doesn't trample on the girls. I won't break with Ian. I can see better than you can how he's been had. You see I'm accepting your judgment--for the moment at least--but I'm only submitting to your will, I'm not agreeing with your arguments. And, my dear, I'm *not* going to let you go off into the blue, alone! You've called me your best friend and you'll have to take the consequences! I'll take you wherever you like; but I've got to approve of it first

and see that you have enough money and a doctor to look after you when you need him. You'll write to me every week, and let me see you at decent intervals. You can trust me, can't you?'

Jean didn't hesitate this time, she said 'Yes!' so quickly that it was like a cry. Reggie fixed his eyes on hers and for a long while Jean looked into them. The hard sparkle had gone, only the steadiness of his nature remained, clear of all desire.

She had touched the deepest thing in him, and she knew that whatever he offered her now, she could accept.

CHAPTER XXXVI

PRESSED hard against the pane was a white unearthly face. For a moment, as Jean glanced up at it from her writing-desk, she thought that she must have invented it out of the mist which filled the garden.

The light of the early afternoon was dim, and the face seemed to come and go--with the drifting strips of fog which blew in from the moor; only the eyes which watched Jean unmovingly were real.

Jean knew that she could not have invented their deep cold blue.

She rose stiffly, and moving reluctantly towards the window, opened it; and stood aside. The slim, shadowy figure confronting her took shape, and slipped past her into the room. For a long moment neither of them spoke; the fog filtered in between them, as if some unseen Power were trying to keep them apart.

'I'm sorry,' Beatrice said at last. 'I ought to have rung, of course, but I wanted to be sure you were alone. Is Ian out?' She spoke in the voice, which, whatever she was saying, always sounded so far away from her heart.

'Didn't you know?' Jean asked wonderingly. 'Yes--he's out.' She trembled a little; cold had entered the room with Beatrice, and the fog which hung in the air made the single light above her desk misty and unsubstantial.

Beatrice stood for a moment glancing about her as if she expected something to be in the room which was not there. She drew up a chair with a little gesture of appropriation, and pushed a log on the hearth with her foot, to make it blaze up.

'I don't know anything,' she said curtly, 'that's why I'm here. I can't very well ask the servants about your future plans, can I?'

Jean noticed that Beatrice's shoes and shooting-coat were wringing wet, great beads of moisture clung to her soft slouch hat. She must have been in physical discomfort, but she seemed oblivious of it. 'I dare say Reggie knows what you mean to do!' Beatrice went on after a short pause, 'but he would see me damned, of course, before he gave me any satisfaction. And as for Ian--well, even if I chose to ask Ian, I suppose he is in the same boat as I am--you tell him nothing?' Her voice paused interrogatively, but Jean made no answer. She did not want to keep anything back from Beatrice, but she herself didn't know quite where Ian was. It had seemed to her for the last day or two as if their relations had subtly changed, although neither of them had spoken of it. Once or twice she had encountered a new look in his eyes, a half-shamed appeal. It was as if the barrier between them had thinned so that from moment to moment they were both conscious of each other's nearness. But she could not speak of this imperceptible approach; nor had it altered any of her plans.

'Do you still insist on forcing this child on him?' Beatrice demanded. Her words were brutal, but the blind white face which she turned towards Jean was a tragic mask. The lovely curves of her face were stamped and flattened into hard lines, her lips were colourless. Only her eyes burned with their accustomed light.

Jean said slowly: 'Yes. I suppose I do--if you can call it "forcing"; you see he hadn't told me before that he didn't want a child.'

'He's told you now, hasn't he?' Beatrice asked harshly. Behind her harshness Jean read, with a sudden stab of pity, how great was her fear.

These last days, in which Jean had felt the change in Ian, Beatrice had felt it too. He hadn't once been to Windlestraws. Jean had not been sure of this before; but she felt sure of it now.

'Yes,' she said after a moment's pause, 'he has told me now--but you see it's too late. Do you think it very unfair, Beatrice, for me to want a child? It's all I'm going to have out of our marriage. You need never see it. I am going away to-morrow, and I shall never come back again.'

Beatrice drew a quick, sharp breath. 'Why do you do that?' she demanded. 'He hasn't asked you to go away, has he? This is your home! You have no right to put us in the wrong by leaving here!'

'Ian doesn't want me any more,' Jean said gently. 'I have that right.'

Beatrice considered this plea for a moment in silence. She looked away from Jean and warmed her feet at the fire. At last she said drily, and without turning her head, 'I think you have very loose ideas about marriage! Wives have no business to dash off in any direction, just because they think their husbands are annoyed with them. Of course Ian's annoyed with you. But if you won't give in to him, you ought to stick to it. That's what marriage is like. I told you when I first met you, that it was a cat and dog life!'

'I don't think it need be,' Jean objected meekly; 'if I knew Ian wanted me, I could put up with his being annoyed. But he doesn't want me, that's what I've found out! I don't blame him and I don't blame you! What was between you was too deep; there was no room for any other relationship. I've made it worse, not better. I was always afraid I might, but I liked you all too much. I gave in when I ought to have fought you. Now I shan't give in again. But I don't see that we need be angry with each other.'

Beatrice looked up at Jean; her eyes shone with a bewildered expression, as if she had mislaid an enemy and found the weapon she was just going to use no longer had an object. 'You don't seem to see,' she said more kindly, 'that if you leave Ian--like this--you will make him feel a beast. He can't stand that! He's given you a home, and he'll expect you to stay in it; all the more that you're going to have his baby! I quite see your point about our not being nasty to each other; but you must admit that when you first came here you were no

one in particular--I mean you hadn't a decent kind of life; now you have this--quite a good little house really, you're Ian's wife, and he's been your lover--well, that's more than I've ever had!'

'Oh, no!' Jean breathed softly. 'Not more--much less--you've had his very soul! And you've had your children as well, Beatrice--you've really had a "life"!'

Beatrice gave a faintly amused laugh. '*You* can have Reggie's children, my dear,' she asserted, 'as many as you like!' She hesitated for a moment as if her jesting words had raised up a new and perhaps valuable suggestion; but for a moment she decided not to use it, and fell back on her former thought.

'We couldn't,' she explained in a softened tone, almost as if she were excusing herself to Jean, 'make conditions before your marriage. It all came so quickly with Char dying--dying, as it seemed, almost to make it--and I really don't think that I'd thought out properly what I could stand and what I couldn't. Nor had he; he only wanted--to be nice. But we were managing beautifully till this cropped up! We had a feeling that as you're awfully sensitive and not a bit stupid really--I'd never have risked it with another girl--that you'd guess for yourself what we felt, and if an accident like this *did* happen, that you'd try to put it right!'

'If there were to be conditions,' Jean said quietly, 'they should have been put to me before any accidents could happen. That worst accident of our marriage could have been avoided, for instance, if I had only known. Even after it--I wouldn't ever have insisted--I couldn't have--what was it you said?--"forced" a child on Ian. But there isn't only Ian to think about now, or only you--there's the child. You're a mother, Beatrice, you *know* I can't take away a life that's mine to protect!'

'Nonsense!' said Beatrice brusquely. 'Don't you suppose that heaps of mothers do it for one reason or another? I gave Reggie his children because I simply had to--there was the title and the place. And Oliver wasn't born till after the two girls. So you can see for yourself! Your own case is quite different. Ian doesn't want a child.'

Jean hesitated. 'I'm taking it out of your lives,' she said after a moment's pause, 'he need never see it. You can't ask more of me than that!'

Beatrice withdrew the hard sparkle of her eyes from Jean's face. She sat very still with her head bent a little, her eyes cast down. The rain dropped from her rough tweeds onto the carpet, but she took no notice of it. She seemed to be trying to find some way which would transcend argument. At last her lips curved, in a sudden sidelong smile, she looked up at Jean, the amusement deepening in her eyes. 'Go if you must,' she said at last, 'but take Reggie with you! He's dying to go--and he'll see you through! I'll divorce him at once--and this time he proposes to marry you! No one can say that I'm not being fair! I'll

give up Windlestraws. I'll turn out with the children, bag and baggage--and go off to some little foreign place like Anna Karenina--and as soon as you're married we'll get married too! You must admit that I've thought of everything--even of mother's feeling, because once I've divorced Reggie, we shall be perfectly free!'

The rigidity went out of her figure. She threw back her head and laughed, her beauty bloomed again, and her oblivion of the physical world vanished. 'Good Heavens!' she exclaimed, glancing with dismay at the pool her dripping clothes had made. 'Why on earth didn't you tell me! I've ruined your carpet! But it won't matter--when you get Windlestraws! You'll have everything then, Jean--the place--Reggie--the child! Don't you see how you'll have scored all round?'

Jean put her hand up to her throat as if she felt suddenly an impediment to breathing. When she spoke at last her words came slowly, with little pauses between them.

'But I don't love Reggie! Not like that! It's not his child! Why must I have all the things I don't want thrust upon me, because I can't have the only thing I do?'

'It's surely wiser to have something!' Beatrice explained kindly, 'you're so terribly unpractical, my dear! It's ridiculous to say you don't *want* Windlestraws! It's the finest place in the County! And I'm almost shocked sometimes to see how fond you've grown of Reggie! You've been on his side ever since that visit to London! If you have such a strong maternal instinct, too, you must like to see how well you'll be providing for your child!' The sudden way Beatrice veered from a desire to murder her unborn child to partially endowing it with Reggie's property took Jean's breath away. It was even more unnerving to see that Beatrice hadn't made this magnificent gesture until she had to. If she could have achieved her purpose by appealing to Jean's better nature, she would have kept Windlestraws. Jean controlled herself after a short struggle, she didn't want to dash the triumph out of Beatrice's eyes, but she couldn't let her go on thinking that everything was happily settled.

'Does Ian see it as you do?' she asked at last. 'Is it his feeling, I mean, that by running away with Reggie, I should be fixing everything comfortably up? It seems to me, you know, so awfully like that other plan which he didn't like!'

Beatrice considered this objection, but only to dismiss it, reassuringly. 'Oh, no, my dear!' she explained, 'it's quite different now! You're married, you see--and divorce, at this time of day, practically hurts nobody! Of course it wouldn't be the same if I couldn't assure you that Reggie would see you through--that, you see, alters everything! Why, it would be the making of you!'

'And Ian,' Jean persisted, 'he thinks it would be the making of me too?'

Beatrice looked grave. 'I can't pretend,' she said after a slight pause, 'that

Ian sees things as clearly as I do. But he'll see this, no doubt, in time; once it has really happened! But I shouldn't, you know, have felt at liberty to breathe a word to him about it, until I had talked it all out thoroughly with you!'

There was a faint shade of rebuke in Beatrice's voice, as if she felt that Jean had overlooked a point of honour.

'I see,' Jean said reflectively, 'and you think he'll like it! Well--if he likes it--if he comes to me himself, and asks me to do it--why, then, Beatrice, I'll do it! As you said just now, I'm almost shockingly fond of Reggie! I think I'd rather put up with the fact that I'm not *quite* shockingly so, than fail Ian again! I should know, you see, this time what he really wanted. As you say, he doesn't always know it himself quite clearly! But supposing that you're wrong and that he doesn't like this plan! You must both set me free! I'm sure my father will look after me till my baby is born.'

Beatrice rose to her feet; her face showed that she was slightly disgusted; it was as if she had had reluctantly to admit to herself that Jean was common, after all. 'You know quite well,' she said coldly, 'that Ian will never *ask* you! He might be deeply, deeply thankful if you did it, thankful for the rest of his life! But men like Ian don't ask their wives to run away with other men in order to free them! If you choose to be silly and expect the impossible, you'll lose the chance of a lifetime, both for yourself and for your child! I advise you to think it over carefully before you throw it away! I don't say anything about your friendship for me--that, of course, would quite go by the board!' Beatrice stood for a long moment looking down at Jean, who had not risen with her.

It struck Jean suddenly, though she felt no sense of panic, that she was in grave physical danger. Beatrice's strong, well-shaped hands twitched once and then were still.

Her implacable eyes burned through the misty light; they seemed to be devouring Jean's body, as if to pierce through the flesh and destroy the secret life nature had set there. 'Good-bye,' she said without moving. 'I don't suppose I shall see you again! It's very odd how I've always liked you! I do still in a way, though you've ruined my life! For of course you know as well as I do what will happen if you insist on going off alone? Ian will leave me! In some ways he's as great a sentimentalist as you are! After all, it's only Reggie and I who see things as they really are!' Beatrice waited for a moment, as if she still felt it incredible that the strength of her own will should prove powerless against so insignificant an enemy.

But Jean said no more. For the last time she watched, fascinated, the beautiful head turn slowly away from her, the erect and gallant figure pass in silence out of the shadowy room. Her lips moved to call Beatrice back; but they had no strength left to speak; and after all, what could she say? That she loved Beatrice and would always think of her with love? But that would have

been what Beatrice meant by being sentimental. The only kind of love which Beatrice was prepared to accept from Jean as real would have been if Jean agreed to do what Beatrice wished. This doing what Beatrice wished had been their whole relation--and as the door closed behind Beatrice, the sound of it echoing through the empty house, Jean knew that it was over.

CHAPTER XXXVII

IAN stood at the garden gate hesitating to enter his own house.

He felt as if it was his no longer, nor was his wife his.

He had lost them, as a gambler might lose his whole fortune on the throw of a card. But the gambler expects the card to give him victory. Ian had not even had that excuse. He had lost everything; and he had expected nothing.

It was late, and all the lights were out, except one which still burned behind the curtains in his dressing-room.

Had one of the servants come upon the half-packed luggage and was she in mistaken zeal finishing the bitter business for him? Jean never entered his room now; she must be asleep. He hoped she would not wake before he left her. A wind from the moor blew the heather-scented air against his face. A pinched moon dragged her slatternly way through tattered clouds. As Ian thought of Jean her sweetness penetrated his heart--like the keen sweet air. At last he could let himself think of her with tenderness.

He was clear of his consuming passion for Beatrice; even her beauty stirred him no more.

But the price he had paid for this victory was great. He could not look Jean in the face again.

He remembered how on the day of the Armistice he had said to Reggie: 'God, I thought Hell was over once you were out of it, but I'm hanged if it isn't worse in one's mind, than when we were in it!' His passion for Beatrice was like that--it was only now that it was over that he could see what it had done to him.

He crept like a thief into the house. There was no sound, only the light still shone in a long line beneath his dressing-room door.

He opened it cautiously--and saw Jean, sitting on a chair, his dressing-gown across her knees.

He stood for a moment with his back against the door as if she were an enemy. She turned quickly as she heard the click of the latch and tried to brush the tears from her eyes. 'No! No!' she said as if he had accused her of something.

'I'm not upset! Not really!'--but even as she spoke, sobs got the better of her, and shook her--so that he moved quickly forward and took her in his arms. For a moment she resisted him, and then he felt her hands clutch at his shoulders as if she were drowning.

He lifted her onto his bed, and she buried her face in the pillow so that he could not see her tears; but she let him keep her small clenched hand in his.

'It's all right,' he said soothingly. 'Good-byes are so stupid, that's why I

didn't tell you. I thought you wouldn't find out till I was gone--and then you'd be glad that we hadn't got to talk a lot of rubbish. I'm not worth crying about! You ought to know that by now!'

Jean listened silently to his words, but he saw that she wasn't paying much attention to them. She knew by now that he never used words to say what he felt; his feelings only showed--if he had to show them at all--when his words stopped.

'I meant to go away, you know,' she said after a little pause to regain her self-control, 'that's why I came in here--just to look round me--for the last time. It was seeing all your brushes and hair-washes and things----' her voice broke, but it went on again more firmly, before he had time to say anything: 'I didn't mean you to go away--like you did before--to China! I can be got rid of easier than that!'

'I know how easy you are to get rid of,' Ian said, trying to laugh, 'but you mustn't run away. This is your home--running away is distinctly my business. If you're dull here or want a change, my sister Cicely would love to put you up--I fancy she's coming over in a day or two, to propose it. I'm not going away to be rid of you either, but to be rid of something quite different--or rather because I am rid of it; and I'm not coming back.'

He stopped, and turned his head away from her. It was intolerable to him to see the violent beating of her heart. A girl has to take the breaking of her marriage hard, he reminded himself, but it was done now--it was broken. She'd feel better after a bit; this talk, which he had meant for both their sakes to avoid, must be got through as lightly as possible.

Fortunately he could count on Cicely; she disliked the people at Windlestraws and would stand by his wife.

He couldn't himself stand by her; not even her tears could shake his pride.

He released the small clenched hand; and took a chair at some distance from the bed. The thing was to get her as soon as possible on to plans; and stick to them.

'I could go to my father's,' Jean began again in a low steady voice. 'I think I'd rather! I'd be better there, wouldn't I? I've always liked work; and then you could come back here--and it would be all right. Reggie, I mean--wouldn't mind--so much as he used to!'

'Reggie wouldn't care a damn,' Ian pleasantly agreed. 'The only person he cares for in the world now is you--and is likely to remain so. I quite think, you know, that you can count on that. Unfortunately--or perhaps fortunately if you're at all a stickler for morality--although the coast is clear, nobody wants to land on it. Beatrice and I happen to be through with each other.'

Ian spoke with determined lightness to shake the intensity with which Jean listened. He longed to lean forward and turn her hidden face towards him; but

he could no more have forced her to look at him than he could force himself to show her what he felt for her.

'You've been angry with her again!' Jean whispered; 'you've quarrelled, Ian?'

Ian was silent for a moment. He had wanted not to speak of his parting with Beatrice. He thought of her as a man half dead from torture thinks of the room in which the rack still stands. But he meant to answer whatever Jean chose to ask him. He owed her that; he could not alter facts, he could not reveal his feelings, but he could speak the truth.

'It's not exactly a quarrel,' he said slowly. 'I dare say it's what often happens when a thing has gone on too long. One realizes quite suddenly that one has had awfully little pleasure in return for the pain one has dealt out all round. And then some point comes up--a plan or an idea, and the disagreement one felt all along is seen to be mortal. Nothing can bridge it; nothing can restore the--whatever it was--which used to cover all the points of difference. One doesn't, in speaking of the woman one has loved, want to be a beast--but too many people have been involved in our little affair. You and Reggie--Char, and in a sense the children. I see now that it is what has estranged Oliver from his father. I suppose I saw these things before--but never quite so clearly. When one has gone further than one's conscience--however poor a one--will let one go, one suddenly finds one wants to back out--to be done with the whole business. I don't say it's very creditable--this last disloyalty. I am only trying to tell you how it has happened. I can't go on. The thing--whatever it was between Beatrice and myself--is over.'

'But she,' Jean protested, raising herself at last from the pillow and facing Ian, 'she doesn't feel as you do--for her it's *not* over?'

'Well----' Ian admitted with a rueful smile, 'her conscience doesn't happen to have broken down; she tells me it's a perfectly good one. But I'm not so lucky. I've done the worst I could let myself do--and I can't go on.'

Jean was silent for a moment, then she said vehemently: 'She loves you! She can't *see* anything else but you! You ought to understand that, Ian!'

'I don't think I appreciate the word love any more,' Ian said reflectively. 'It's made me kill Char. It's given Reggie ten years of Hell. I won't go into what it's made me do to you. Of course you have every right to say that it was I who made myself do these things--in a sense it was--but what does a man do, that's wholly himself, when he's madly in love?'

'But she's mad, too,' Jean pleaded; she fixed her eyes, which were very grave and a little reproachful, upon his own.

'I think that's where we rather disagree,' Ian answered, after a brief pause. 'Beatrice has steered clear of madness. She made it perfectly clear to me long ago, that though she would willingly deceive Reggie, she'd never give up the

children or Windlestraws. That rather brought things to a deadlock. Still, I saw her point. She is a good mother. Now she wants me to make a fresh departure--we needn't, I think, go into her new plan--but it's no longer possible for me even to see it; and what is more--because of it--I can't see her any more as I used to see her.'

'Yes--but that's *her* madness!' Jean persisted eagerly. 'You've had your kind and she's had hers! You must remember she doesn't care for Reggie--or for me--as you do! So she disposes of us much more easily--and in a way that shocks you! But she can't help that! After all, she might have thought of worse ways of getting rid of us!'

'Perhaps she might,' Ian agreed with a faint smile. 'Please don't think I judge her. When a man's asked his wife to kill their child, and hasn't a shred of honour left, he's hardly in a position to lay down the moral law to his accomplice! Have it any way you like! It's what I've done, because I've loved her, that's ruined my feeling for her. You can't remake feeling. I know that I've been a brute all round--it's really as a brute, you know, that I'm going away. I only wanted you to know that it wasn't entirely as a brute, since I mean never to come back.' He turned his head away from Jean, but he was not sure that even not seeing her would keep his heart safe. Lightness hadn't--bitterness hadn't. She seemed incapable of stopping short at the only barriers he could put up between them.

'What you said to me--that time,' Jean went on inexorably, '*can't* count. Because even then I half knew you didn't mean it! It was for her you spoke! For her you had to say you didn't want it! You *had* to stand by her! Perhaps you might have seen even then that she hadn't the right to ask it--it was only your not having had anything, which made you cruel and blind. I couldn't have seen this before we were married--but I can see it now! She's been here and I know exactly how she feels! She was angry when she came--perhaps you had made her angry--but she went away without unkindness!'

Jean stopped abruptly, something in the sick distaste of his bowed head made it impossible for her to tell him any more about Beatrice. The best she could find to say of her only seemed to drive his disgust deeper into his heart.

'It's only I then,' Ian said after a long pause, 'who have done you harm; and even I don't seem to have brought it off as thoroughly as might have been expected. May we stop talking of what we feel now, and look up trains and things?'

'No,' said Jean with unexpected firmness, waving aside even the hint of insolence he had tried to bring into his voice, 'we can't be such cowards as to talk about trains yet--we've got to finish finding out where we all are! You say you've done with Beatrice, but isn't that only part of the same thing--the madness--which makes you both, because you can't belong to each other, strike

out all round? If you could, if there was a way now, to-morrow, which would free you both to belong to each other, wouldn't you take it? Wouldn't you be *glad* to take it?'

Ian looked at her at last, with a long deliberate look, as if he dared her to take from his eyes anything but their deep repudiation.

'I don't want that kind of freedom any more,' he said drily. 'You see, having admired Beatrice all my life rather too much, I now no longer admire her quite as much as you do.' When he had finished speaking, he dropped his eyes, took out a cigarette with his usual deliberation, lit it, and leaned back in his chair. She would have thought that he had no further interest in the discussion if she had not seen his hand shake as he lit the cigarette.

'I wish,' Jean said quietly, 'that you weren't so angry! Then you could tell me the truth. I don't mean about what you've said--I mean about what you *really* want! If you're blinding yourself, you see, you may blind me, and I particularly don't want to be blinded just at this moment.'

'I am not angry with you,' Ian answered her, without moving his eyes from the floor, 'nor am I nearly as blind as you think. I know very well what I want; but I'm not quite in a position to ask for it. That's why I am going away.' His quietness suddenly broke down; with a quick impatient movement he sprang to his feet, and threw his unfinished cigarette out of the open window.

He stood for a while with his back to Jean, looking into the windy darkness.

He couldn't, Jean knew, see Windlestraws, even if there had been light enough, but he was looking towards it.

'I'm in your life,' she reminded him at last, 'but I needn't stay in it; and I could free Beatrice, so that in the end all these horrors and muddles--the things you've had to say and the things she's wanted you to do--would fade out of your mind and leave only her! Remember, she isn't like the things she's done! If she'd ever been happy, she would have been what she'd like to be--awfully straight and generous, awfully kind and true! She's had so much power and yet she's never really had her own way; it's broken in her hands--and that's why she's broken other people! If there was a way out--a way she could accept, she'd be different! She'd be what you've always thought her--what I thought she was, when I saw her first in the rose-garden! And Ian, what I want you to see is, that there *is* a way out!' She paused.

Ian turned back from the window and looked across at her.

'What way?' he asked curtly, 'and what do you mean by "out"? Out of what do you suppose I want to get?'

'Out of our marriage,' Jean's steady voice went on, 'out of your being bound to Reggie--and to me! It's different from the other plan, because we needn't tell lies now. Reggie would take me away quite openly and stand the divorce.

Beatrice, too, would give up Windlestraws. She could keep the children because, you see, if we go off first--she'd have the right to keep them--and I'd have the right'--for the first time her voice faltered, but she went on after a brief pause, 'I'd have the right to keep this--other child.'

'You've got a perfect right to do it,' Ian said in a strained bitter voice. 'I should not dream of making any protest. I've always told you that Reggie was the better man.'

Jean held his eyes with hers. 'You're cruel!' she said at last. 'You know whom I like!' His pride broke down under her deep accusing eyes.

'How can I know what you like!' he said desperately. 'How can I *dare* to know it? I've all but killed you! Do you suppose I've been blind--all these weeks? I've starved and robbed you--I've given you nothing but my damned empty name! Why should I grudge you to a man who's been the best thing in my life and yours!'

'I don't think so!' Jean said breathlessly. 'He's good--but he isn't better! And if he were I shouldn't care! I don't want to go away with Reggie--I want to go away with you!'

Ian flung himself down by Jean's side and buried his head against her breast with an inarticulate moan.

She knew now what he wanted.

But even as she held her lover close to her heart, the sense of other wants which could not be assuaged laid hold of her.

She saw Windlestraws with its mortal wound unstaunched. Reggie's questing eyes, forever unsatisfied, gazed back at her; and the vision of Beatrice, standing alone in the rose-garden, came between her and the passionate pressure of Ian's lips.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Windlestraws* by Phyllis Bottome]