MY NAME IS LEGION

CHARLES MORGAN

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“He is the true Saint . . .
Who requireth thee not to close the doors,
To hold the breath, and renounce the world:
Who maketh thee perceive the Supreme Spirit
Wherever the mind resteth:
Who teacheth thee to be still amidst all thine activities:
Who, ever immersed in bliss, having no fear,
Keepeth the spirit of union thro’out all enjoyments.”

—Kabir.

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Two old men and a youth with light fluff on his chin and lips sat under the sign of *The Three Faithful Men*. In the doorway, divided from them by a space of weed-pricked gravel, stood Jim, the ostler, wearing a waistcoat of black and yellow stripes and a soiled apron tucked up into its own strings. Parts of the waistcoat had belonged to Jim's grandfather, and still Jim wore it, for the sake of his grandfather's tradition, though its yellow was dulled and its pocket-rims frayed with age and ridged with continual mendings. That grandfather had been an ostler indeed. *The Three Faithful Men* had been a posting-house in his day, set conveniently on the edge of the road from London to the north. Now the stables held only a shaggy pony, and none came to the inn but stragglers from Dedwick on the south side of the Great Lake, or such villagers of Flare Royal as sat now beneath the sign. Jim hungered for romance in a mournful world. How he despised the Dedwick race-gangs with their bowlers and binoculars and blue lips! How he hated the pompous, veiled women who swept by him sometimes in their motor-cars, goggled and owl-like! No swish of silk, no spray of lace; no coat-of-arms, no pistol. All that was left to speak of what once had been was Flare Manor set on the hill above Flare Royal, and the Flare family—who had in truth a spark of the devil in them yet—and the Flare buttons, whose heraldry was worn smooth, on the waspish waistcoat.

Jim stared at his three guests—Crawley, who talked for ever of racing and was for ever afraid to bet; Gurge, with his tight-stretched parchment-face and white Saturday stubble, bent up in his chair like an earwig with a broken back; and young Fish—Jim spat out his disgust for young Fish—who was the contempt of the girls, with his dull, hungry eyes. And, turning from so unpleasing a spectacle, Jim saw, far away down the road at the sweep round Dedwick Lake, a shadow, a dark shadow, an outline—a horseman. God, how he rode! There was no mistaking such riding. It did the heart good.

"There!" said Jim. "There's Master Rory."

The others twisted slowly in their seats. The earwig inclined his body towards the road, for Fish's shoulder cut his vision.

"Aye," said Gurge, flashing his pewter pot at the reddening sun, "that'll be the young Flare without a doubt."

"Rides as 'e were comin' out o' hell, not Dedwick," Crawley answered. "But 'e's an eye to horse-flesh—I'll say that; though 'e do treat 'is own beast bad."

“Was ’er’ ever a Flare that hadn’ an eye to all flesh—beast or woman?” Gurge piped. “An’ was ’er’ ever a Flare that didn’ treat ’em bad?”

“Still the women they do run a’ter ’em, so it seem. There’s the parson’s daughter, years gone. They do say Mr. Flare’s father stripped her naked in the full sunshine an’ dropped ’er, head down, in the Lake. An’ she still run a’ter ’em. . . . That’s but a tale may be.”

“Tell us’t!” said Fish, and, as Crawley knocked out his pipe in growing silence: “They be crool, the Flares, wi’ no right respect for the People.”

“That’ll be the cycle-makers in Dedwick learned ’e that, boy,” said Gurge. “Heh, heh, heh—an’ ye’ll stand up when he come like the rest o’ us that’s older.”

The white horse was near them now, the gallop breaking to a trot. A young man waved a salute to them as they rose round their tankards, and thrust his feet home in his stirrups as he drew rein. Jim came running to him with a pot flecked with amber foam.

“Crawley . . . Gurge . . .” he said, taking breath. “Why, Fish! You in love again?”

The youth’s sheepishness was not lessened by this attention drawn to it.

“No, Master Rory.”

The three of them sat down.

“I hear ye’ll have a sister or brother afore long, Master Rory,” Gurge said.

“Half-sister or half-brother. My mother’s a Flare no longer, Gurge.”

“So. . . . Penny, ’t’ll be, then.”

“Pennell’s the name.”

“Pennell. . . . Aye. . . .”

Rory Flare handed his empty tankard to Jim and ran a scarlet handkerchief across his forehead.

“I’ll be getting home,” he said.

Gathering up his reins, he threw a friendly, laughing glance at Jim, who had been standing at the horse’s head with a look of almost mystical devotion in his eyes, and rode away.

The drinkers sat in silence while Jim’s retreating footsteps crunched in the gravel. When the striped waistcoat had at last disappeared and a jangle of rings told that the parlour-curtains were being shaken of dust—a habit of Jim’s when he needed action to kill thought—Fish gathered up a handful of pebbles and let them drop, one by one, through his fingers on to his leather gaiters.

“All that money an’ time his own,” he grumbled.

There was a pause before the others followed his trend. Then Gurge said: “Young Flare?”

“Aye.”

“What’d ye do wi’t if it was yourn, Fish?”

Fish dropped three pebbles—then the remainder, and ground them fiercely underfoot.

“Never you mind.”

Gurge tapped the beer-mug with his nail. “This?”

“No.”

“Or worse?”

“Never you mind,” Fish repeated angrily. “But I don’ see why the like o’ him should have all so easy.”

“Ye’d live in Flare Manor maybe?”

The youth glanced up as if he had been unexpectedly trapped, but he did not answer. The gaze of the three was turned—with a quick, almost furtive movement—towards the Manor, dark among trees on the north hill like an eye set deep beneath a heavy brow. At last, by common consent, as men who would let a subject drop, they came back to their tankards. Crawley swilled round his golden dregs.

“They be like a little world o’ their own, the Flares,” he said, nodding. “An’ now ’er’s a strange mite comin’ to ’em—wi’ naught o’ the Flare blood.”

The thought sank into their minds as they sat without speech or movement; but, the silence lying coldly on him, Gurge murmured at last:

“Aye, aye, they be earthy stock. The Lord Christ Himself’d stan’ long knockin’ at that door.”

Fish parted his lips to laugh at a blasphemy, but, suddenly shy, let them come together again. Solemn old fools. . . . Solemn old fools. What had come to them? . . . How—how dark it was! he found himself saying in his mind—dark, how dark! Always that word.

He stood up and shivered in the late sunshine.

CHAPTER TWO

FROM her high south window Elspeth Clear watched the evening thicken over Dedwick Vale. Below her the carriage-sweep was so darkened that the polished gravel shone no more, and the stone vases that crowned each flight of the terrace-steps no longer displayed their flutings. To her left, the path that led behind the Manor to the hills twisted into wooded gloom; to her right, where ash and elm stooped over the drive and hid the gates, the branches had acquired already that clearness of outline, that strange air of sleeping erect, which the approach of night lent to them in calm weather. Only to the south, beyond the vases and falling terraces, day survived chill-gold among the pasturage.

Elspeth folded the stockings she had been darning and added them to the heap of mending that was her afternoon's work. Then, gathering together the silks and scissors on the varnished table, she packed them deliberately into a basket which creaked as she pressed down the lid and ran a white-wood stick through its wicker fastening. Light had failed: her task was done. Soon, before her own supper, she must go to her mistress's room and make sure that Angela had drawn the curtains and put a candle near at hand. But she did not need to go yet. She might sit a little while in the security of her own four walls—her brown hands folded over her apron, her back straight, her eyes bright and observant of her thought.

Presently, with a pang of regret, she heard footsteps approach her door and the loose brass handle clink as it was turned. Still she did not move, but sat staring at the misty face of her clock, which, as she now realized for the first time, had ceased to tick. When at last she turned her head, she saw, so close to her that light hair brushed her forehead, a girl who stood with her heels raised from the ground, her slim body bent forward in inquiry.

"Oh, Mrs. Clear, I thought you must be asleep: you were so still against those panes."

"No, Angela. I heard you coming a long way off. And I heard your silks rustle as you crossed my room. Why do you waste your money on such things?"

"That's for me to choose. . . . Besides, it isn't a waste, not if I enjoy it."

"It's out of place."

"In a servant, you mean? Not in a lady's maid. . . . Besides, I'm different from most. The kitchen isn't my place."

The elder woman stood up. "It's where you live," she said.

Angela shot a glance of distrust from under her heavy lashes. “Oh, you’re hard, Mrs. Clear; or at least you pretend to be. You aren’t really. It’s different for you living in this house; you’re older; it doesn’t matter so much to you. But I like gay things and a show of an evening—not cooped up day in and day out with an invalid lady in a place like Flare. Look!” Her face was close to the window. “This hill! And in the valley that dull lake. Flare Royal—the dirty village—and that three miles away. And, on the far side, Dedwick and more hills. And, west, more hills again. No opening anywhere except to the east, and that takes you to the sea. What’s the use of it to a girl, anyway?”

Elspeth joined her at the window. Dedwick Lake, which was her mind’s background to all the incidents of the Sea of Galilee, lay quiet now, the evening stretched over it in peace; but she knew well its dark anger in storm-time and its frothing response to an east wind. The North Sea gales would sweep through the vale unchecked till the western ridge threw them skyward, and the lake, writhing within its limits, would be lashed into foam which—perhaps by virtue of the hill’s shadowy influence—seemed more green than white.

“There’s no cause for any young girl to stay in Flare Manor unless she choose,” said Elspeth abruptly. “There are other situations you could have, and more girls who would come here.”

“There’s the mistress to look after.”

Elspeth answered in a dry voice, unnaturally even: “I’ve looked after her, poor thing, for close on twenty years. I dressed her for her first ball. I dressed her for her wedding to Richmond Flare, and I was with her when Master Rory was born. And through the years when Richmond Flare—anyway, I brought her the news when he lay dead over his port-wine. . . . Then wasn’t it I that took her right away from this place, thank God, and stayed with her and Rory till his grandfather took the wild thing away to educate after his own lights? We were alone together then, till she took Mr. Pennell, one year gone by. I thought it was all coming right then—or so I told myself.”

“Was he different from the Flares—gentler, I mean?”

Elspeth answered slowly: “Different from the Flares! Half Russian, he was.” And she added with a sigh: “He didn’t like hunting, you know.”

“Then why——”

“Because Mr. Flare cares for no one who does not hunt, and Mr. Pennell, for her sake, wanted to take grip on Rory again. She loves Rory for all his devilment. She couldn’t abide the thought of her son becoming as his

grandfather is. So Mr. Pennell tried to win the old man over by hunting with him. Mr. Pennell could ride, but not like Mr. Flare."

"Mr. Flare's not old—not sixty yet," Angela said defensively.

"He's Rory's grandfather."

"May be—but not old. Rory's not nineteen. Mr. Flare rides like a young man—James said so."

"Young enough," said Elspeth, "to ride my darling's husband to his death. I remember them bringing him in. They dumped him in the hall. Mr. Flare stood over him—waiting for the mistress to come down—two pups sniffing at his gaiters."

"Mr. Flare looks fine when he's come in from hunting."

"The Flares look fine always—Richmond Flare, and now Rory with his easy, swaggering walk. There'll be good girls to waste on Rory before he's done."

Angela's lips parted in a full, defiant smile; but she held back the words she would have spoken, and substituted for them: "That can't have been long before I came."

"No; and, soon after, she knew about this child coming. That will be two husbands and two children I've seen her through. She was scarce more than a child herself that night of her first ball—before ever a Flare came into it. . . . I can see her through what's left, young lady, if you'd be going from Flare."

"But she wants me," said Angela, and because Elspeth stood with unmoving lips, she went on: "She wants me because I'm pretty and young. They like young and pretty things when a baby's coming. . . . Besides, I do care for her—not like you do, perhaps—but I do care for her all the same. I'd be sorry for any woman who'd seen what she's seen. Men are queer animals."

"There!" Elspeth exclaimed after a pause, picking up her work-basket and thrusting it into a cupboard. "Lord bless you, child! Love my poor lady if you will, and stay if she wants you. But don't forget, when shutting-up time comes, to draw her curtains close and put a candle at her elbow. . . . I'll go to her now, before my supper."

"No, she doesn't want you. She sent me to say so."

"Not want me?"

"Not now. She's strange to-night." Angela pressed her hands against her hot cheeks. "I was quite glad to get away."

Elspeth came close, so that in the gloom she might see the girl's eyes.

"What's the matter with her, that you were glad to get away?"

"Nothing—oh, nothing at all. Only silent—you know how. . . . She said the house was so still in this calm weather that she couldn't bear to eat alone. So you're not to go yet; but later she wants you to take your supper with her. I think she doesn't like to hear Mr. Flare and the company laughing over their wine whenever the dining-room door is open and the sound gets upstairs. She turns round on me sometimes and says: 'Wasn't that Mr. Rory's laugh?' "

"Then I can go to her now till her supper comes up," Elspeth said. "Perhaps you'd tell Mrs. Lugg I shall not be in her room, and ask her to have a tray sent to me?"

"The mistress doesn't want you now."

"She said so?"

"Yes; she wants to think, she said."

"Is she worried about something?"

"Aren't they usually fretting when their time is near?"

"That may be. . . . Why can't you answer a plain question? So pert you are! Is she fretted about anything particular? You see," Elspeth continued, regretting her impatience, "she has never wanted me to eat with her before."

"I don't know. How should I know? P'rhaps there's something she's going to tell you. . . . Though you are a curious thing, I must say!" Angela swung round in search of a mirror, her fingers raised to her hair. "What a horrid, dark, scrubby little room this is! I wonder how ever you live here." She struck a match and lighted two candles in sticks of blue china. "Weren't you ever a girl, Mrs. Clear?

> "Weren't you ever a girl?
> Didn't you take your chance,
> Before the devil could dance on you,
> To lead the devil a dance?

"Weren't you ever a girl——"

She stopped her singing to laugh, not unkindly, into the grave face looking down at her.

"I ought to be smacked, Mrs. Clear? That's what you're thinking, isn't it? . . . And your looking-glass is cracked and horrid. . . . But I enjoy life anyway while I can. And now I'm going."

The candlelight went out of her soft hair as she moved to the door; and there, tiptoe, leaning forward as when Elspeth had first seen her, though the

colour was warm now in her flushed cheeks, she chanted again in a teasing singsong:

> “Weren’t you ever a girl?
> Didn’t you take your chance,
> Before the devil could dance on you,
> To lead the devil a dance—
> Mrs. Clear—
> To lead the devil a dance?”

When she was alone, Elspeth stood with her arms straight at her sides, staring in the direction of the latch’s click. Presently, with dry lips, she blew out Angela’s candles and sat rigid in the darkness.

CHAPTER THREE

WITH her lips still moving silently to her taunting catch and her thoughts far away, Angela went at once to Rory's sitting-room. There, opening the door, she found the blinds drawn. One lighted lamp stood on a table near the windows. Tinted by a shade of deep red and dragons, it cast down its bright circle on to a cloth bestrewn with coloured books and newspapers, which gave an impression, not of separate entities gathered together, but somehow of a gaudy patchwork, a collective dog's-ear. A silver lion, which was an inkstand, crouched over a smeared blotting-pad, and a network of shadows fell from the pens stuck between the paws. Diagonally across the pad lay a crop. A pair of riding-boots, one erect, one drooping sideways with an air of spinal fracture, stood near a Chesterfield, which had been dragged, with an upturning of rugs, across the fire-place. And from over the Chesterfield's bulging upholstery Angela saw at last Rory's eyes quietly regarding her.

He lay prone, so that she could see no more of him than those eyes and his high forehead slashed by a triangular wedge of hair. She knew then the pressure of the floor through her thin-soled shoes and the touch of her skirt's stuff against her hands. Why didn't he speak, having, as she knew, so much to say to her? Why did he keep her waiting there like a servant, so curiously conscious even of the very act of standing? Why did he keep her waiting like a paid servant? She was no paid servant of his—nor would be! She would take no orders from him.

"Well?" he said. "Well, Angela?"

For a moment her message forsook her. Then, with an eager breath that came near to choking her:

"She doesn't want to disturb you to come to see her to-night. I was to say good night to you for her."

"You mean my mother—Mrs. Pennell? You don't speak with a great respect."

"Respect for you! And after the things you've said!"

Her defiance was gone from her in a moment, leaving her uneasy. Rory swung himself on to his knees, stretched his arms, and yawned. A blue dressing-gown slid back from hairy wrists.

"Well, come and say good night from your own self—though there's an hour and a half to dinner. I can't see you over there." She advanced to within a yard of him. "And now I can't reach you. . . ." But, because she made no

further movement, he smiled and went on: “There’s a timid bird! All right! It’s like a nun’s cloak—madly becoming.”

“I’m not here to be teased,” she said weakly.

“No, no, no.”

She knew that thickening of tone, that rapidity of speech which made a voice somehow like a trembling, eager hand. Even Fish—the pale clown—had dared to speak thus. All men did sometimes. And, the corners of her mouth drawn up slowly by her knowledge, she smiled, scarcely of her own will, and quivered inwardly, like a small-leafed tree seen through waves of heat.

“Listen,” he was saying. “Doesn’t this cramped, yellow place shut you in, too? The scent and cleanness of my mother’s room like a cloister and a grave. And we might colour it all so easily. . . . You want me. You do want me. Your eyes are wet for me now. You stand there because you’re afraid to come near—just afraid. Oh, it’s such a waste of hours!”

“I’m not afraid. You’re only a boy still.”

“You make me mad.”

“Because you think too much. You imagine things.”

He smiled. “Oh, I know well enough nothing can fill your mind as mine is filled. You’ll pass always from day to day, not caring much. You’re lazy and sweet. You make me think of flowers shaking after a bee has gone—passive and waiting in the sun—always in the sun.”

“In the sun! In this dark place! Oh, you *do* imagine things!”

“Never mind. How you wander! Answer me.”

“What?” His hands were coming out at her. She took a pace back and put up her arms across her breast as a shield. “No—not kiss me—you mustn’t.”

“I have before,” he said with a boy’s embarrassment, staring at her beyond his reach.

“Do you know,” she said impetuously, “—do you know that they think I am—what you want—already?”

“Who?”

“That boy Fish does.”

“He’s jealous!”

“Oh, yes, he’s jealous.” She laughed. “He’s so like you.” And she laughed again. “They think because you’re a Flare—and you nineteen—you must have a girl. Oh, it’s funny!”

“Well, they’re wrong.”

“Yes”—smiling.

“What am I to do? Angela, don’t be a fool. You’re only playing.”

She bent her head towards her right shoulder.

“I like you there,” she said, “—like a wild beast in its cage. There—my hands, you can have them. Then I must go.”

He seized her fingers, then her wrists; dragged her to her knees beside the Chesterfield. In an instant his lips were at her throat, his eyes over the blur of her cheek—too close for focus.

“My darling, you must stop playing! Say you will . . . you will?”

He caught some word from her, and, encouraged: “To-night?”

She could not answer, but her hand went fluttering to his dark hair. At last, on thin breath, she said:

“Let me go now—oh, let me go.”

He released her at once. She sprang to her feet, hesitated an instant, then swayed across the darkness and was gone. He lay down again, his forehead pressed against the cording on his sleeve.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the room which Rory Flare had likened to a cloister and a grave, Mrs. Pennell sat with Elspeth at supper. It was not an abnormal room. Long and thin, its composure shocked a little by the effect of opposite mirrors, its height exaggerated by slim windows, it yet gave no suggestion of cold or gloom. But it had a certain austerity which, in truth a reflection of its occupant's hatred of violence, had been interpreted by Rory's passion as contempt for the colour of life. In his mother's room, he was conscious always of a sense of restraint, of a spiritual shyness, as if the essence of him were foreign to its atmosphere. What were his prides elsewhere took on here, so that he could not fail to recognize it, an air of worthlessness and brutality. He was conscious of a clumsiness within himself, as if he had stumbled, with a drunken song upon his lips, into a room where one lay dead.

Throughout supper Mrs. Pennell spoke little. From time to time she lay back in her chair, her breath coming quickly with her thought, but so lightly that her breast seemed without movement; and, though in such periods she was physically inert and allowed her white hands to droop from the arms of her chair, she did indeed wear an air of expectation, of anxious searching and wonder, as if, in withdrawing—and she was clearly withdrawn—from consciousness of her immediate surroundings, she had become immersed in realities which were to her more urgent and distressing than those of earth. Elspeth watched her narrowly, and fell to wondering, as she had wondered a thousand times, what had prompted a woman cast in such a mould to marry Richmond Flare. She pictured her mistress as she had been then, a girl of eighteen, not beautiful, but slim, fair-skinned and erect, with a panther's suppleness and much quickness of vision and emotion; and she allowed her eyes to rest long on the woman before her. Perhaps it was her instinctive clinging to the old days that influenced her thought, perhaps the change was greater than she knew; but, to her seeing, the girl in Mrs. Pennell had been marvellously preserved. A calmer dignity, a fine marking of the lines of care—these she perceived. And yet how like, how little damaged by all her bitter troubles! Elspeth thought. She nodded her head in slow wonder, counting the years.

Mrs. Pennell leaned back in her chair as if gathering strength to make some effort. Already she had decided to say to Elspeth what she had such desperate need to say to some living creature; but it was hard to begin. Though Elspeth was trustworthy and loyal, she would but partly understand.

Yet to Elspeth alone could she confide the child in her womb. There was none other she could trust in the grim world she was so soon to leave.

"Listen," she said suddenly. "To-night I'm going to take you forward twenty years. You'll be living then—sixty-five years old, but I shall not be here. . . . No, no, don't interrupt me. Don't treat me as a child. I'm not afraid of death—and I know. I know I shall die when my baby is born. My baby will be alone—in this earthy place. Think, Elspeth. . . ."

In the pause that followed, there came the sound of footsteps mounting the stairs, and of two voices, one rough and heavy-toned, the other quiet in answer. As the sound reached them, the two women looked quickly at each other, then at the door. Mrs. Pennell listened for a moment, her lips parted. Then, forcing herself into activity, she said:

"Lock it."

Elspeth hesitated. "It's Mr. Flare."

"Never mind. Lock it. I can't have him. . . . Ah! Oh, well, too late now."

She sank back at a knock, and, with eyes unnaturally wide open, watched the opening door. The candlelight was weak save on the supper-table, so that there were at first visible in the doorway only Urden Flare's white shirt-front and the shape of his face above it.

"I've brought Dr. Conrad to see you," he said.

Mrs. Pennell gave the doctor her hand. Then, turning from him, she said:

"What made you send for the doctor, Mr. Flare?"

"Didn't send for him, m'dear. He came."

"Not professionally——" Conrad began.

"Oh, no; not professionally," said Mr. Flare. "Came about a cow. I brought him in for a glass of sherry. Then I brought him up. . . . Why do you sit in the dark?"

"There are candles."

"Yes. I can see them. Still, it's as dark as a grave—eh, doctor?—dark as a grave. Have you no lamp?"

"There is a lamp," said Mrs. Pennell.

"The lamp is here, sir," said Elspeth, fingering it.

"Light it. The doctor can't see."

"So far as I'm concerned," Conrad said quickly, "I like the candlelight. I should be sorry to be a nuisance to Mrs. Pennell."

Elspeth stood still, not knowing what she should do. Her mistress, she knew, disliked the lamp; it was seldom lit. But Mrs. Pennell said nothing.

She lay motionless, regarding the scene from under lowered lids as if it were of no interest to her.

"Light it," said Mr. Flare.

"I think perhaps it would be as well if Mrs. Pennell were allowed to rest her eyes a little," Conrad said.

Mr. Flare glanced at him. "Go on, Mrs. Clear, do as I say."

The glass chimney tinkled against the brass. A match was struck and held tremblingly to the wick.

"Go on, woman; watch what you're doing. Don't gaze at me."

Presently the flame drew up.

"Good," said Mr. Flare, "that's better. Now, doctor, have a look at the patient. What do you think of her?"

It was spoken with a callousness that stirred the doctor to anger. He knew well this method of indirect bullying which Flare employed in the presence of others, and he knew, too, the long silences that were Mrs. Pennell's armour. She would not be lured to the protest which Flare would shout down with so much satisfaction. And Conrad, following her tactics, checked the words that were upon his lips. He ought to have kept out of this room altogether and risked Flare's anger, for the intention to annoy had been clear enough when the visit was first suggested. Yet Mrs. Pennell was so terribly a prisoner in a strange land that, even when his visits to her had been professional, he had felt that his mere presence had in some way brought her relief. He had talked little with her, for she had a habit of reserve; but none the less he believed that he, or indeed anyone not a servant or a Flare, was regarded by her, not perhaps as personally welcome, but with that kind of pathetic eagerness with which a boy, lonely in a great school, looks up at any visitor from the world outside his own. There had been times, too, when he had been almost afraid to leave her; when, having closed her door, he had paused on his way downstairs and, looking into the stone-paved hall, had thought of how she must lie there companionless, shut in.

He disposed of Flare's question, "What do you think of her?" by saying that he thought she looked a little tired, and would, perhaps, rather be left alone; and, she replying only by a slight shake of the head and a gentle smile at his embarrassment, he continued to watch her and to wonder what thought was passing through that quiet forehead, shaded by her hair.

Then suddenly, tempted to mischief and to the mystification of old Flare, she said deliberately:

"When you came in, Mr. Flare, I was talking to Elspeth of the future. We don't often look forward, she and I."

“You ought to look forward. You’re young enough,” Flare said. “That’s your trouble, Sybil: you mope. That’s what makes you ill. I never look back, and I’m getting an old man now. This world’s good enough for me—good enough for most of us, eh, doctor?”

“It is certainly possible to think too little of it.”

“So I say. So I’m always telling her. Now Rory was on the right road to being brought up a fool when I got hold of him. But I shook it out of him. He’s different now.”

“He’s different now,” Mrs. Pennell said.

Mr. Flare looked at her inquisitively, suspicious of some unperceived meaning in her words. Deciding that at any rate she could have intended no compliment to the Flares, he retaliated as seemed fit: “God knows what she’ll make of this Pennell child—a saint, maybe. Bring up a boy to be a man, I say. Bring him up to sit his horse light and squarely.”

Mr. Flare had compared life to horsemanship: he had meant no more than that. But to Mrs. Pennell, who knew how he despised a fault in riding, his words seemed a taunt at the manner of her husband’s death in the hunting-field. That she could not endure. Conrad saw colour rise in bright patches to her cheeks, and her fingers pluck at the thin gold chain that hung from her neck. She raised herself in her chair and said:

“It is like you to make a jest of the dead.”

“The dead?”

“My husband. It was you who rode him to his death.”

“I——”

“Don’t dare to speak of him. You can say what you will of me or of my child. But of him—never.”

She sank back. Conrad saw that Flare was amazed, that he had indeed not intended this thrust which had pierced her. But he would not seem to admit an error in himself. He would not explain or deny. Instead, accepting her interpretation of his words as if it had been his own, Flare said stubbornly:

“I shall say what I like. . . . You worshipped the man. You made a god of him. You thought him better than Richmond—better than any of us, didn’t you? Admit it. Don’t sit there staring at me with your great wide eyes. You don’t look as if you were alive. In that white stuff you wear you look as if you were sitting up in your coffin.”

She lay far back in her chair, her chin so raised that the lamplight was yellow on her throat, and her eyes moving in challenge. “Don’t move! Don’t

speak!" those eyes said. "Not a step nearer me. Take warning."

She was so like a wounded animal, her whole aspect from her tightly clenched hands to her parted lips was such an angry menace, that the three of them—the doctor, the servant and old Flare—could not turn away their eyes, or move, or speak. They stood waiting, grouped in stiff attitudes. For an instant there struck into Conrad's mind a fear that she would collapse—some fit would seize her, there would be an outbreak of foam on those dry lips, a twisting of the muscles, and then—— His responsibility—yes; but he could not move. He watched her eyes, travelling to and fro across their faces. Soon her gaze would come to rest and the tremendous energy that had strung her up so near to madness would focus upon one point. One of them would have to face that inquisition with what courage he could muster. The movement of her eyes became slow and more slow, and stopped.

Her arms, her hands did not move. Her body jerked forward only a few inches. But this advance, coupled with the intent fixity of her look, had the power of a great gesture to compel stillness and admiration. Free himself, Conrad glanced towards Flare. It was as if a spear had transfixed him. But now, the attack made and the first shock of it past, the old man was beginning to recover, and was moving his shoulders a little as if to make sure that all of him was not turned to stone.

"This child of mine," said Mrs. Pennell. "What will you do with her?"

"I shan't interfere."

"She'll be yours. I shall be dead—in the grave you talk of. Oh, yes! . . . And what will you do with her? Teach her to sit a horse light and squarely?"

"I don't want her."

"You shall have her."

"I don't want her. I'll have nothing to do with her. My God, Mrs. Clear, don't stand there with your hands crossed! Mrs. Clear, you'll look after the child."

Mrs. Pennell drew his eyes back.

"Yes," she said. "But in your house. In this house. I leave the child to you. She upstairs and you downstairs. You can't avoid her. You can't put her out in the street. She's your charge. You accept it?"

"No."

"You miss your chance?"

"What chance?"

"A thousand. Think: my child—her father's child—yours to do what you like with. Such an odd child, too, she'll be . . ." She dropped the taunt

suddenly. “Listen,” she went on. “I have seen this child. I have spoken to her ——”

“Dreams,” he broke in.

“Waking. Don’t you believe that there are some who see what you can’t see? Don’t you believe there are powers——? Every day, now, this unborn child comes to me. I see her, touch her, am touched by her. I feel the power of her over me. It’s an amazing power. You and I, we are of the same kind, the same flesh with all men, more or less dulled and hidden by the flesh, like a sword that has lain too long in its sheath. But she—she’s clear of the sheath. . . . But there, you don’t understand.”

None of them understood. Conrad looked again at Flare to find him running his finger-nails up and down the lapels of his coat. And Flare was thinking: “I don’t like all this. These women with child—strange creatures . . . Never make enemies, not beyond the grave anyhow. This is a lonely house for an old man. . . . Besides, besides, when this child is born, if the mother dies, I can’t turn it out. Anyway I shan’t—not in fact; it’ll stay here. Easier so. No trouble. Mrs. Clear will keep it upstairs. No trouble at all.” Then Mrs. Pennell’s words came back to him and his mind stumbled over them. This child—a sword, clear of the sheath. The sheath—the flesh? She meant that. How could a child——?

“What’s she mean?” he demanded of the world, his eyes by chance on Elspeth as he spoke. And, to his surprise, the woman started, and gulped breath, and said at last, in a low respectful voice: “The sword of the spirit, I think the mistress means, sir.” From the back of the manor came suddenly the clashing ring of the stable-bell. It was a distant sound, but they stood silent as if they could not speak against its noise. At last Conrad forced himself to say:

“Yes. I see. I think——”

Mrs. Pennell held out a hand to silence him.

“I’ve made her what she’ll be. More spirit than flesh, invincible. You see how she’ll go unharmed? I feel her power.” She turned on Flare. “And you shall feel it—thank God, thank God. That’s what I leave behind for you.”

“A ghost alive?” he said with a weak laugh. “What ideas you women get into your heads! You must be quiet or you’ll be ill. . . . There, if you want it, I’ll promise the child shall stay here.”

She turned over on her side and looked towards the curtained windows, her shoulder rising and falling in silent laughter.

“You wouldn’t escape—even if you refused.”

Conrad watched the curve of her shoulder. She was like a cat in the soft pleasure of her satisfaction. They had understood—a part, at any rate. What an obsession this must have been! And Conrad, remembering the motive of hatred that had stood in her eyes while she spoke, saw, and blamed himself for not having seen earlier, to what this obsession in a pregnant woman might lead. He touched her shoulder. A kind of wild anger and indignation tightened his grip so that she turned to him with mouth twisted by amazement and pain.

"You can't make your child into a God," he said; "not by all your prayers and watching. Don't believe any woman can do that. Let her be as chance would have her. . . . What's your object in all this?"

"A weapon against the world," said she.

"Against me?" Flare demanded.

"No—no!"

"What then?"

"Against the flesh. The spirit can't fail."

Conrad stood back from her. "Aren't you conceiving your child in hatred?" She said nothing, and he went on: "Don't you realize that it's over the spirit that the devil too has power?"

She flinched, hesitated, and recovered.

"Yes," she said with a flash of assurance that left him speechless, "that may be. Even that may be. But caution is useless—utterly of no avail. The meaning of victory is victory over the devil."

"You take that risk?" he said. "It is perilous."

"Risk!" she exclaimed. "Peril! At the worst, forty days and forty nights. . . . Ah! but you'll never understand till you have seen." And, turning again on Flare, she said in a new voice: "You will never understand till the earth is white with snow on a rainy day."

Flare shook his head. He wanted to escape from this room with its candle-shadows that clung to Elspeth's face and gave to her features the appearance of rough-hewn stone. He plucked at Conrad's arm.

"Come," he said. "Come away. . . . There's that bell again. Someone's playing tricks. No need for the bell at this time of night, is there—is there, Conrad?"

Mrs. Pennell had drawn herself into an attitude of listening. The clangour of the stable-bell came up to them with a persistent, soft regularity.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was into such a world and of such a mother that Irma Pennell was born. Within a few hours she was left motherless, and her early childhood was spent with Elspeth Clear in the vast upper rooms of Flare Manor. She had few visitors. Sometimes Rory would come, dressed for her pleasure in a medley of the costumes of dead Flares, and would sing songs to her or act parts that he invented on the instant to suit the clothes he wore. But she was allowed to be no more than an audience in these affairs—an audience, moreover, whose very presence he would often forget. There was no costume she might wear, and he laughed cheerfully at her, and himself sang the louder when she tried to join in his choruses. She strove, with a hundred persuasions, to assert her choice of the clothes he should wear, the part he should play, the song he should sing, but he would allow her none of the joys of command. These entertainments, therefore, languished early, and so soon as he tired of it all, the performer would stand before her, take an elaborate farewell, and disappear round the screen—not to return, perhaps, for many weeks; and she, who had always a warm corner in her heart for her picturesque visitor, would retire to the window or the fireside, and there fulfil for herself the many tales and wonders that Rory had suggested and had left incomplete. But there came a time when Rory's head-quarters were moved to London and even his visits failed her.

Mr. Flare came to her perhaps twice a year, and his coming was always in the manner of an invasion. He looked at her curiously with one eyebrow raised, chucked her under the chin with an awkward finger, and, after a nod to Mrs. Clear, went his way. Only Conrad, the doctor, who came when he could, would listen a little while to her talk, and ask her questions and answer the great store she reserved for him. She liked his wide grey eyes, and his smiling nervousness gave her confidence.

When Urden Flare came into the nursery to find Irma celebrating her ninth Christmas, the child, who had caught some of Elspeth's respect for him, laid down her spoon and fork and rose in her place.

"Christmas?" he said, staring at the pudding.

"Yes, sir," Elspeth answered.

He thrust his hands more deeply into his pockets and frowned—not unpleasantly. "Christmas . . . I see. . . . Where are your presents, child?"

Irma ran to a large table on which two articles were lying—a box of paints and a book. She brought them to him eagerly, glad that at last

someone was come to admire her possessions.

"This box of paints is from Elspeth; that book's from mother. Aren't they lovely?"

He turned them over, one in each hand, and said nothing.

"Don't you think they are lovely?"

Disappointment and anxiety passed and repassed over her face. How could he help thinking they were lovely?

"Why do you put them out on that table?" he asked.

"But Christmas presents are always displayed."

"Displayed!" He handed them back to her. "That book—where did it come from?"

"From mother."

"What does she mean by that, Mrs. Clear?"

"I always give her just a little something," said Elspeth. "And then there's this other, from her mother, as you might say, sir. One present doesn't seem hardly to make a Christmas, sir. It's one of Mrs. Pennell's own books that she left behind."

The old man nodded and dragged at the skin of his cheek. "Suppose you're happy—er—Irma? What d'you do all day? Lessons?"

"In the mornings I do."

"You'll have to go to school, you know. Like that? You don't know any other boys and girls?"

"Oh, yes, I do. In Flare Royal."

Mr. Flare fired up at that. "The village? What's she been doing in the village, Mrs. Clear? What d'you mean by letting anyone from my house mix with that lot?"

"She comes to no harm, sir."

"It's no place for the child."

"*She* comes to no harm, sir, nor will. She's different from most."

"They like me in Flare Royal," Irma said. "They do really. They say I make them well. And they like my stories."

"What kind o' story now?"

"They think they are stories. Really, they are all true. I see them all with my own eyes."

But Urden Flare was not listening.

"There," he said, "take your presents. Put them back on your display table. I think I'd better give you a present. What'd you like?"

She shook her head doubtfully. "Thank you, I don't quite know. You've never given me anything before, grandfather. I must think, mustn't I?"

She crossed to the window and stood looking out. With an awkward smile Urden Flare took his place behind her and tried to follow the direction of her gaze. She seemed discomfited by his nearness and glanced now and then over her shoulder as if she wished he would not stand where he did.

He looked out upon the hill-side and upon Dedwick Lake below. There was no snow or frost; only the dripping trees and steel-like sky spoke of winter. Through openings in the wood, the road that wound upward from the village to the Manor lay bare between mossy banks. Here and there a bird—of its kind his failing eyesight gave him no sure indication—rose from the brushwood or darted between the tree-tops, and, circling against the sky, like a rash line in an engraving, either disappeared from view or, descending, hopped across the road in search of food. There was something in all this that struck chill upon his heart. He loved colour, crude colour, laughter, voices, wine, good company, and here he stood on Christmas day having none of these things, staring, with only this elfin child as companion, at a winter scene of austere monotony. It was like an engraving in the picture-books that had been given him to look at during the wet Sunday afternoons of his childhood. The smell of those damp pages was in his nostrils. The sodden fir-trees, like vast bedraggled plumes, the ground blackened with heavy rains, the loose gravel that would ooze up mud if a wheel passed over it—the same, the same through all these years it seemed. Where was the stiff rustle of his mother's satin? . . . But that was many years ago. She didn't know all that had happened since her son was a boy. She was in the grave long since, her features gone, her eyes perished, cold. . . . It must be cold in the grave, very cold and lonely. But he was strong, he had time before him yet, and there were friends, thank God, old friends and riotous, coming to dinner with him in the evening.

"They are coming up here," Irma said.

"Who are coming?"

"That long row of men walking up the road, very slowly—all lumpy-black against the snow."

"Snow?" he said in a low voice with a feeling of thickness in his throat.

She pointed. "Deep; and those lovely rims along the branches! Look! Why so slowly? I wonder. . . . That cart may be heavy. Or the horses' hoofs balled and slipping on the snow."

“There’s no snow, child,” the old man murmured. “What are you saying? It is a rainy day.”

But she went on, as if he had not spoken, tugging at his sleeve. “Look at Rory there. And Gurge and Fish and Angela Fish. Everyone—all the tenants and people. Why do they keep looking up at the windows like that, grandfather?” Searching his white face for an answer, she paled suddenly: “The room’s dark as if the blinds were drawn and cold too. Where are the lilies that smell so?” She snatched his hand. “Look how close they’ve come. Rory’s face looks all shaky through the steam off the horses. They are coming for grandfather—poor grandfather!”

“Stop, child!”

Irma’s voice broke suddenly with a little catch. “A—ah! A—ah!” she cried. “You’re hurting me with your hand.” Then she turned round and faced him, her eyes so full of light that he could not encounter them.

“It’s for you they’re coming, grandfather. Poor grandfather, are you afraid?”

“There’s no snow,” he persisted. “Look, the trees are dark and dripping. It’s a rainy day.”

She nodded unconvinced assent. “But snow is coming,” she said after a little while. “It’s dark so early this afternoon. Over the hills those black clouds. There’ll be snow by morning.”

“What do you know of snow and death?” he cried.

She did not answer.

“What do you know? It’s a lie. It’s all lies. A witch’s tale. What do you know?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “I’m tired. It’s like swords in my head.”

Urden Flare’s guests found him strange company that night. They came in twos and threes, grinning at each other their expectation of the yearly feast. Their coats and woollen scarves were taken from them in the hall and there were red-check dusters with which they wiped the mud from their boots. The farmers kept together, and the racing men together. Dull, honest eyes stared suspiciously into eyes darker and brighter. Black coats and white shirt-fronts were mingled with tweed coats and bright tie-pins. In the hall there was much winking and nudging and yielding of precedence.

Flare received them in the smoking-room, but to-night it was a cold hand he gave. He knew them all at once, joked with them all, asked each just those questions he liked to be asked. But they could not help noticing that

his hand was cold and his grip lifeless. He looked ever beyond them as if he expected some other to follow on their heels.

"You've got a good bright fire, Mr. Flare."

"I'm getting an old man, Houston."

"We're none of us so young as we was."

Flare nodded and turned to greet a new-comer. The room seemed crowded to-night. They stood about so awkwardly. Come, they must be put at their ease.

"Sherry and gin on the table," he said. "Help yourselves. You, Odling, with an empty glass?"

"Mus' be empty afore it can be filled," said Odling. "Now, mus'n't it, Mr. Flare?"

"Good," said Flare, and led the laughter.

They were all better when they had laughed. Glasses were held out; they drank his health with an old formality he loved. Faces began nodding together, hands were clapped on shoulders, and fingers wagged in persuasion and exposition. He leaned against the fire-place, looking at them all and the portraits above them, and a glow of satisfaction passed over him. Then his eye fell on their boots—no polish—snow? No. No. It was a warm, soft day. There had been rain in the afternoon. The laurels had been filmy with it. . . . Then, as he looked up to ask of the weather, he found eyes fixed curiously upon him. He must not brood. He must not fail. He must not let them see. After all, it was so much damned foolishness.

"Now whose the youngest of us?" he asked. "You, Sherringham?"

"Four an' twenty, Mr. Flare."

"Any younger than four and twenty?—Then it's your choice of the first tune, Sherringham. What's it to be?"

"A song, Mr. Flare?"

"There'll be a couple of fiddlers in the gallery. One of them can sing. Song if you like. Here are Meggle and Little William. You must choose a tune they know."

The door had opened to admit two persons, who, with evident reluctance, edged across the room. Meggle was a tall man, so thin and angular that his appearance was knife-like among these burly guests. He wore a black coat cut to tails, a long waistcoat and a neck-cloth loosely tied, black knee-breeches, black worsted stockings and broken shoes that ran to a narrow point. His body was bent forward in an attitude of continual obeisance, but his small, deep-set eyes held a flash in which there was no

humility. Below the eyes the face narrowed quickly to an angle as acute as his shoe-points, driving the lips together into a little pinnacle of contempt. But above the eyes his forehead sprang out into a white, gleaming dome, crowned with yellow hair turning grey that clung in damp profusion to his temples. Under his right arm was tucked a bow; in his left hand he gripped a fiddle. With the back of it he was urging Little William forward.

There was nudging again at the sight of Little William, a boy with eyes like stars and white chin high tilted. The music-master and the child who lived with him were well known to them all, but here was Little William in a new dress that set them smiling. Hitherto the child had always worn black clothes as old-fashioned as Meggle's, so that the two had appeared as quaint, unreal figures from a picture-book, beings not to be associated with thoughts of cold and hunger and the human desires. No one wasted charity on Meggle and his boy. They stood apart from life, legends, grotesque decorations, fantastic as ghosts. And here was Little William clad in tweeds—tweeds too big for him that hung dismally over his tight fists, but tweeds such as other boys wore. It was a shock, even to Flare, to find that Little William was a boy; he, too, had thought of him always as of a child somehow detached from his kind. And, because Flare's mood that night was cheerless, the revelation struck him as pathetic, not humorous, and he gazed at the two minstrels with eyes that no will of his could light with fierceness.

But, when they had threaded their way through the crowd and were standing on the rug before the fire-place, something in the odd picture tickled the guests. Fingers were extended, red necks were craned out from uncomfortably stiff collars, teeth were bared, and a great flood of laughter welled up and engulfed them all.

"Ha, ha, ha! Hoo, hoo, hoo!" they laughed. "Look at Little William! . . . Oh, Gawd, what ready-mades! . . . Little William's become quite a little man! . . . Goo—shake me by the hand, Little William."

Meggle flushed under it. Oughtn't he to have given Little William this suit? "William," he had said, "it will make an ordinary boy of you. It's better to be an ordinary boy. But take care of it, child, for there's not many who learn music in these parts." And Little William hadn't liked to refuse; but he hadn't liked the suit; he had been nervous about it—very nervous and silent as they climbed the hill to Flare Manor, though in previous years his chatter had done the heart good—his chatter about supper in the Flare kitchen and how well the music sounded in the great hall.

And Little William's chin was tilted at yet a steeper angle. His eyes were turned on Meggle in passionate affection, as if that twisted musician were all he cared for on earth. This ring of curled lips and naked teeth forced them

close together, bound them in the intimacy of lonely defence. Little William had become suddenly proud of this suit Meggle had given him. For himself he didn't care for all their laughter—oh, no; but they made Meggle uneasy and miserable. With all the emphasis of a quivering lip, he hated—he hated them for that. From gazing at Meggle, he, too, turned to look at Mr. Flare.

"God!" said Flare. "What are you all laughing at? You, Upcott."

"Oo!" said Upcott, gulping down his amusement. "Why, I don' know, to be sure, Mr. Flare. We was all laughin', I think."

They were sobered instantly. The brass chandelier creaked in the ceiling-draught. A silver waistcoat-button clinked against a watch-chain as Upcott slid into inconspicuousness. Silence held. They were watching Flare's eyebrows, thrown out in whiteness by the deep flush of his face. The corners of his lips were moist.

"A happy Christmas, sir," said Meggle, remembering suddenly why he was come into the room. "What orders as to music, sir?"

"A happy Christmas, sir," said Little William, mechanically.

Flare looked from one to the other.

"Come to the fire. Warm your hands. You can't fiddle with cold hands."

He made way for them, and they knelt on the hearth-rug, their hands outstretched, their finger-tips rosy with fire-light.

As they crouched there, one of the guests separated himself from the crowd and, taking his stand by Little William's side, stooped and spoke to him. The boy looked up at once with eyes bright and eager with welcome.

"No, sir," he said with new confidence, as if this man's friendly presence gave him strength, "no, sir, I'll not be afraid—not when once I begin to play, anyhow—never you fear. You'll be listening, won't you, sir?"

At this point Meggle overheard the conversation and touched Little William's arm. "Don't you be troubling Captain Pye, boy. Don't you be troubling him."

Captain Pye smiled and shook his head. "Doesn't trouble me, Meggle. Let him talk; it does him good."

But Little William had fallen into silence. Pye could see only the crown and back of the child's head, and he stared at them with a wistful, longing expression, as if to say: "I wish I could come nearer to that lad; help him somehow; draw him out. Maybe there's fine stuff there, finer than any of them have guessed." Then, with a half-weary drawing of his hand across his eyes, he tried to dismiss the thought. What could he do anyway—he, a merchant-service skipper on the beach? Little enough, and yet—— He

glanced at the mob of guests and at the boy who must live among them and be despised by them. And quietly, as his way was, he completed a resolve, half formed within him for months past, that Little William should be given his chance. He drew himself to his full height and smiled again. Seen thus, he was a man to love, vigorous, alert, fired by the decision he had taken. His left ear, crushed long ago by a swinging block, was misshapen and gave to his cheek an ugly lopsidedness, but his eyes—the eyes, you would have said, of a connoisseur, screwed up now with a seaman's twist—had a peculiar beauty, an almost childlike tenderness and glow, that absolved him of the brutality which his disfigurement might have given to another face. But he had never become altogether unconscious of his ear, and, in moments of emphasis, he would put up his hand to cover it and tug at it as other men clench their fists or square their shoulders. He was tugging at it now.

"Tell me," he said to the boy at his side, "ever thought of going to sea?"

Little William turned to answer, his lips parted, his fingers suddenly at his throat, but before he could speak Flare's voice broke in:

"Well, Sherringham, what's your choice?"

"I leave it to you, Mr. Flare."

"No."

"Then let the little 'un choose, I say."

"D'you hear, boy?" said Flare.

"Yes, sir. Am I to choose, sir?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to sing 'The Banks of Ayr,' first, and then——"

"Sh," said Meggle. "One song you were to choose."

"To-night is Little William's night," said Flare. "Let him choose, Meggle."

"I don't think he'd choose what you'd care for, Mr. Flare; not amusing songs, mostly."

"Let him choose. Get to the gallery now. It's time for dinner."

Meggle and Little William passed the footman, who now stood at the open door.

"Come, gentlemen," said Flare, both arms outstretched.

His outburst of anger had caused him to forget, but the cold shock of the hall, that set his shoulders trembling, brought back his old fears. Where was the child? In bed? He thought he saw her eyes staring into the ceiling's darkness. He thought he saw her clothes, piled neatly on a chair. And, imagining her thus defenceless, a queer hatred of her swept up into his throat

and eyes, and, because his fingers gripped only air, ebbed away again, leaving him afraid. He checked himself suddenly as he was about to enter the room where dinner was spread, and turned back to peer into a closet where his guests' greatcoats were hung.

Houston, who had been walking at his host's side, stretched out a hand to detain the man in front of him, and, with a directing glance at Flare, shook his head and shrugged his shoulders interrogatively. Flare was running his hand over the coats hung within, and presently he emerged, gazing at his palm.

"Wet," he said. "Rain, eh, rain?"

"Bit damp," said Houston. "No hurt, Mr. Flare. We won't melt for a drop o' rain."

"No, damn you. But was it rain?"

"Rain, to be sure—what else?"

Flare sighed deeply and colour came into his face.

"Might have been snow. It's Christmas, eh? Seasonable weather, eh? Might have been snow."

Over the black rail of the gallery two pairs of eyes were looking down on to the long gleaming table, which appeared from that elevation as a white streak, sprinkled with luminous red rings. As he counted these rings, and discovered that there were exactly half as many of them as there were chairs, Little William became fascinated by the golden lines of light that shot up from the centre of each, where, to his view, the candle-shades left the flame unhidden. He found that, by screwing up his eyes, he could make these rays twist and turn into amazing angles until the stiff pattern of light was lost in a cloud of golden whiteness that thickened and cleared and swayed hither and thither as he moved his lashes. Through this cloud the dark figures of the guests passed to their places.

"It's a wonderful spread," Meggle whispered.

"I can put a halo on each of their heads," said Little William, screwing up his eyes till his smooth face was puckered with wrinkles. "Isn't it far down, down there! Sailors must see like this from the mast of a ship. All the people look so little. I like singing from up here, because they always forget me, and when I begin, all the tops of the heads disappear and all the faces turn upward together."

"There's Mr. Flare," said Meggle. "That's the last of them. They're all in now. Get ready."

"Mr. Flare looks ill. Oh, look—look how white he is!"

Little William gripped Meggle's thin arm and together they leaned further over the rail.

"Cold," said Meggle.

"Frightened——"

"Tush, boy."

"——of something. Do you see how he looks around—as if he had lost something? Perhaps he has lost something."

"Perhaps he's expecting a guest who hasn't come yet," said Meggle.

"Perhaps that's it."

Flare faced the gallery as he stood at the end of the table. Meggle hastily tucked his fiddle under his chin, twisted a foot round a leg of his chair, and waited for the sign. The old man held up his hand. The voices died away in a last splutter of talk. There was silence. Little William straightened himself and drew breath.

"The gloomy night is gath'ring fast,
Loud roars the wild inconstant blast,
Yon murky cloud is foul with rain,
I see it driving o'er the plain;
The hunter now has left the moor,
The scattered coveys meet secure;
While here I wander, prest with care,
Along the lonely banks of Ayr."

In the instant's hush that succeeded the first verse, Meggle knew how the silence had deepened, how there had fallen over the room a new atmosphere of wonder and expectation. The boy had never sung like this, never in a voice so full of sweetness and terror. Meggle's bow scarce touched his strings, and the accompaniment became fragmentary.

"Chill runs my blood to hear it rave;
I think upon the stormy wave. . . .
Tho' Death in ev'ry shape appear,
The Wretched have no more to fear:
But round my heart the ties are bound. . . .
Farewell, my friends! Farewell, my foes!
My peace with these, my love with those—
The bursting tears my heart declare,
Farewell, the bonnie banks of Ayr!"

There was a scraping of chairs as the company took their seats, but Flare remained erect, his eyes fixed on the place in the gallery where Little

William had stood. The boy, overcome in reaction by a sudden embarrassment, had crouched beside Meggle. In a moment it seemed that Flare would speak. Then, his gaze falling from the gallery upon his guests, consciousness of his position slowly returned to him, his lips tightened and broke into a smile, and he sat down.

"Sherringham!" he cried at random. "These damp, dull winters take the life out of a man who can hunt no longer. I like it cold. Cold makes the fire burn bright and clear."

"True," said Sherringham, "an' makes the spirit bite well in the throat."

Houston broke in, speaking with difficulty because his mouth was full. "Yes, that may be. But snow makes hard going for man and beast. I'm always glad to see a thaw."

"Snow," said Flare. "Snow. . . . Ah, yes, snow. Ha!"

And he found them, with knives and forks inactive, staring their amazement.

Later in the evening, when the wine had gone round and cigars were lighted, he had managed to forget his fears once more, but, having so begun, he continued to drink more heavily than usual. The talk ran to hunting and the accidents of the hunting-field. Someone, who had been out that never forgotten day, ventured to speak of Mr. Pennell, Irma's father, saying how strange it was that good horsemen were often made victims while the weak riders escaped.

"Nothing odd in that," said Sherringham. "They take the risks, eh, Mr. Flare?"

But old Flare's thoughts had leapt back nine years. A new terror gripped and choked him. Mrs. Pennell's voice was saying to him, whispering in his ear: "You will never understand till the earth is white with snow on a rainy day." Not the child only . . . Nine years ago . . . Not till this moment had the mother's words come back to him. The emphasis of that repetition broke his courage, like the clanging of doors in a dream.

"The devil take all women!" he cried aloud, and they stared at him again and nudged one another. Then Sherringham, thinking that this must be the beginning of a good story, pushed back his chair, crossed his legs, drew at his cigar with sucked-in cheeks, and said:

"Well?"

"Well, sir!" Flare shouted.

"What's the story?"

"Story? What story?"

“About the woman.”

“Oh,” said Flare. “Oh, I see. Well, once there was a woman who was a witch. And she had a child who was a witch likewise. And the child saw black processions and snow where there wasn’t any. But devilish pretty child she was. So I say the devil take all women, gentlemen; and fill your glasses. Houston, send the wine round.”

The end of the table began to sing huskily:

“The devil take all wi-imen
An’ strangle ’em in hell,
But if he takes the wi-imen
He’ll take the men as well.
The devil spare us all, say we,
For we are a merry company.
The empty bottles are all in hell,
The drink is here and the drink is well,
The drink is here and all is well!”

It was sung round and round the table in that quiet, mournful singsong dear to the humour of a crowd of men. Then in a moment’s silence, while sleepy heads were still nodding to the lilt of the dead chorus, Captain Pye covered his left ear with his hand and began in a low voice, oddly thin and clear:

"Come to the ship;
The iron breaks free.
With bubble-lip
Laughs out the sea.
There's a rose on the deck
And a rose on the mast
And a rope for a neck
When the anchor's cast.
Who knows, who knows
If it be he?
He smells the rose,
He smells the sea.
The rope may be
For you or me.

But now clear hawse the anchor swings.
By mark, by deep the leadsman sings.
The Lonely Helmsman holds the wheel.
Swift from the land the ship doth steal.
Somewhere death is hovering.
Who knows, who knows? Light heart we go
To sunshine, tempest and to snow.
Where is death? We do not know
The shape or texture of his wing.

There's a rose on the deck
And a rose on the mast
And a rope for a neck
When the anchor's cast.
O lovely Lord, the sailor lies
Beneath Thy wing, beneath Thine eyes,
And all his love and strength do stand
Within the hollow of Thy hand.
Comfort send him, vision send,
And so preserve him——"

But, rising from many throats, the old song broke in upon the new:

"The devil spare us all, say we,
For we are a merry company . . ."

And deep in their throats—a thick softness:

"The drink is here, and all is well!"

Captain Pye, having glanced with uneasy eyes at this merry company, shifted his hand to his mouth to hide a smile or a yawn or a grimace, and sank a little lower into his chair.

Old Flare had begun to feel cold. He went to the fire, kicked it into a blaze, and held out his hands towards it. Behind him his guests were singing their chants and passing his wine. Suddenly he hated them. He felt ill, lonely and old. He wanted some woman with quiet hands to minister to him, someone to give him orders and lift from him the responsibility of his conduct that night. As he straightened himself by the hearth, and faced the table, sweat broke on his forehead. His lips must be pale—very pale. Why didn't somebody notice? Damn them, with his wine and cigars! No care for him. And when he was gone—why, when Christmas came without him, they'd miss the annual dinner, that's all.

Captain Pye looked up, saw the old man swaying like an unsteady tree, and jumped to his feet.

"Feeling queer, Mr. Flare?"

"Bloody queer," Flare answered, and sat down. "No, no. Don't break up, gentlemen. It'll pass; it'll pass."

But they gathered themselves up from their crumpled napkins. The door to the hall was opened and the draught swept in so that the candles guttered and gave off thick wreaths of smoke. One by one they said good-bye and went out. Good-bye. Good-bye. Happy Christmas. Their voices came back from the hall and porch. Their feet sounded on the gravel outside.

"Care for the doctor to come?" said Houston.

"Conrad? No, no, certainly not. I'm well enough. Dinner too heavy, maybe. All right sitting down."

"My way lies close to his house. I'd send him if you like."

And a sudden yearning for company came on the old man.

"Yes," he said. "Thank you, Houston. May be as well. Ask him to come across. But no hurry. When convenient. Don't make a panic of me, mind you."

When the guests were gone, a sleepy footman, herald of the downstairs company that looked for the leavings of the feast, opened the door and thrust in his head. Flare heard him, turned on him with fingers dug into the padding of his chair, and shouted in a voice that made little sound: "Go with

your peaky face. Go! leave me! Go to your kitchen-maids while yet there's time. You fool, you fool!"

So, through the long hour before the doctor's coming, he sat beside the broken meats. Once, with all the effort of a journey, he slid forward on to his knees, crawled across the hearth-rug, and raised a log in trembling hands. He raised it above his head—a magnificent gesture, he imagined—and flung it into the fire. How the sparks jumped in the chimney so that all the soot was diamonded! He watched it happily, pleased by the crackle and blaze.

But, when the bark was gone and a steady burning replaced the brilliance, he crawled back to his chair, hoisted himself into it, and sat for a long time unmoving, his face buried in his hands. He did not hear the doctor's ring, nor his movement across the hall. He knew nothing, indeed, until a hand was laid on his shoulder and he looked up to find Conrad's eyes looking down into his.

"You're frightened," said Conrad.

"Oh, no. Drunk—just drunk."

Conrad shook his head, drew up a chair, and replenished the fire. Then he laid his fingers across Flare's wrist.

"What are you frightened of?"

"I'm an old man."

"Are you afraid of the end? You've never been afraid before."

"No, no. But this house where I've had such good times—such very good times—is yellow and cold and empty to-night. There's more in it, Conrad, than I can understand."

"Tell me."

Flare told him and the telling restored his confidence. He could be scornful now of the little brat upstairs with her tales and gloomy wonders, and gradually, under the spell of Conrad's conversation by which he was led far afield, his terror and much of his sickness left him, and, glancing at the deserted table where the wine stood yet high in the bottles, he was able to regret the premature farewell of his guests. He allowed his eye to wander from the glossy apples in a silver bowl to the pineapple, cut but once, with a serrated cutter still plunged in it. In the middle of the table, surrounded by heavily moulded candlesticks, stood an epergne piled roughly with flowers; and, above the flowers and the light fern mingled with them, he allowed his eye still to travel, onward and upward, until, at a point on the opposite wall, it stopped.

There was little light so far across the room, but enough to illumine a thick gold frame and a portrait in oils. Richmond Flare, his son, dead: the husband of that witch-woman. His hate of her burned up afresh. He rose from his chair and took post beside the table.

"Can you see Richmond's face from where you're sitting, Conrad?"

The doctor had no need to turn. He had been following Flare's movements.

"Yes," he said. "I remember him little. But a good portrait, as my memory serves."

"He died in this room. Here, in this room, at this table, where I stand now. That woman, you know, would have made a fool of his son, Rory."

"Rory's doing well in London?" said Conrad.

"Oh, well enough. . . . Brains, that boy—through his mother, I suppose; we must grant her that. . . . But he won't use 'em. An' I'm damned if I see why he should. What good would brains have been to me, Conrad, I ask ye? What's brains to look back on when you're an old man an' the sands run low? Better remember the bright lamplight on women's clothes, and the mist between a horse's ears. That's life, that's movement, that's colour! That's cheating the grave, Conrad, I tell you. Old age can't take that thought o' youth away. Why, I remember——" He choked suddenly and Conrad sprang to him. "Ah!" he exclaimed with recovered breath. "Sit me down, I mustn't stand up an' shout."

Presently he went on: "Why was I afraid, I wonder? All's quiet. There's no trouble in the house. Of evenings I like to sit here. If I'm still, I think sometimes I can hear the hounds and the hoofs' thunder; or perhaps voices—you know how voices break out in a theatre when an act is done—then the applause, and then Nell Farren—Nell Farren it used to be—coming before the curtain. Listen how quiet it is. The whole house is asleep. Listen."

They sat without moving. There was no sound anywhere save now and then the low murmur of the chimney-draught.

"Ah," said Flare very quietly. "I've cheated the young lady. Snow before morning, she said. It's four minutes to twelve. And there's no sound of storm, no sound. We should hear the drops against the window and the dripping from the gutters. Listen. No sound."

Then, out of silence, a thought came to him. He exclaimed with high-pitched voice:

"But we shouldn't hear snow falling, Conrad! Not *hear* it!"

He sprang up and made for the window. He flung the curtains aside with a rattle of brass rings. Suddenly, like a figure crushed by a blow, he sank down upon an upright chair.

Conrad, before he reached Flare's side, paused an instant. The window was narrow and long. Above its lower frame the old man's white, domed head hung forward stiffly. And above and around the head, a black panel of glass was scarred with falling snow. The wooden frame of the window was enamelled white, but now it seemed discoloured.

"Come, Flare, come; this is childish," Conrad said.

But old Flare only looked up and whimpered and fell sideways from his chair.

CHAPTER SIX

ELSPETH CLEAR tried unsuccessfully to fill Irma with a sense of the dignity of death. The child, led into a darkened room amid all the impressiveness of tiptoeing and whispers, to look upon the old man's composed body, regarded it impassively, without alarm or grief or wonder, as if, Elspeth said, it had not been her grandfather who lay there. Returning from the cliffs on the morning before the day appointed for the funeral, Irma found the hall full of luggage bearing Rory's name, and went at once to his sitting-room in search of him.

During Rory's absence in London the door of his room had been locked, but now, as Irma expected, she was able to open it. As it began to move under her touch, a scent of terrible sweetness flowed out upon her, a scent familiar with that strange familiarity by which the mind is sometimes struck and overwhelmed at a first encounter. She had never before been near lilies massed in an enclosed space, but she knew and feared their scent as if, somewhere beyond her mind's present compass, she had learnt to fear it.

She went into the room and closed the door. The furniture, from some of which dust-sheets had been partly thrown back, wore an air of desolation. On the walls, brass picture-hangers gleamed above areas of unfaded wall-paper, and the pictures themselves, propped against the wainscoting, displayed only their brown paper backs and the pieces of frayed wire by which they had been suspended. The floor, from which rugs and carpet had been removed, was littered with open cardboard boxes that stood amid a disarray of lids and knotted string and white tissue paper.

"Aren't they wonderful?" said a woman who was standing with her back to the chimney-piece.

Irma looked at her steadily.

"Are they all wreaths?"

"And crosses, and—and floral emblems. I suppose you are Rory's little sister. You *are* like what Rory is sometimes."

Irma took the soft, jewelled hand stretched out to her, and found herself suddenly gathered into this woman's arms and kissed.

"Are you a friend of Rory's?" she asked.

"Yes," said the other with a slow smile, "I'm Rory's friend."

"Did you come from London with him?"

"Yes."

“With all those flowers?”

“They were at the station when we arrived. We brought them up.”

Irma looked at the smoky fire, then over her shoulder at the windows where the morning sun was struggling for entrance with the drawn holland blinds.

“Let’s pull up the blinds and open the windows,” she said.

“But we can’t pull up the blinds with Mr. Flare dead in the house. It wouldn’t be right. We can pull up the blinds to-morrow evening.”

“No. I forgot. Elspeth did tell me.”

Irma drew herself into a corner of the Chesterfield and tucked her legs under her.

“Who is Elspeth?”

“My nurse. She used to be mother’s maid, you know. What is your name?”

“Peggy.”

“Mine is Irma. Do you live with Rory in London?”

“I see him often. I’ve heard of his little sister.”

“I’m not really his sister, you know. My other name isn’t Flare.”

They sat for a little time without speaking. Peggy took a small gold case from a black bag that lay on her lap and lighted a cigarette. This proceeding caused Irma to look at her companion more closely. Hitherto she had noticed only that, when Peggy kissed her, the lips pressed to her cheek were somehow glossy and the arms encircling her were more deft and gentle than Elspeth’s. The experience had pleased her. She liked, too, the slow, even voice and the heavily lashed eyes.

“Are cigarettes nice?” Irma asked.

“Oh, goodness,” said Peggy, throwing a quick glance over the cardboard boxes, “perhaps I oughtn’t! I always do, you know. I always do. But perhaps I’d better not—not with Mr. Flare like that.”

She threw the cigarette into the fire.

“But what difference does grandfather make?”

“Well, he’s dead.”

“But he won’t mind, will he?”

Peggy stood up and stretched herself.

“P’rhaps not. But the country’s different from London. I wonder why Rory hasn’t come back.”

“Would you like to come out in the garden? I’d show you. We could be in the sun there.”

“Rory said I was to wait for him here.”

“Oh, I see.”

It seemed odd to Irma that, at her age, Peggy should have to be so obedient. She must be twenty at least.

“Where has Rory gone?”

“To see about the funeral.”

“To Dedwick?”

“No; to Flare Royal. There’s a Captain someone who lives there.”

“Not Captain Pye?—a man with an ear that makes his face look all crooked? He was hit by a block that had broken loose, he said.”

“I think that was the name—Pye.”

“He’s a sailor and sings songs. Some people are frightened of him. I’m not. He’s going back to sea soon, he says. Why does Rory want Captain Pye?”

“About the funeral.”

“Oh,” said Irma, though she could not understand what Captain Pye had to do with the funeral.

Peggy looked at Irma and realized that the effect of sunshine and holland blinds was to give to flesh an unbecoming tint of yellow. Should she pull up the blinds after all? It would never do for Rory to find her less beautiful in his own home than he had found her in London. Yet, if she raised the blinds, Rory might think she didn’t know what was right and proper. “The country is different from London,” he warned her when she had begged that she might be allowed to travel north with him.

“I don’t think Rory would mind if we pulled the blinds up,” Irma said suddenly.

“It wouldn’t be nice, I think,” Peggy answered. “Not with poor Mr. Flare like that.”

They sat in gloomy silence. The smell of lilies, the nearness of death, the half-darkness, the colourless smoking of the fire, twisted Peggy’s heart into self-pity. It was hard to be a woman of the world and not know what to do. She had been so lucky! Rory was so kind to her! But it was a weak hold she had on him. He wasn’t dependent on her yet. And if she lost her hold—well, there was nothing to fall back on, only chance and hard buffeting. And in the intervals between the gifts of chance there would be hunger, perhaps—she knew what hunger was like.

Then she stroked her silk dress, and turned the rings on her fingers and smiled, but her eyes held tears.

“Why are you crying?” said Irma. “Is it about grandfather?”

“Y—yes,” said Peggy.

“But you didn’t know grandfather.”

“No. I’m not crying really. I was only thinking. P’rhaps lilies are like onions and make your eyes weepy.”

Irma came close to her.

“I think you are the loveliest person in the world. You look like my Italian picture of Mary.”

“Mary?” Peggy pulled Irma towards her in an impulse of affection between laughter and tears. “No, darling, you mustn’t say such things, I’m sure. I’m not always good, you see. Sometimes I love very much. And sometimes I’m afraid and I’m rather a coward. It’s all rather a mix-up.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

RORY was both shocked and charmed when he found Peggy and his half-sister in each other's arms. Something surviving in him, which in any other place but Flare Manor he would not have believed could have survived, protested against the child's proximity to the woman he loved; but another influence in his nature, more deeply rooted and powerful, caused him to find pleasure in the scene's incongruity. He, too, was struck by the unnatural twilight of the place and by the smell of lilies that was in such strange discord with his knowledge of the room's history, and, seeing against the background created by immediate sense and by memory the ovals of two feminine faces so close, yet so contrasted, he paused to gaze at them with an exquisite consciousness creeping over him that here was a new clash of loveliness.

He saw that, before his coming recalled her, Peggy had been travelling in a world different from that in which she walked for his sake; a world, like all those she visited, of sense and action, but coloured somehow with a sentiment she kept hidden from men.

Now she drew up her body, rose, came very close to him, and took his hand in hers.

"What a long time you've been away!" she said.

"Yes. Pye was out. The Vicar will bring him up here presently. Then we can talk it all over. Why my grandfather couldn't be buried in his vault like the rest of us, I don't know. I haven't got to the bottom of that request. The old man wouldn't say he was to be buried at sea without a reason. He never did anything without reason."

"Is grandfather to be buried in the sea?" said Irma.

"Yes."

"Shall we all go on the sea?"

"Yes. If we can get the boats. I don't know where they're coming from."

"Isn't Captain Pye arranging that?" said Peggy. "You needn't worry, Rory dear."

"Yes. Pye is doing all the arrangements. Anyhow, I'm not going to worry. It's cold in here. Can't we make the fire burn up? Try the poker, Peggy." He threw back a dust-sheet from another chair. "Well, what have you two been talking about?"

"You, Rory," Peggy answered quickly.

Rory put his arm around Peggy's shoulder as she laid down the poker and stood erect at the fire-place.

"Have you been dull in here? Have you been outside and seen the place? It's quite warm in the sun."

"No. I was waiting for you."

"I told you to wait, didn't I?"

"Yes. People, gardeners and servants and people, wouldn't know who I was."

"They soon shall know."

"You mean that!"

He saw that she had interpreted his words as a promise to marry her, and, indeed, though they had been lightly spoken, such had been the thought behind them. But her over-eagerness caused him to retreat.

"Perhaps some day soon, if you're good," he said.

"Oh, but I wasn't asking for that. I wasn't suggesting that. You mustn't think so, Rory. We talked that all over and everything's quite settled as we are."

He kissed her suddenly, saying under his breath: "Oh, what a child she still is!" and she, lulled under the kiss and caring at the instant for nothing beyond it, moved away from him and sat smiling into his eyes.

And Irma said: "Oh, but she looks all different now!"

Rory turned on her sharply, his instinct having brought him near to her meaning, and, allowing his gaze to move quickly from his sister to Peggy, he saw in those parted lips and deep, wide eyes an expression, half puzzled, half resentful because puzzled, which aroused all the pity in him. This impulse, the normal expression of which was checked by Irma's presence, forced him to say, with a gesture towards the wreaths:

"She looks like an actress after a great first-night! Can't you imagine that this is your triumph, Peggy?"

"Oh, Rory, how can you say such things, when these are all for death?"

"Then you mustn't look so alive and so beautiful to make me say them."

She looked gratefully at him. "You're glad I came up, then?"

"Glad!"

"You weren't very keen, you remember."

"I thought you wouldn't like to be brought into all this."

That was not the reason for his hesitation, she knew; but because he seemed at any rate content, because she had played her part without

discrediting him, she did not question him further.

When Captain Pye and the Vicar, Mr. Bax, were announced, their coming was felt by Rory and Peggy to be a relief. Irma, who had sat long in silence, rose quickly and was the first to greet the new-comers. She allowed Mr. Bax to take her hand, but when she raised her eyes to his she found that he was looking over her head at Rory, that her hand was quickly dropped, and that the Vicar's interest was all in her elders. Turning from him to Captain Pye, she went, she knew, to a friend. The sailor stooped over her.

"You ought to be out of this dark room," he said.

She whispered in his ear. "Mr. Bax—will he be staying long?"

"We shall leave together."

"Then I'll go out in the sun."

She pressed his hand and went out. Mr. Bax's eyes followed her out of the room. When she was gone, he smiled comfortably and said:

"Like an elf, isn't she?"

"I think she is a darling," said Peggy.

"A difficult child to understand. A most difficult child to get hold of. Both weak and strong."

"Tremendously strong," said Pye.

"Perhaps, in common with most sailor-men, you are popular with children, Captain Pye. But strong-headed I'm afraid it is sometimes. It is my duty, you know, to teach her her Bible-lessons."

Pye's interest quickened to eagerness.

"Is that so? New Testament or Old?"

"We started at the beginning with the Old, of course. She has no memory for the Kings. It is very like laziness, I'm afraid, Rory. Kings or Chronicles, it's just the same—she will not apply herself to them as she should."

Pye gave a tremendous tug at his misshapen ear.

"Then why not go on to the life of Christ, Mr. Bax?"

"But that's just what she wants, Captain. Ah! I see that even your knowledge of children has its limitations. Naturally she wishes to get away from the difficult to the easy. It would never do to give way. I always tell her: Let me see that you have mastered the Kings and Chronicles—then you shall go on. . . . Don't you think so?"

This last question was addressed to Peggy, whom Mr. Bax regarded already with suspicion. When he was introduced to her, her own name had not been mentioned.

“Of course you must know best, Mr. Bax,” she said. “After all, it’s your profession, isn’t it?”

“Yes, yes,” said Rory; “quite right. But if she doesn’t take to Scripture, don’t press her too hard, Vicar. I remember my own youth.”

“You are very like your grandfather in some respects, very like your poor grandfather, Rory.”

Captain Pye now turned towards them.

“The arrangements are all made: one steamboat, two boats in tow. Start at two-thirty to-morrow from the jetty. That suit you, Flare?”

“Admirably. You won’t use the church, then?”

“No,” said Mr. Bax. “It would make it difficult, you see. If we carried out the preliminaries in the church, I should be in my surplice, and I should have to remain in my surplice. It’s a long way out, Captain Pye tells me, a long way—more than an hour.”

“That is so.”

The Vicar sat down.

“I suppose it is really necessary to carry out this whim of your grandfather’s? There’s nothing hanging to it, I understand?”

“Nothing—except his wish.”

“But not very seriously expressed.”

“He knew I shouldn’t go against it.”

“But if you did? After all, this is very unusual—very unusual indeed.”

Rory faced the other squarely, and said in a voice slightly raised by his determination: “To tell you the truth, Vicar, I shouldn’t care to risk the consequences of crossing his will.”

“But that is superstition. If I may say so, it is positively unchristian superstition.”

“That may be. But there it is; I can’t help it. There’s the old man lying upstairs now.”

“The boat which Captain Pye has obtained is not large. It is so constructed, he tells me, that it will be very sensitive to motion. There has been a considerable wind for some days. Only yesterday I saw white horses far out to sea, though it is a little calmer this morning.”

“There’s no danger, is there, Pye? I don’t want to drown the village.”

“No danger. But you may be sick.”

Rory looked at the Vicar.

“It’s a strange request for my grandfather to make. You knew him well, Vicar. You were a friend of his.”

“I knew him well, yes. I am afraid we did not always see eye to eye. But there—that’s all done with now.”

“Quite. You’re a good sailor?”

“I am not. I am a very bad sailor, indeed.”

In the room above them old Flare was lying. Rory looked across the room to where Captain Pye was sitting with his chin sunk upon his knitted tie; then his eyes, travelling upward towards the room where old Flare lay dead, came at last to rest upon the ceiling. It seemed that the plaster cherubs were smiling back at him.

“Peggy,” he said, rising, “I think you and I had better take grandfather his wreaths.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

THAT evening, when dinner was over, Peggy sat by the fire in Rory's room with a book on her lap. She did not easily concentrate upon it, for she was unused to reading, and her mind was light with many anxieties; but she read on nevertheless, telling herself that in the country it was the custom for women to sit over the fire with a book. Rory would be glad to find that, when he was busy, she was able to amuse herself. These thoughts, however, were encouragements in her task, not the chief reason for her having undertaken it. Often when she was alone she would read, laboriously but with steady devotion, because she was determined that, during her time of prosperity, she would, in her own phrase, better herself, and so acquire weapons against the enemy years that the future might have in store for her. The books she read were chosen at random, for there was none to guide her choice. Her preference was for tales of women who, though swayed by their passions, were yet honoured and protected and secure. These she understood with a jealous understanding. They had no need to fight the battle she fought; they were endowed by fortune with what could come to her only as the fruit of victory. Often these women, who had never known insecurity, were fools, she thought; her common sense triumphed over them. But, whatever their faults, they, being of the same flesh and blood with her, were secure and happy. They exhibited in their own persons the reality of her dreams. They would teach her those tricks of manner to which Rory attached so much importance.

Rory sat now at the table by the window, his back towards her, his head bent over the accounts he detested. All day he had been a man little known to her, a new Rory whom she had not yet come to understand. He had behaved with a quietness and restraint that frightened her. His very gentleness made her feel strange to him, and she longed for the light-hearted roughness, the brutality even, by which she knew him best.

He laid down his pen and turned suddenly in his chair.

"I'm sick to death of this stuff."

"Then come and sit by the fire."

"It has to be finished."

"But not now."

"Yes, now." But he sat staring at her.

"Rory, was I wrong to ask to come up here? Is that why you're so strange?"

"No, child. You didn't do wrong."

"I didn't mean to come to Flare Manor, you know. I meant to come north with you just for company. I thought you'd put me in some hotel near by. Then you needn't have owned me at all. It would have been quite easy. It was you who said I must come to the Manor."

"I know. I wasn't going to disown you for fear of what that man Bax might say. I'm master in this place. I'm not afraid of Bax."

"But what are you going to say? Who are you going to say I am?"

"They can think what they like."

"But is that good? The servants here——"

He stood up. "Do you think I'm afraid of my own servants? My God, Peggy, you give me small credit! You've joined up with an odd crowd, you know. The Flares aren't ashamed of their girls and they don't worry about other people's."

"But don't you see——" she began.

"See what?"

"There's me, too."

"Well?"

"Never mind," she said.

He came close to her. "Say what you were going to say."

"I don't want to."

"Say it."

She saw she was in a trap, struggled a moment for some plausible deception, and, failing to find it, spoke the truth:

"You see, I might need a reputation if——" She could go no further.

"Stand up, Peggy." She stood up. "If I married you, you were going to say? Isn't that it?"

"You made me say it."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Understand this. We'd better be clear. I love you, but you're my mistress. You'll do what I tell you; you won't ask questions. Or we'll part. Which is it to be?"

A gust of temper swept over her.

"You know I've no choice. I should starve."

"There are half a dozen men ready to take you."

"And you would hand me on?"

He took her by the arms. “I’ve told you I love you. Isn’t that enough? It’s true. If it’s not enough, you’d better take one of the others. You could make fools of them—easily.”

“But why couldn’t you have left me in a hotel? It would have been the same for you and better for me.”

“Because I don’t think that way. I wanted you here—that’s enough.”

“You don’t think of me at all—ever!”

He turned away and, walking to the window, stood with his back to her, staring at the lowered blind. She would not understand the freak of superstition in him which withheld him from marrying her because, if she were once his wife, he would turn less lightly to other women. His affection for her was genuine, perhaps lasting, but not exclusive. It was not that he knew no loyalty or that a chance desire swept loyalty away; but he loved to dominate, to take up and cast aside, to overpower many by his will. He lived for contrast, for the interplay of personalities wrought upon by emotion, for the fiercer colourings of tragedy and desire. To him the blank sexual routine of respectable men was intolerable. His loves must be a never-ending tale, an adventure undulled by habit. He did not deceive her. She sat among the women who were at his suppers in London and she was above them all. She shared, too, with him the hours of work and quietness into which no other woman entered. But, for her, security came first. He knew that. Sometimes he dreaded to lose her because of it.

The low window-sill was pressing his knee. The blind was so close to his eyes that he could distinguish the threads of which it was composed. Behind him, he knew, Peggy was standing as he had left her: but with what look in those eyes that were certainly turned upon him? As he strove to imagine her eyes, he heard a voice calling him softly by name. It was not Peggy’s voice. It seemed to proceed from some place far away, and, though he did not know who it was that spoke, the voice was familiar and distinct. Fear stole over him so that he dared not move. He was terribly aware that behind him was a living woman upon whom he could not look, whose long-held pose must by now have taken upon itself a certain rigidity; and that in the room above, separated from him by a few yards only, lay the body of Urden Flare, wrapt in darkness, mocked by a profusion of lilies.

Then, in a flood of understanding, he located and recognized the voice that had not ceased softly to call him. He seized the cord of the spring blind, pulled and released it. The naked panes, blackened by night, threw back at him his own reflection and the scarlet gleam of his lamp. He bent at once, thrust his fingers through the iron rings attached to the lower frame, and

attempted to raise the window. It creaked but did not move. The iron cut into his flesh, and, because the rings were not large enough to admit more than one finger through which he might transmit his strength, he began to groan with eagerness and dismay.

"What is it? What is it? Don't you see?—the catch is not back."

He saw Peggy's hand stretched over him.

"Stop pulling at the window. Stop! I can't move the catch while you pull."

Withdrawing his fingers, he stood up suddenly so that his shoulder struck her breast. He did not look at her, but out of the window into the darkness he could not penetrate. As the catch was released under her touch, she stood back and her pressure upon him was removed. Stooping again to the rings, he flung up the window. The winter air flowed in over his face and hands.

"Where are you?" he cried. "Where are you?" Then, when nothing but the rustling of evergreens answered him: "Speak! Oh, for the sake of God, speak to me!"

"What is it? Why are you shouting? Tell me what it is!"

Peggy's hand was laid on his arm. He shook it off with a gesture that was almost a blow, and clambered out of the window on to the gravel. A shaft of moon, given him by the movement of heavy clouds, fell across a lawn that lay stretched from the house westward, and was overshadowed, in the direction of the hills, by great poplars, and, beyond them, by the mass of the hill itself. In this direction, with a low cry of anticipation as if he had seen his quarry, he set off running.

His course taking him beyond the western wall of Flare, there soon opened to his left the expanse of Dedwick Vale. From this quarter, a south-east wind, which the buildings had broken, swept over him. The figure which the moon had revealed in flight now stood motionless, distant some thirty yards. He advanced without haste.

The moon was partly obscured. Only blunt shadows of brow and throat marked the face that was kept steadily towards him as he approached and was swiftly turned away and hidden when, being within range of low speaking, he stopped.

"Look at me, Angela."

"I can't. Why do you follow me?"

"You called my name."

“Yes. I thought you were alone. I saw your shadow on the blind. Then the blind went up. Oh! I thought you were alone. I swear it.”

“I am alone now.”

“No: the window!”

“We’re out of sight.”

“She’ll follow. She’ll come here.”

“No. The moon has gone in. We are lost in the dark. Come.”

He urged her, who had no will beneath his touch to resist, towards the poplars’ gloom.

“Why did you come?”

“I knew you were at Flare. I thought you were alone. I’m so wretched.” She laid her hands against his shoulders and turned her face to him, but, as his arms moved to touch her, she withdrew swiftly like an animal resisting a dangerous fascination. “Oh, I was a fool to come. It’s all over. I ought to have known. You don’t care for me now. It’s all done with. I’m left with him.”

“Fish?”

“He’s mad. He’s like a beast.”

“There—you mustn’t be afraid of him. He’s rough. But he loves you, doesn’t he?”

Her knowledge of the facts of Fish’s love so coloured these words with bitterness that she shrank under them and remained silent.

“It’s so dark that I can’t see you,” Rory said. “Why do you stand there with your breath coming quickly as if there were something you dared not say? Angela, you’re not afraid of me? Do you remember how once, when I thought I had frightened you because I loved you so much, you said that nothing I did would ever make you afraid? It was on the night when a bird flew in at the window and perched near the mirror blinded by a candle.”

Borne on the tide of these memories into his embrace, she clung to him, sobbing, with dry eyes, but, as his arms closed about her, her hands fell suddenly from him, her body stiffened and resisted, and a toneless gasp of pain escaped her lips. He struggled to read her face.

“Angela, what is it?”

“Let me go.” His grip tightened. “Let me go. You’re hurting me.”

He stood back in wonder.

“You don’t care,” she exclaimed, “not though he flogs me to death! You’ve had your pleasure, and you don’t care—not though my body’s a river

of blood!" Then, with fiery transition from hatred to appeal: "Take me away! Take me right out of it all! I can't go back to him to-night! He's waiting there now, counting the time I've been away. When I get back and shut the door quiet and creep in, there he'll be in the passage. And he won't say no word, but stand looking at me with the lamp held in his hand, and bar the way to the kitchen so as I must go upstairs. And then he'll come and open the door and slam it to. You don't know how his eyes look."

She was now raised, by her own imagining of the repeated scene, to so high a terror that her voice broke and caught and came out mingled with the sound of her breathing. The wind swayed the poplars over her till their trunks complained and the gaps of sky they revealed danced and spread and rolled inwards like flying paper. Rory was thinking that the woman, whom the darkness hid from him but whose voice, harsh and querulous, filled him with disgust, must now be shrunken and old, her beauty torn from her by child-bearing and endurance. And she, conscious of his hesitation and miserably aware that somehow she had killed his love and pity, said: "Oh, you think it's all a tale. You don't believe. You shall see!" and, with hands made deft by madness, stripped the clothes from her wounded shoulders and stood silent before him, her head raised, her whole frame shaken by cold, her fingers interlaced across her breast.

He could see nothing but the gleam of her flesh and hair, and these, producing in him a sudden reaction, called up before him so clear a vision of the girl she had once been that it seemed she stood unchanged. He caught her to him and bent back her head with the pressure of his lips.

"Now go," he said.

"Never back to him. Rory, do you—do you love me still?"

"I must get you out of this. If I give you enough to make you safe, you can run away; you need never go back to him."

But this assurance was not what she needed now.

"Do you love me still? Tell me that. Tell me you love me. That's all I care for. Once more . . ."

She dropped on her knees, whimpering his name. A low gust of wind caught the garments she had discarded and sent them fluttering against the brambles. She was come now to the wreck of all her fortunes in this world.

"Get up, get up," Rory said. "You do no good cowering there."

Her voice came to him muffled. "Isn't there anything left of all you told me? Not for one hour—your love? Don't you remember how when you took me——"

Memories flowed through her speech. In all she said there was neither sequence nor hesitation. Scene after scene was recalled with such detailed accuracy that even the touch of her hands became abhorrent, and Rory stepped back from her, leaving her to fall forward on the ground. He could not leave her thus, for he knew that so she would lie through the night and the cold take fatal hold upon her.

"Angela!" he said, and, because she neither moved nor answered, he thrust his arms round her, lifted, and held her that she might not fall again.

"You need never go back to him. I'll make you free of that. You are safe now—do you understand?—safe."

"I don't care for that."

"I'll give you enough for all your needs. You needn't be afraid. There, put your things on. You'll die of cold."

She clung more closely to him and thrust her face to his.

"I love you still. Kiss me. . . . Oh, in God's name, you kiss me as if I were a strange woman."

She broke from him, but, with quick impulse, he followed and took hold of her.

"I gave you what you wanted," she said. "You will give me nothing—not one hour."

He kissed her with simulated passion in an attempt to quiet her, but she thrust him away.

"Money—kisses! They are nothing. You give nothing."

"There is nothing I can give."

"Then why did you follow me?"

He remained silent. There was no right course; there was no selfish course open to him. He could think of nothing that he ought or wished to do. He hated to remain with her, for, when he had kissed her, he had felt the bones under her cheek, but he feared to leave her because something within him said: "You must not let it end now. There is no splendour or colour in this. Think of the right phrase, the right act; then you can end it and forget." But no act or phrase came to him. The world, upon which he depended, was bankrupt. A wild idea of offering her spiritual consolation occurred to him. He wanted to tell her she must fall back upon Christ. Then, looking up at her shivering body and the great trees massed over her, he scorned himself for what seemed his hypocrisy, and was sick in mind at the thought that had been his.

"Well, you'd better go," she said.

“What are you going to do?”

She stood peering at him so that he could endure it no longer. At last he added: “Good-bye. I’ll send you money,” and walked away from her.

She began to gather up her clothes with frozen fingers.

CHAPTER NINE

AFTER one glance from his window next morning, Captain Pye decided that there should be no funeral at sea. Throughout the night his mind had been unquiet. He had wakened often, and, at each waking, the same uncertainty as to his duty had immediately gripped him. He was not concerned in the matter. He was in charge of the boat—no more. His responsibility extended no further than seamanship; and, if old Flare wished to be buried at sea—well, that was for him to decide. At this point, sitting up in bed with a hand curved over his ear, he would stare at the ceiling, and his mind would be filled with the remembrance of Rory's smiling gaze at the plaster cherubs. It had not been pleasant, that sudden realization of Urden Flare's last, grim joke: to make poor Bax seasick while he read the office. Bax was a good man, though a dull one; a kind man, though with little perception of the spirit. Urden Flare, in making this request which bore a date more than a year old, had done himself less than justice. It was a mean request, and Flare's sins were never mean. It lacked that very sense of humour of which it had seemed at first to be an example. Probably Flare had forgotten having written it; recollection, when the bitter whim had passed, would have led to the will's destruction. He would not have wished it to be obeyed.

There was, too, another consideration that weighed heavily with Pye. He had watched the burial of men at sea, had counted the circular ripples as they expanded over the filmy surface of the Pacific. He remembered the pitiless sun, the flat blue of the sky, the stifling sense of imminent corruption with which tropical calms are loaded. At these moments the words of the Burial Service had promised to him a ransom that was peculiarly the ransom of seamen; he had perceived significance in the fact that a ship's mast and yard lie to each other in the form of a cross. To repeat this ritual for the satisfaction of a landsman's wry humour seemed to him intolerable.

Then, reminding himself that he was but an instrument in this matter, he would fall again into a troubled sleep.

The morning sea swept doubt away. During the night the wind had risen. He could tell Rory, what was indeed true, that the small steamboat was not built for such weather, and, with this intent, he set out an hour later for Flare Manor.

Entering the Manor by a side door, he came unexpectedly upon the lady Rory had brought north. In front of him was a narrow passage. Opposite the point where this passage joined the hall was a room through the open door

of which he saw her. She stood with the tips of her fingers resting on a table and her head slightly raised. It seemed that, falling unconsciously into this attitude, she had long maintained it while thought ran on. Certainly more than the distant sound of his footsteps was needed to recall her.

Pye was still wondering if he should be able to avoid what might be an embarrassing encounter, since he did not know by what name he should speak to her, when the door of Rory's room opened. Irma came out with a quick step, passed across the hall without looking to right or left, and disappeared towards the garden. There was something in the directness and speed of her movement and in the fact of her not having paused to put on her coat or hat which prevented Pye from thinking merely: "There's Irma, going into the garden." Her manner checked him; there was in it an urgent determination that stirred his curiosity.

When he looked again towards the doorway that faced him across the hall, he saw that Peggy's attention also had been arrested by Irma's swift going, and that she was now turned in his direction. He walked up to her boldly. Her black dress, though it threw her light colouring into relief, gave her an air of artificiality. He felt that she was "dressed up"; and this, added to the unwonted appearance of frailty which now she wore, made him uneasy in her presence.

"It was the child who went out?" she said.

"Yes—into the garden."

"I didn't exactly see her go. I was looking the other way, I think. But I knew someone had crossed the hall. I thought it must have been the child."

This, clearly, was intended to be explanatory of something she could not explain, and Pye deliberately gave her time to gather the control that was somehow unsteadied. She gazed at him while he talked, and, at last, speaking from a course of thought which his words had in no way interrupted, she said:

"I hate this funeral, Captain Pye. It's all wrong. It's horrible. I can't imagine why Rory goes on with it. Couldn't it be stopped? Can't you do something to stop it?"

"But surely," he said, "you could do more than I? I am merely in charge of the boat."

She looked at him sharply, with a flash of resentment and suspicion.

"Why should you think I can do anything?"

"I should have thought your influence——"

"Mine?"

He remained firm. “Yes.”

She watched him, summing him up. Then, putting away her mustered indignation, she asked:

“You’re a sailor, aren’t you? You’ve been at sea a long time?”

“Nearly all my life.”

“Then I’ll tell you. I haven’t that kind of influence.” And she added with pitiable defiance that struck home to him: “You knew I hadn’t. You needn’t have pressed me.”

It would have been easy to give some apology, but Pye felt that cold politeness would be cruel. He must meet her now on the ground she had chosen to throw open.

“If there’s anything I can do, I’d be glad.”

“Then stop it. Tell him you won’t sail. Refuse point-blank if necessary. You must stand fast, though; make up your mind and stand fast. He has been almost mad since last night. He’ll listen to no one. I daren’t go near him again.”

“What happened last night?”

She drew in breath and closed her lips. “That was nothing. That was between him and me. You—you understand.”

Tears of helplessness flooded her eyes and she turned away to conceal them. While he waited for her to recover composure, he found himself reading the golden titles of the books in the shelves.

“Am I to go or stay?”

“Stay a little.”

He went straight to her and put his hand over hers. “My dear, it’s no good breaking down. One must fight through the storms. I’m an old sailor; I’m getting an old man.”

“Yes, yes,” she said. “You’re kind, I know. But you have a crew to help you fight and a port to make for, haven’t you?”

She made herself smile at him.

“Look you,” he said. “Tell me, why do you want this funeral stopped? What’s it matter to you? What’s behind it?”

“Everything has gone wrong since we came up here. I hate the place. There’s something bad in it. I want to get away—back to London again. It’s all easier to understand in London. It’s straightforward, anyhow.”

“You’ll get away as quickly if he’s buried at sea as if he’s buried in the vault.”

"I know. But there's Irma, too."

"Irma?"

"Last night she had dreams, I think. This morning she said there must be no funeral at sea—*must*, mind you, from a child like that! She said we should all be lost if there was a funeral at sea. Drowned, did she mean? I asked. But she didn't know whether it was drowned or not; *lost* was all she could say. She said it over and over again. And she looked as if she knew. She was all desperate and fighting and yet calm. It was the calm that frightened me. Rory wouldn't listen. He just laughed at first and waved her away. Then, when she went on, he swore at her, and her eyes flashed—not like a child's eyes. 'Can't you see?' she said. 'Why can't you see anything?' Then she sat down and cried as if her heart would break; and, when I went over to her, she would take no notice of me, and Rory shouted at me to 'Go away! go away! go away!' Then later she went into Rory's room and she's just come out and gone into the garden."

"Where has she gone to now?"

"I don't know."

"She went out as she was—no hat or coat."

Peggy nodded. "You see what I mean now?"

"You believe the child."

"I don't believe or not believe. I just want it all over. I want to get away."

"Do you mean you want to escape?"

"Escape?"

"From Rory? Is he holding you?"

She threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, no! oh, no! It's not rescue I need. Last night he told me I could go. He told me I had better go while there was still time for myself. And he offered me money to go with. There, that's the truth. I don't know why I told you. And he's not tired of me yet, I know. It's not that he wanted to get rid of me. It's something new—from outside—making him act like this. I don't understand it. He's never like that in London. That's why I want to get away."

"Perhaps——" Pye began, and hesitated. She laid her hand flat against the window-pane. It was as if the brutality of her self-revelation gave her some obscure pleasure.

"No," she said. "Other girls don't make any difference to him and me. Even if there were other girls it would make no odds. That's not the reason." And, her voice becoming suddenly clear of bitterness, she went on: "Go in and see him. Tell him you won't sail."

"Very well."

"You promise?"

"Yes."

When he was at the door she said:

"And you won't think unkindly?"

"No, indeed. I promise that."

He found the sitting-room no longer in disorder. The dust-sheets were removed, the fire-irons and mirror shone. Over all was a faint scent of furniture-polish. Rory was standing by the fire-place, filling a pipe from a jar on the mantelpiece. He turned his head as Pye came in.

"Everything all right?"

"Everything is ready, but the sea is too rough."

There was a pause.

"Nonsense!" said Rory at last, but without conviction. "The sea will do us no harm."

"It's quite impossible to take boats in tow."

"Then we'll have to go alone."

"The steamboat isn't built for such weather."

"You mean you're afraid?"

Pye smiled. He saw that Rory's will was shaken; that the new superstition, instilled into him by Irma, was stronger than the old, but that he dared not admit his conversion. It was for Pye to take the blame for a change of plan.

"For myself, no," he said. "I'm not afraid, but I'll not take the responsibility for my passengers."

"Which means that you refuse to go? There are the expenses already incurred. Will you pay them?"

"If you like."

Rory laughed. "My dear Pye, you're absurd! You shall do nothing of the kind. The old man will pay them—it's his estate. And we'll bury him with his fathers. Now are you satisfied? But there's one thing you must do for me. Go down to Flare Royal and warn the people of the change. Tell Bax on your way: he'll be relieved. And have arrangements made at once for the funeral in the churchyard. We can postpone it an hour or two to give them time."

He led Pye by the arm into the hall, opened the door for him, and watched him disappear among the trees. Then, turning back into the house,

he called in a voice that betrayed how greatly his heart was lightened:

"Peggy! Peggy!"

There was no answer and he repeated the call. Presently a black figure appeared in the light that shone on the head of the stairs. It paused timidly.

"Come," he said, and, opening the sitting-room door, stood aside to let her pass. Then at once he took hold of her.

"My darling, I've been a beast to you. What can I say?"

"You are breaking me in your arms."

"But you love me?"

"Yes."

"You love me still?"

"Yes."

"Though I break and hurt you?"

And she cried out: "Yes! Yes! Yes!" and let her head fall back.

After long stillness, he put her from him and said, while she stood with fixed eyes:

"Go to the piano and play."

And he threw himself on the hearth-rug and waited for her to begin.

CHAPTER TEN

On the morning of the funeral, Mr. Bax was recognizably in one of his bad moods. His wife was careful to say nothing of the subject which she knew was occupying his mind, and the housemaid, when soon after breakfast she was sent into his study to take him the letters he had left unopened by his plate, withdrew hastily and was glad when the door was once more closed behind her. She was afraid of no kind of violence in him. He would not, she knew, accuse her unjustly or speak angrily to her. But he sat staring at his ink-pots and rapping the blotter with a paper-knife in a way which made her uncomfortable in his presence. This restless absorption was a bad sign; that was all. Of what it was significant no one knew, but it reacted upon the household. Servants and mistress went about their work cheerlessly. When they spoke, their voices were quieter than usual.

He examined the carving on his paper-knife with eyes that took in no detail of the design. After a little while, he laid it down where he could not comfortably reach it, and tried to think, but presently he found himself dipping a fragment of blotting-paper into a pool of ink which had overflowed when the pot was filled, and watching the dark-blue fluid creep over the pink surface, creep higher and higher until at last his finger and thumb were holding a piece of flabby wetness.

At this moment the maid came in again. His impulse was to ask her sharply what she wanted, but he restrained himself. It was not her fault, poor girl.

"There's a gentleman to see you, sir, please."

He hesitated. If this were some parish matter—the nursing-fund, perhaps, or a little boy who wanted help in finding a job—he couldn't deal with it now, really he couldn't. He would see about it to-morrow morning. And yet—well, he was the parish priest. Parish matters, however trivial and annoying, were his duty, and he must not shirk his duty.

"Who is it? Did you ask his name?"

"It's the sailor gentleman with the bad ear, sir. Him that called before."

"Captain Pye?"

"Yes, sir."

This was the last man in the world he wanted to see. Surely the arrangements were complete. There could be nothing more to say. The feeling of resentment which he had been trying all the morning to overcome so that he should not bury a man while he was yet angry with him,

reasserted itself. At last, driving it down, he said quietly: “Ask him to come in, please.” As the girl reached the door, he added: “You should always ask visitors their names.”

To the news that Pye brought he gave the strange welcome of a smile. He could not help smiling when he discovered that the change of plan gave him so little satisfaction after all. He was glad, and, when Pye paused for him to speak, he said: “I am glad,” but he was thinking that, though he had prayed rather distractedly for strength to do his duty in a right spirit, it had never seemed worth while to pray that the duty itself might be changed.

“It’s odd how things happen,” he said vaguely.

“Yes,” Pye answered, thinking of Irma.

“You know, I never prayed for that. It’s the one thing I didn’t pray for. It didn’t seem to me that it could possibly happen.” He walked to the fire-place and added: “I suppose we ought to learn to ask for what seems to us impossible. Don’t you think so, Captain Pye?”

“That’s coming near the New Jerusalem, Vicar.”

“Eh?”

But Mr. Bax’s thought had wandered already, and was returning to the practical. He stopped short on the edge of realization. He withdrew again on to familiar, humbler ground. It was as if, after drawing himself almost to the top of the wall that limited his vision, he had fallen back to count the bricks. He stretched out a hand to the fire, and thought, as he watched the light flicker round his thumb: “I suppose I’m not what’s called a spiritual priest. Probably just as well. In a parish like this, someone’s got to get the spade-work done.” And, turning to Pye, he asked:

“What made Rory change his mind? He was very fixed last night.”

“I went in to persuade him. I was going to give a seaman’s reasons. And I found him persuaded.”

“By what?”

“By the little girl, I think. He didn’t say so. But I was told she had a dream last night. It seems to have impressed the household.”

“Who told you that? Irma herself?”

“No. The lady Flare brought with him.”

“That’s his mistress.”

“I suppose so.”

Mr. Bax said nothing. What he had been about to say seemed unsatisfactory and he shut his lips upon it.

"These dreams!" he began after a pause. "They'll spoil that girl, listening to her. She'll grow up one of these over-sensitive abnormal women. It's a pity. She has intelligence, if only it could be subjected to some kind of discipline."

"Do you think discipline would change her?"

"Something ought to."

"Why?"

"Why? Surely, Pye, as a man of the world, you don't defend that kind of thing? If she'd lived a few centuries ago, she's the kind of person they'd have sent to the stake."

The priest's eyes had grown hard.

"Perhaps you'd have been on the tribunal, Vicar."

It was spoken good-humouredly and Mr. Bax softened into short laughter.

"I must be getting out," he said. "I'll walk down to *The Three Faithful Men* and tell the ostler to have the vault opened and everything arranged. Jim looks after these things for me. Are you coming that way?"

They went out together into the hall, where they met Mrs. Bax, a small birdlike woman whose chief care was to ward off from her husband the worldly nuisances by which he was so unfairly beset. To her, whose brothers earned their living by trade, a Cambridge degree seemed to entitle its holder to protection from all but intellectual exercise. Her husband's study was a place apart, an island upon which the waves of materialism ought never to encroach. He was engaged in mysteries which she did not understand, which it was not her place to understand. It annoyed her that he should waste his time with parish accounts of which she could quite well have relieved him, and that he should play cricket with the villagers when he might have been meditating. When he explained that these things were part of a parish priest's duty, she replied that they withdrew him from a higher duty which few were equipped to fulfil whereas anyone could keep accounts and play cricket. Her mind was incapable of receiving the fact that he liked cricket and accounts better than meditation. "I am afraid cricket is my field," he said once, and she, suspecting no bitterness, answered gently: "I don't think we ought to joke about such things, dear."

Now she accompanied them to the front door, saying how glad she was that young Mr. Flare had turned sensible. It was so good of Captain Pye to let them know at once; it lifted such a weight from the Vicar's mind. These eccentric courses were very distracting. Yes, it was a cold wind, and, in spite of the trees, the houses on the hill had very little protection when the wind

was southerly. It must be very bitter in Flare Manor, which was even less protected than the Vicarage. Young Mr. Flare would be returning to London, no doubt? And Irma would be all alone at the Manor with no one to look after her but the servants. Poor little maid! It was dreadful she should run wild like that. What a tragic life for a child—no mother, no guidance! And such a difficult family for a young person—in fact, you couldn't say there was real family life at all. It was a pity. She was a pretty little girl and good at heart, surely. If only she were less flighty! If only there were some wise, firm hand to guide her!

When they were gone, Mrs. Bax returned to the kitchen.

"The funeral will be as usual," she said. "The Vicar has gone out. You won't forget to see that the study fire is kept bright?"

The snow of Christmas day was almost gone. Only between the sheltering roots of trees thin wedges remained, hardened by the frost that had succeeded the thaw. The two men walked in silence while the firs still overshadowed them, but on reaching the full sunlight, as if heavy thoughts had fallen from them, they began to talk. They were following a path tributary to the wider track by which, on that afternoon nine years ago, Rory had ridden home. Now winter had so laid her quiet colouring over the scene that the twist of smoke rising from the inn could not easily be distinguished from its sombre background. Below them and at right angles to their direction the north road sparkled like a river. Beyond it the ground rose easily to the back of a cliff, and over this, from the height at which they moved, the sea was visible. On the cliff, dwarfed in silhouette against the masses of stormy sky, stood Dr. Conrad's house.

When they reached the valley, the sea was lost to sight and vast shadows scudded across the hills. The sunshine's coming and going accentuated the cold of morning, for, when clouds banked across the sun's face, direct warmth seemed too suddenly withdrawn and the expanding greyness acquired the intensity and influence of twilight swiftly fallen. It was in the midst of such a sullen retreat of splendour that they came at last upon the high road. The brightness of the hills was folded back; giant glooms swept over the places where it had been, so that even the road itself which a moment since had cut boldly southward, being now shrunken and wrinkled, no longer arrested the eye. Only the sign of *The Three Faithful Men*, already too worn and faded to give back the sun's glitter, swung on unchanged amid the general transformation.

Jim was closing the door of the stable. At his side was Little William, his arm crooked awkwardly over the handle of a great empty bucket he was carrying.

"You'd better be runnin' home, Little William. Mr. Meggle will be wonderin' where you got to."

"But I want to know how Irma got on at Dr. Conrad's. I want to wait till she comes back."

"She won't change Mr. Rory when his mind's made up—not with all her dreams. That I know. And the doctor won't neither. So you're wastin' your time lingerin' here."

"All the same, I think Irma——"

Jim took the boy by the shoulder.

"Look here, young man," he said, "you'd better drop callin' her 'Irma' like that. It ain't your place."

"But I call her 'Irma' when she's here. And she calls me 'Will'!"

"What else should she call you? 'Master Will,' d'ye think? You remember she lives at the Manor, though she do run wild, maybe. And don't ye grow up like them fellows from Dedwick what hasn't got a Miss or Mister nowhere except for such of themselves as they quarrels with. It ain't your place. Home's your place. Now you give that bucket to me an' run off."

They turned from the stable to find the Vicar and Captain Pye standing near at hand. Without a word, Little William surrendered the bucket and slipped away across the gravel yard, but at the edge of the road he paused and, seeing over his shoulder that Jim's attention was now occupied by the new-comers, decided that he might safely remain if he kept quiet. He therefore climbed on to a bench that stood near the sign-pole, and, hugging his knees up to his body for the sake of warmth, stared at the empty slope that led to the cliff. Behind him he heard the three men talking, but even when their words told him that the plans for the funeral were changed he did not turn his head. Since a day, some three weeks earlier, on which Captain Pye had offered to have him educated and, when the time came, to take him to sea in his ship and train him as a sailor, his future chief's presence had always caused him embarrassment—the same embarrassment which made him awkwardly silent when, after the news had spread, good-hearted people in the village began to call him "Admiral." He longed to go to sea. Moreover, he had ordinarily an easy manner with those he liked which freed him from shyness. But, although Captain Pye with his deep, bright eyes and friendly hand was for him a hero, the almost professional relation newly created between them was somehow restrictive. For three weeks Captain

Pye had called him, not ‘Little William,’ but by his unfamiliar surname, Drake.

He stretched himself full length and turned upon his face. With a twig which he found blown by the wind against the leg of the bench, he scrawled in uneven capitals on the gravel:

WILL DRAKE

The name, so seldom used, set him wondering about his father, but he stopped short at wonder, for of this unknown personage Meggle could never be induced to say more than that he had died a few months before his son was born. He must have been dead, then, almost twelve years. It was odd to have missed the last twelve years. Will described a One and a Two upon the gravel. His mother, too, “his poor, foolish mother,” as Meggle, who was her brother, called her—she had been dead almost as long. Why “foolish”? It would have been nice to have had a mother to whom he might bring gifts of parrots and silks from beyond the seas. Meggle would not write long letters; besides, Meggle would die soon. Irma might write him letters. With long sweeps of his twig he scratched out the characters he had drawn. Irma must write him letters.

He threw away the twig in front of him. His eye, following its passage through the air, lighted upon a mass of feathers near the spot where it fell. The feathers did not move and he realized with a little pang of astonishment that the bird was dead. Its death must have been very recent. Before he went to the stable with Jim, he had stood by the place where the body was now lying, and it had not been there then.

“Well, Drake,” said the Captain’s voice behind him, “I thought you were going home.”

“I’m waiting for Miss Irma, sir. . . . Look, sir, there’s a dead sparrow just fallen.”

“Did you see it fall?” Mr. Bax asked, walking towards it.

“No, sir; but it wasn’t there just before you came.”

The Vicar stood over the body but did not touch it.

“Poor thing! Yes; the feathers are still fresh and free from dust. Frozen and exhausted, I suppose.”

Jim had come up with them. The three men now stood beneath the sign gazing towards the opposite hill. “Miss Irma . . . Miss Irma . . .” Pye’s brain echoed the words. Were they all waiting for Miss Irma? But he said nothing, and there grew over them a silence that seemed scarcely broken by the

regular tapping of Will's heel upon the bench. Presently the boy's voice startled them.

"There she is—coming now. D'you see? Against that furze-bush—coming down the hill."

"That's Dr. Conrad carrying her," said Mr. Bax. "There's something wrapped round her."

They watched the approaching figure with new curiosity. None dared speak the inevitable thought and fear. When he saw Irma's arm move and twine itself more comfortably round the doctor's shoulder, Pye knew that his relief was shared by them all.

"Tired, I expect. That's why he's carrying her," he said.

"She shouldn't run off like that," the Vicar answered. "There are moments—I've noticed them myself—when she seems to have no self-control. Yet ordinarily she's a quiet enough child—almost dreamy."

Jim's fingers had closed over the arm of the boy, who, at the first sight of Irma, had come running from the bench.

"Well, thank God, she ain't hurt. What d'you say, Little William?"

Pye stared at the dead sparrow, not wishing at present to search Jim's face. When at last he looked again eastward, he found that Dr. Conrad had come within hailing distance and was trying to free an arm that he might wave to them. He walked heavily under his burden. Behind him the cliff-edge, cutting the dark sky in a smooth line of greater darkness, was rimmed with the false light thrown up by the sea. Presently Conrad had come so close that they could see the coarse grass bend and spring under his tread. He crossed the road, walked into the court-yard, and set Irma down on the gravel. She was wrapped in a cloak borrowed from his housekeeper; her cheeks were pale, her eyes set and strained.

"There," he said. "You'll be all right now. I'll leave you here with Captain Pye and go straight on and see Rory. I will do my best, Irma; but I can promise nothing."

She looked up at him and, after a moment's pause, said:

"There is no need for you to go to Rory now."

And the Vicar broke in upon Pye's wonder.

"You have given yourself a lot of trouble for nothing, little lady. The funeral at sea has been cancelled long ago."

Her eyes turned slowly upon him.

"Yes," she said, and smiled.

It was a smile of contentment and peace. Her gaze travelled over the group that surrounded her until it checked suddenly upon Little William. At the sight of him, as if his appearance had suggested to her the advent of some new struggle, peace left her face, and she stood rigid, regarding him with curious wonder and expectation, her lips parted, waiting for the words he would speak.

He seemed not to have noticed her strange arrest.

"Look," he said, repeating his earlier phrase, "there's a dead sparrow just fallen."

She walked in the direction he showed her, stooped over the bird, and raised it in her hands. There she held it a little time and pressed the feathers against her cheek.

"It is not dead."

As she spoke, there was a movement of the beak, a quick fluttering of the wings. She put the bird down. For a moment it paused as if dazed by the sun. Then, with a light movement that scattered the pebble-chips, it hopped away.

Irma's face was bloodless.

"Just frozen," Mr. Bax was saying. "It's remarkable, the influence of the human hand."

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WITHIN a year of Urden Flare's funeral, Mr. Bax wrote to Rory in London that it was time for Irma to go to school. "Dr. Conrad," he said, "is an able teacher of the ordinary school subjects, but both Mrs. Bax and I are agreed that, under his tuition, Irma must lack that feminine influence which is most necessary. Mrs. Clear is a kindly soul, but she spoils the child." But Rory would have none of it. He would have no dictation from his Vicar. Why was Bax so eager to be rid of the girl? was the way he put it to Conrad. And Conrad replied: "Come down from London and talk about it. The Vicar may be right. She's an odd child. She ought to interest you. You'd better come and judge for yourself."

Rory came and was so enchanted by the thought that this beautiful child's destiny was in his hands that he could deny her nothing. She did not want to go to school; that was enough—she should not go. She liked to be taught by Conrad; she should be taught by him. "There's material to mould! Make what you like of it, Doctor. It ought to be good fun. It needn't be so many years now before she's old enough to come to London. Don't let the priests get hold of her. She's their kind."

"That's not likely," Conrad answered. "For her the church might not exist except when she is taken to it. But she has the people under a spell. They fear and love her. They are intensely superstitious——"

"About her?"

"Ever since she was a baby. It's thought lucky to meet her on great occasions—weddings, for instance. And it's lucky to have her walk into your house, or into your field about harvest-time. She's much more valued than the doctor when you're ill. You remember, she used to tell them stories as a very little child. That's how it began. The stories had a habit of coming true—or so it seemed. Then there was the incident of your father's funeral and the frozen bird. The news of that spread. It's a legend now."

"Tell me," said Rory, "what does *The Three Faithful Men* believe about that bird? What does Jim believe, for instance?"

"They believe the bird was dead."

"And she?"

Conrad shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"But you must have asked her?"

"Never. . . . You know, Rory, they believe she brings them luck in gambling. They don't tell her so, but, when she walks into *The Three*

Faithful Men, it means a lot by whose side she chooses to stand. And, if luck doesn't come to that man—well, it's a straight warning; he'd better mend his ways. And he does—till his luck mends."

Rory twisted the talk to a sudden angle.

"Conrad, you talk of all this with a kind of easy cynicism. *They* are superstitious, you say, and *they* believe. Are you playing down to me or up to me—put it which way you will? Tell me the truth. What do you think yourself?"

"Don't you know the truth?"

"I am always away."

Conrad shook his head. "Weren't you here on the morning of your father's funeral? The child came straight from you to me. Pye saw you after she had gone. Then came the frozen bird. You weren't at *The Three Faithful Men* but you hold a link in the chain. It's like the other links. As you judge it, so you'll judge the chain."

"She made me change my mind."

"Yes: but how?"

"She was dead set."

"Then it wasn't Pye's persuasions?"

"No. Pye knows that. He knew it then."

"But you've never admitted it before. And now—is there any need to ask me what I believe?"

Rory laughed. "Upon my word, you teach me my lesson as you might teach a child to repeat the alphabet. I'd like to stay and watch her or to take her to London with me. But she's too young for that. She'd be in the way in my kind of house."

Irma was brought to London once only before she came to womanhood. She was then nearly eighteen years old; dark, with full colour burning in a dark skin, and eyes brown and wide. London produced in her neither alarm nor surprise. She submitted to the admiration of such women as Mrs. Trell with no sign of pleasure or resentment. She brought out in Lord Drumpeter his jester's sadness, so that he was good to her with a kind of clumsy apology to the friends whom he had taught to look to him for less honest and more amusing practice with girls of her age. Mrs. Trell, a heavily built woman with a looseness of flesh about cheek and jaw, used to lead

discussions of Irma among Rory's friends. Her eyes, which seemed scarce sunken in her head, twinkled beneath flat lids.

"Drum's first love," she said with contempt.

"You despise it?" Drumpeter asked.

"I laugh at a rake's sentiment."

"Can you distinguish?"

"I'm trained to it."

"But this is a child."

"Drum—it's a woman to you."

"Anyhow, to me she's human. To you she's a specimen. You'd like to experiment. You're smart enough to recognize material in her. It would amuse you to launch a saint into your world. She'd persuade into your drawing-room men whom your money can't buy and women who despise your excellent dinners."

Mrs. Trell smiled. Then she said to Rory: "Well, have you decided whether Irma is coming to live with me?"

"I told you I had decided."

"As a man of the world, don't you know that a girl needs a woman to bring her out? I brought Vi out last season."

"She's your own daughter. You can, of course, do what you like with her."

"She and Irma are becoming great friends."

"Dear lady," said Rory, "it's no good. As a man of the world, I know that a girl who comes out under your wing is damned. You know it, too."

Mrs. Trell had an amazing gift. Shafts of this kind sank into her without leaving a visible wound. Earlier in life she had been hurt by them, but her heart had dried up. Now she was almost convinced that the shafts missed her, just as she was almost convinced that she was indeed a great lady. She had learnt that the straightest speaking must be received with a twist of the lip, and laughed off as if it were raillery. Now she said:

"Rory, you are delightful! There's not another man in London who would have had the courage to say that, even if he had meant it. Well, send her round to lunch with me."

"But she goes to Flare to-morrow."

"It seems a pity to waste miracles on villagers."

"Who told you of them?"

"One hears."

“Who told you?”

“Natalya.”

Rory nodded.

“Is it true that Natalya is going to live at Flare?” Drumpeter asked.

“Not at the Manor,” said Rory. “In the village. She’s got a room in Fish’s house.”

“You suggested it, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“Charming, if I may say so.”

Mrs. Trell scented scandal. “Rory!” she said, holding up a mocking finger.

“Oh, Rory’s got no interest in her,” said Drumpeter. “No particular interest, I mean.”

“Oh!”—doubtfully.

“No, I haven’t!” Rory exclaimed with a flash of anger.

“Well . . .”

“No,” he repeated.

They looked at each other, and Drumpeter continued: “I know you haven’t. I’m sorry. But, honestly, Rory, what does a woman like Natalya want in that place? A Russian dancer, a revolutionary, a protégée of Mrs. Trell’s—above all, a woman: half a dozen things one can’t successfully be at Flare Royal.”

“She wants to get away—for peace from us, I suppose. I don’t wonder. She asked me where she should go. I suggested the Manor. But she wants to be alone.”

“A kind of religious retreat, eh?”

“Something of the sort.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Natalya Vassilievna Serova had won for herself in London the reputation of a fashionable mystic. "She's a dancer," Mrs. Trell's friends would tell one another. "A marvellous woman. So full of fire. Mysterious. Russian. Wicked, of course"—here the rings of Mrs. Trell's friends would glitter on their outspread, tolerant hands—"but with a large, forgivable wickedness, a wickedness of culture, a *Byzantine* wickedness! A gorgeous woman—that's the word! And deeply religious. Quite *quaintly* religious." For a season she was received in all but a few houses, and Mrs. Trell's early acquaintance with her through Rory Flare was a social asset to Mrs. Trell. But Mrs. Trell clung to her when others had allowed her to drop. She talked of her incessantly, calling her "the Serova," at which Natalya turned down the corners of her pretty mouth. Natalya had a great contempt for Mrs. Trell, and, so far as she was capable of affection, she had affection for Rory. He praised the qualities in her which she knew were genuine and of which she herself was proud. These others invented qualities which they believed to be Russian and praised them. For the benefit of these fools she was deliberately exotic—"they are convinced by pantomime, and pantomime they shall have"—and she put on brightly coloured clothes and allowed stout women to kiss her feet. But to Rory, and perhaps to him alone, she showed herself in her abandonment to gaiety beyond laughter, in her moods of ecstasy, in her long periods of dullness stirred and stirred by vain, angry, petulant talk—talk that led her for ever in narrowing circles until she halted at last, blind and giddy, at a centre-point of despair.

She reached Dedwick Station at dusk. It had been arranged that Fish should stay in Dedwick after his day's work was over, so that he might meet her, look after her luggage, and take her to the Lake ferry-boat. Her first knowledge of him was the weight of a hand laid heavily on her shoulder, the fingers twining themselves round it as if they sought its outline. She looked into a face pressed close to hers, a face from which fierce, watery eyes looked out under flaxen lashes and reddened lids.

"You the Russian?"

"Yes."

"I'm Mr. Fish. Where's y' baggage?"

The luggage was found, put on to a trolley, and taken to the quay-side. She leaned on the rail of the ferry-boat, gazing into the black water. Fish was hovering near her, seeking, she knew, some means to draw her attention to himself.

"Got y' lodger, Fish?" said an unknown voice. There was no reply. Probably Fish's thumb was jerked in her direction, for she heard the same voice say after a pause for inspection: "What a bit of a thing!" Then there was muffled talk she could not hear, and a laugh, broken into by an order shouted through a voice-pipe: "Go ahead!" The thin deck trembled under her feet and the water was sucked into foam.

"Well, Miss, an' what d'ye think of Dedwick?"

"I have seen only the station."

He did not care for that; he had not been listening for her answer. "It's a bad place—flat, dull, stupid place. They don't see where their own interest lies. I bin talkin' there to-night—tryin' to tell them. It don't seem no good. Your country's a great place for that kind, I'll be bound."

She shook her head. "I don't understand you. What kind?"

"Men who want freedom, eh?"

"Ah," she said, drawing her cloak round her as if in protection against some invisible approach, "do you talk to them of freedom? Is it of that you have talked to-night?"

"It weren't a meetin' to-night. That's Fridays. Only talk across the table. But they're no good. Freedom? They're not even loyal to their leaders. They're afraid."

She let him grumble on. It was no more than grumbling—angry, ill-tempered, vague discontent, and inspired by the pique of a leader whose leadership was not acknowledged. She suspected that the Dedwick cycle-makers laughed at Fish. The fool! The petty fool—his freedom reckoned in shillings a week. And he claiming comradeship with her own people! She was angry in her disgust. But she looked at him while he talked, looked at the bulk and spread of him that blotted out the stars before the funnel. And she became aware that he had stopped talking and was looking at her.

"You dance, eh?"

"Yes."

"Tell us about dancing."

She began to tell him more about dancing than she had ever told in England. It came smoothly from her lips—theory, picture, sensation, desire. In a supreme ballet, supremely executed, there would be perfect compounding of spirit and flesh—unity, a consummation of all art's endeavours, a fulfilment of all life's wonders and longing, a finality, peace. Did he not understand that human desires, spiritual and fleshly, were now like a tangle of confused threads? No one knew to what pattern they were

designed. Artists, priests, reformers, they were all trying to evolve a pattern in some corner, to clear the tangle that lay nearest to them. That was useless. A million patterns would mean more confusion. There was one pattern—one only: all these threads were designed to run together into the cloths of God. And dancing was weaving, the weaving of joy and grief, love and cruelty, strength and weakness, colour and line. The supreme ballet would be the cloth into which all desires were woven; it would be both rest and movement; it would be peace. Peace—she continued to repeat the word until at last Fish, who in his turn had not been listening, said with his loose lips: "Peace." And, hearing him say it, she laughed aloud at him, at herself, at all the vanity of dreams.

"This is Flare Royal."

The engine stopped; the ripple of water came out of the stillness; the thud of a rope cast ashore—its creak and whine on the unseen bollard.

"This pattern," said Fish unexpectedly, "this pattern you talk of—I might use that in a speech. How are ye goin' to find the pattern?—that's what they'll ask me."

"It will come by a miracle."

"Sudden?"

"Like the idea for a ballet."

"Sudden! The end o' the world? That's old."

She said, in such a way that he could not be sure whether he should take her seriously: "It will be a revolution."

"Something sudden? An uprising?" He was eager that it should be sudden.

"Yes—an act of the spirit."

He shook his head. "I don't want nothin' gradual. Ye can't keep the men up to the mark."

"It is not going to be a strike for wages. Can you think of nothing but that?"

"That's the first step—then the general strike. Then——"

They were walking away from the ferry, he trundling her luggage on a wheelbarrow which he had brought from home in the morning. He turned up a cinder path.

"Is that your wife's house?" she asked, pointing at a dark shadow pierced by the light of two unblinded windows.

"Yes. That's my house," he answered.

Angela Fish was sick of "revolution." She said so to Natalya whenever Fish was out of the way. To her it meant a grumbling for wages which never came and which, if they did come, would profit her nothing; it meant also late nights when Fish, having missed the last steam-ferry, would sail or row himself across the lake or perhaps not return at all. If he returned he was tired, angry, often drunk. She was then subjected to an unending, rambling repetition of his many complaints and demands: a history of the children she had borne him which had not lived; a detailed food-list to illustrate the monotony of the meals she gave him; complaints because her beauty was gone, because she was silent, because she contradicted him, because she cowered from him in fear. It was all no good, she told Natalya. It wasn't that she minded the hard times; she could have gone through with that if there had been anything to look forward to—anything. But there was nothing—nothing but flat greyness and beastliness. O God! if only something would happen! She had been happy once. Miss Natalya knew Mr. Flare? Well . . . Angela smiled with a kind of sly pride, and a little colour flowed to her cheeks.

"But you are beautiful still," said Natalya. "Do you forget what an opportunity that gives you? Can you not take pleasure? There are other men. Since your husband treats you so cruelly, you would be justified."

Angela did not answer, but it had pleased her to be told that she was still beautiful. She rose and, standing in a patch of sunlight, stretched herself. There were years to run yet before she was forty. Her lightness had gone, her suppleness, her flitting activity. But there was grace still; the curves of her body were firm and her muscles strong.

"I don't want other men," she said at last. "I'd just sink lower. The men here smell of fish or tar or earth. There's no class in the place."

Natalya took her by the shoulders. "You love Fish," she said.

"Love? O God, no!"

"But you'd not have him leave you."

Angela looked away, shamefaced. "One gets used."

"That is why you are a slave—do you see?"

"Why?"

"Because you don't *want* to revolt. You don't *want* to."

"I don't know what I want. I don't care. Anyhow, it's none o' your business—me and my husband."

Natalya's thin, eager, hawk-like face became set.

"No. But it is because I am so far away from you that what I say is not interference. To me you are not Mrs. Fish, a neighbour, an intimate friend, a woman in whose life I have a part. You are a beautiful woman, wasting her power. You could be happy. You could rule that man. He is a fool—don't you know he's a fool?"

"I don't care whether he's a fool or no."

"Ah!" said Natalya. "Don't be impatient. Think, plan, be wise. Deny yourself to him once, twice, thrice. Soon he will be fawning. He will bully no longer."

Angela shook her head. She had been insulted, and by a foreigner. She tried to be angry, but could not. The woman had said she was beautiful, and had spoken as if she were the equal—more than the equal—of Fish. The thought remained with her, opening out a new prospect of existence, and, as its birth coincided with a period of quietness in her husband—caused in fact by his shyness of Natalya—the thought grew in strength. She began to feel that she owned herself. She carried her head higher.

And Natalya knew that she had won a victory. Still Angela was submissive before Fish, but there was in her submission a hint of waiting. Even while she obeyed him behind his back, her gaze would be turned covertly in his direction, and the white of an eye gleaming under a lowered lid would be for Natalya a sign that the thought of revolt was kept alive.

The violence of Fish was pleasant to her. "In England," she had said once, "patience is a disease," and Fish was without patience. He was blank, stupid, sullen—this for long periods. Then, with no warning or explanation, he would shout a command prompted by a peremptory desire. He would sit staring at Angela in silence; then, tearing her sewing out of her hands, drag her to her feet and say:

"You—to bed wi' ye. See?"

The room that was both kitchen and living-room ran up to the full height of the house-roof. Its end wall, opposite the front entrance, supported a narrow gallery approached by stairs that were little more than a ladder. Two doors opened on to the gallery, one that of Angela and Fish's bedroom, the other leading into a narrower room, once belonging to the children, in which Natalya now slept. The rooms were divided by a thin wall in which, near the rafters, there were curtained panes of glass, and at night, when the blind was down over her window, Natalya, lying in bed close to the partition, could gaze at the stars through her share of a skylight that was common to both bedrooms. Usually she went to bed later than Fish and his wife, so that there was no sound in the house when she crept upstairs with her candle. She was

surprised that they should fall asleep so soon. This had not always been so. In the earlier days of her visit, there had come from beyond the partition a murmur of voices which had often continued long after she had blown out her candle. But now, each night, she undressed amid no sound but the creak of the floor-boards under her feet and the rustle of the beech-tree outside her open window. It was as if the occupants of the adjoining room had died or had gone away. Sometimes, when at last she lay in darkness, she thought the sound of renewed speech came to her, but it was short and indistinct and she could not feel sure that it was speech at all. One night, as she was pursing her lips to extinguish the candle-flame, there came the dull sound of some heavy weight fallen on the floor and straightway an outbreak of voices and a swift silence. She lay long awake that night, and, in the morning, when Fish had gone to his work, she said to Angela:

"I am not sleeping as well as I did. The air seems to hold all the heat of the day."

"I think perhaps it's the skylight that makes the rooms hot," Angela answered. "The afternoon sun falls through it. We thought to whitewash it once, but it has never been done."

Her manner was agitated and she avoided Natalya's eyes. All the morning her housework kept her busy, and at dinner-time she produced food and ate it almost without a word, but, when the meal was cleared away and she sat in the garden with her sewing, she began asking questions about Russia. Hitherto she had shown no interest in the country, her conversation having turned always to subjects within her own experience, and even now, Natalya felt, the vague questioning was but a shy prelude to something more personal.

"I suppose Russian women are very different from English ones," said Angela. And Natalya understood for the first time that this wife was jealous. The discovery opened up new paths of curiosity, and she did her utmost to give her an opportunity to reveal what was in her mind. The direct question came at last.

"How long will you be staying, Miss Natalya? Mr. Flare said a long time."

"I hope a long time. Flare interests me and fills me with a delightful feeling of escape. Besides, I haven't yet met Miss Pennell."

"She has scarcely been in the village since you came. She has been ill, so they say. It seems strange that she should be ill."

But neither woman had any intention of allowing the conversation to drift into a discussion of Irma, and, since Angela relapsed again into silence,

Natalya brought her back by saying that she hoped she was not in the way.

"Oh, no," said Angela. "It's very convenient to have you here. The house is too big to run on Fish's wages without a lodger."

"Do you mean that, Mrs. Fish? Are you sure I don't make the work too much for you? I should like to stay in Flare Royal, but perhaps there are other houses in which I could find rooms."

"No. Fish wouldn't like that. I'd rather you stayed in our house—apart from the money."

"Then what is it?"

There was a long silence. Angela's head was bent over her sewing and she would say nothing until Natalya pressed her again, and she replied, with a little break of shame and passion in her voice:

"Oh, I don't know. But it isn't nice for you in this house. Don't you know what's happening? I ought not to tell you. He'll punish me dreadfully if he knows that I've told you."

"He shall not know."

"You promise that?"

"Certainly. Why should you think I should let him know?"

"Because it may mean you'll have to leave this house. There's no other room you can have, and if you pin down the curtains or ask for whitewash, then he'll know—know for certain I've told you."

Natalya picked sense out of her confusion. "Do you mean he looks through the partition windows?"

Angela nodded. "The curtains your side are shrunk. It's dark in our room. He stands on the bed-rail. And when your light goes out he drops back on me. And he calls me by *your* name."

Angela stood up, her face averted, her eyes hot with tears of shame.

"Oh, what am I to do? It's horrible. It's your name always. You don't know how horrible it is."

"I will go to-morrow if you wish it."

But Angela did not wish her to go. She was afraid now of loneliness in the day-time, of sitting through the long hours waiting for Fish's nightly return. "Besides, if you went he'd go mad. I don't know what would happen." She sat down again helplessly, relying upon Natalya's stronger personality to discover some solution. She felt shut in, as if in a room so dark and strange that the door could not be found, but she had energy to say: "It's not your fault, I know. I don't bear malice against you."

“I will help you in any way I can,” Natalya said. She waited in vain for Angela to answer. “Is there nothing you wish me to do? Have you nothing to suggest?”

But Angela sat unspeaking, staring across the little lawn into the dusty hedge that divided the garden from the cinder path. At last she murmured: “Always before, you know, when there was trouble with anything, I used to be sure he’d thrash me and be done. It was easier then, but now there seems no way out. I don’t count for him any more. He’s always thinking of you. You have a mole on your hip and he touches my hip there, and tells me, and calls me by your name.”

Her body shook at the remembrance as if it had been cut by a biting wind.

“Why don’t you resist him?”

“I can’t—I can’t, not when he’s there.”

“Have you no will of your own?”

“Not when he’s there.” To this Angela added presently a question, shot out with new energy: “Aren’t you angry that he watches you? You must be strange not to mind—all twisted, you must be.”

Natalya disregarded that, but it stung and roused her.

“Why don’t you fight him?” she said. “I would—with my teeth and nails. Even if he broke you down you would be better for having fought. As it is, you don’t count, you say, and you would make yourself count. At least, he’d have to deal with *you*.”

Angela sighed. “I think if you were in the room I could fight. Down here I could, but not there in the dark.”

“Then fight here.”

They talked long over the means that should be adopted, and the sense of a conspiracy touched Angela with excitement. In prospect, at any rate, she was ready to act. Should she run away? But they rejected that plan, for there was no place except a great barn at two fields’ distance in which she could take shelter for the night. They discussed the alternatives; one was chosen; and Angela, when supper-time approached, prepared the meal with a quickness of movement and lightness of heart that sprang from the joy of action resolved. Natalya gazed at her with a fanatic’s admiration for a convert, saying: “You will be firm when the time comes?” To which Angela replied: “Yes, but you mustn’t interfere. You just sit there, that’s all I ask.”

But when Fish came in and they sat down to supper, Natalya had a flash of misgiving, of self-blame for the part she had played. Not Angela’s

interests, but her own desire to command and to experiment, had prompted the advice she had given. As she looked from Fish to his wife, sitting over their blue-rimmed plates on her right and left, she knew that she was little more than a spectator at a play. This self-revelation staggered her, reminding her of like discoveries in the past. Was all her vision no more than a stage on which human beings were to move to delight her emotions? Was she no more than a flippant woman who veiled her flippancy with a cloud of pretended purpose? There was no confusion comparable to this inability to look with honesty into her own heart. In that moment she doubted all things. Then, with a little shake of her head, she looked up, smiled at Fish, and questioned him about his political activities in Dedwick. She was excited and happy.

Because the night was cool they stooped over the embers of the cooking-fire, Fish sometimes thrusting a great forearm into the glow to obtain, from between the bars, a light for his cigarettes. At length he stood up, stretched himself, and said: "Bedtime"; and, as Angela did not move at once, he repeated a little more loudly: "Bedtime, girl."

Still Angela made no answer, but with a quick jerk raised her head and let her sewing fall on her lap. When she opened her lips to speak, words would not come and she sat still an instant, gaping at him. Her voice, when at last she could command it, was steady.

"I'm not going to sleep with you to-night."

"What?"

"I am not going to sleep——"

"Where are ye goin' to sleep, then?"

"With Miss Natalya."

"Her?" He turned on Natalya, but, after a moment's reflection, decided to leave her alone. "Now, wife, none o' your nonsense. Up wi' ye." He took her hand and dragged her out of the chair. "Get to bed."

She remained staring dumbly, until he stepped forward to catch hold of her.

"If you touch me I'll tell her, that I will."

"D'ye dare?"

"I'll tell her all."

"D'ye remember what happened to you in th'other house, that night ye went to the Manor and I'd followed? D'ye remember that? That's what ye'll get again if you're not off quick."

"I'll tell her all."

"Ye've told her. Think I don't know that? Why should she let ye sleep in her room else?"

A coal dropped on to the hearth and lay there smouldering. "You're a fool," said Fish. "Ye'll have to be taught again, I can see. Come." He seized her and swung her on to his shoulder, she kicking helplessly in his arms. "No, no. You learn. I'm your master, not she." And he bore her upstairs towards the door of their room.

Natalya watched. That door was locked, locked with the key of her room, for its own key had disappeared. Faced by this obstruction, Fish set down his burden and laughed.

"So that's the trick."

He stood looking down into the kitchen, his fingers closed on the gallery-rail. There was little light so near the roof, and to Natalya his face was obscured. Neither she nor Angela had expected that resistance would in the end be effective, for his strength, they had known, would ultimately prevail; resistance itself was what they had desired, and the door had been locked in order that resistance might be prolonged. But Natalya had not looked for this attitude in Fish. Wrath and violence she had pictured to herself, a great tempest of action, blows, raised voices. But instead he had laughed and now stood silent, Angela beside him. For the first time Natalya began to be afraid. When he swung down the stairs, Angela followed him and stood on the hearth-rug where he placed her, thrust thither by the shoulders.

"You bin fools," he said suddenly. "It's not mainly your fault, girl. Is it, pretty? D'you think that door there holds me? This shoulder'd finish that quick, eh?"

She nodded.

"Now are ye ready to get to bed?"

"Say you won't hurt me. Then I'll go. Then I'll do what you want. Say you won't."

His point was gained and he stood up. "Now, you un'erstan' this. If you don't want to sleep in my bed, well, you needn't, that's all. But ye'll sleep outside o' this house, an' ye'll begin to-night. An' afore ye go I'll gi' ye something to remember by. You're a child still an' want learnin', that's what you are. Come here."

She hesitated. "Not here," she said, "not in front of her," and glanced at the locked door.

"Come quick or worse'll follow. You locked that door, didn't ye? Come."

He dealt with her as with a child, and at the sound of the first blow and the first stifled, angry scream Natalya hid her face in her hands.

"Out ye go now."

"Where?"

"Out, that's all."

"Let me stay."

He threatened her. "D'ye want more of it?"

Footsteps crossed the floor and the latch sounded in opening and in closing. There passed an interval of time. Natalya's thumb-nails were pressing against her cheeks, and through the interstices of her fingers she saw the bright blue of her skirt. Her body burned with advancing and receding fire. Presently a thick hand was thrust into her hair and her head drawn back with a certain gentleness.

"You'd better bolt that door," he said.

She crossed the room, marvelling at the cunning which gave this apparent opportunity for escape. He wanted to run after her and drag her back; at least that satisfaction should not be his. The bolt ran quietly into its socket, and, turning to face him, she leaned against the door, weak and sick, dreading only violence. He walked towards her and paused at a yard's distance, his chin sunk, his regard steady on her body.

"Well," he said, "you'd interfere?"

"You watched me. That was a vile thing."

"I watched ye. D'ye know why? Because you're proud, that's why. And you ain't a pure woman. So where's the harm?"

She made a sound in her throat, a choking sound of anger and revulsion at his nearer approach.

"Don't come near me!" she cried from the darkness of his shadow. "Keep your hands off me! I'm in your power and I shall not fight you. It is you men who break the spirit in the world. It is you——"

"Now, enough of your cant. You—you're a foreign harlot. I know ye. An' ye give yourself these airs. You'll be taught like the rest. You're an unnat'ral woman an' proud, an' that's got to be driven out."

"I shall tell the police."

He shook his head and grinned. "Not when it's over"; and both knew that he spoke the truth.

"Now," he said, "I'm not goin' to talk to ye."

"Well?"

"Do what I want, quick."

"What do you want?"

"You know." She did not move. "Kiss me."

She answered coldly: "I am here."

"Kiss *me*. I'm not movin'. You move. It's your trade."

Without flinching, she stood with her dark eyes raised, wide and sullen, and her lips began to smile at him. They curled first in contempt, softened into weakness, then hardened suddenly, with a darkening of her whole countenance, into a glittering invitation. She pressed her hands against the door's panels, her nails driven between the bevelling, and so raised her face that, when his shoulder moved, a triangle of light fell across her stretched throat. His nearness, his dark bulk and the knuckles that were knotted shadows set her little frame trembling. Waves were breaking over her, curling, shutting out skies with mountainous foam-ridges, swaying, and thundering on her like an ocean dropped. She fell on her knees, buried her face in him, and thrust at him with her shoulder like a dog. And he, seeing the eyes she presently lifted, struck at her face, as if in self-protection against what he saw there, and she fell back from him with both hands at her throat.

"God preserve us from ourseln," he said. With blood running from her lips she besought him and cried out, but he shrank from her as from some creeping thing, and, having undone bolt and latch, went out into the hay-sweet darkness.

When he came back with Angela the kitchen was empty, and a key lay on the table. He gave it to his wife.

"Run up wi' ye."

She did not understand why he kissed her with this tenderness, but gladly and without question she obeyed. She ran up the ladder-staircase, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, but, as she turned the key and heard him blowing down the oil-lamp's chimney, she said to herself, as if in relief after thunder: "It's clearer now."

She struck a match, lighted a candle.

With the bedroom candle held before her, she ran out to give him light. As she leaned over the gallery-rail to seek for him, the shadow of the candle-bowl swung across the room in tremulous lift and plunge. But Fish, having already climbed in darkness, laughed out suddenly near by, and blew out the flame, and laid his hands over her. The candlestick fell from a slackened finger and slid with leap and clatter from step to step.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Soon after this, Natalya arranged that she should stay at Flare Manor. After their first meeting, she lost no opportunity of being with Irma. The openness and swiftness of the girl's mind fascinated her, and Flare Manor, with its cool gloom on summer days and its history of many adventures, attracted her by its atmosphere of peace and its suggestion of violence. Day by day her attitude towards Irma became more distinctly an attitude of recognition, as if all her life had been but an expectation of the discovery of this personality. In the village of Flare and the streets of Dedwick the impression deepened, for here was displayed more vividly than in the Manor's solitudes the contrast between men and women of complex fears and desires and this girl's singleness of spirit. Natalya knew that they felt, as did she herself, the power that lay behind Irma's mingling of intimacy and aloofness—an intimacy that enabled her to speak to, and understand instantly, people whom she had never known, an aloofness that made her impervious to insult, to churlishness and to flattery.

It was difficult for Natalya to avoid Fish's house as much as she wished. Irma's way lay often through Flare Royal, and sometimes she would visit Angela. Natalya did not dare go with her; yet she would have liked, after all, to have seen Irma in the kitchen which the wooden gallery overlooked. In that place, perhaps, she would awake to a realization of her own power; there would be forced upon her some consciousness of the corruption and evil which Natalya saw almost as if they were concrete things—tangled forests that must be penetrated. Irma seemed blind to them. Yet, was it blindness? Or was it a vision that penetrated them as if they were without reality and substance? Natalya thought often of Irma as a force that would spring suddenly into activity when the awakening came, the passionate spiritual force for which she had looked so long in vain; but sometimes, with a sigh of bewilderment, she saw her passing unscathed through the world's evil as if it were not, and the evil closing behind her again as if she had not been.

Irma watched the summer days go past her with a feeling that something precious was being slowly taken from her grasp. The power to live within herself without consciousness of self was passing away, and with its passing came a sense of exposure and responsibility. Elspeth had asked her if she was lonely. She had known it to be true, and for an instant her lip had trembled.

“It makes me sad, Elspeth,” she had said, “to feel that I’m not living as you would have me live. I think of all the big and little things you have done for me. Do you remember how it used to surprise you that in the dark I was never afraid?”

“That I do. You were never afraid even in the dark passages leading to the tower. I saw that in time. I used to give you my hand walking through them, but you never gripped it. I noticed that.”

“You must have loved me.”

“I did love you.”

“And yet I am drifting away from you.”

“That’s the way with little children as they grow up.”

Irma had looked at Elspeth, wondering if she was aware of no more definite estrangement than that which the years inevitably bring. And now, by her association with Natalya, she was made more than ever conscious of her estrangement from the normal way of life that Elspeth would have chosen for her.

Natalya spoke so often of a power in her that she became at last observant for its effects and curious for its source. She had known always that she was able to give quietness to men and animals in distress; she knew that she was actuated sometimes, as she had been on the morning of her grandfather’s funeral, by an overwhelming force which, having passed through her and having found expression in her acts, left her exhausted. But in all this she had found no cause for question, and had never asked herself whether others could give that quietness or convey that force. Now the curiosity with which, she perceived, she was regarded, opened her eyes to a peculiarity in her own position. Why did Dr. Conrad treat her with so much tenderness—as if he were aware of something beyond the limits of his experience and fraught with danger to herself? Why had Elspeth ceased to command her and begun to assume in her presence an attitude of timidity? The fishermen and the cycle-makers seemed now to be embarrassed by a secret which they feared she might penetrate, some gazing at her with abstracted devotion of which in the presence of their friends they were ashamed, others avoiding her eyes.

Thinking of these things while she undressed on a certain evening after Natalya had come to stay in the Manor, Irma’s wonder checked at Natalya’s name. Angela had spoken it—“I’ve seen you with her often, Miss Irma”—and had waited for comment. Angela apparently shared Elspeth’s disapproval, and Rory, in a letter, had said that Irma would at first regard Natalya as an evil woman. In fact, Irma had felt for her only pity because her

mind seemed always to be distracted by sharp, ungovernable impulses, by wild angers and grief, by fierce, spasmodic strivings after an undefined purpose. But evil? Had not Rory himself added that she desired to be a saint? Yet, contact with her was disturbing and had robbed these summer days of their peace, for she seemed to sum up in her own person the withdrawn watchfulness of the rest of Irma's world. Those eyes of hers, set deep beside the sharp nose, flashed out an intense curiosity and expectation.

Dressed now in white, each hand grasping a heavy candlestick which she was carrying to her bedside in order that she might read before she slept, Irma became aware, as she had never been before, of the largeness of the room in which she stood. She gazed beyond the candles' circle into the darkness of the distant walls. Floor and ceiling seemed to flow away from her so that the bed's whiteness and a mirror's gleam acquired the remoteness of a patch of water seen in a great landscape. The walls themselves, by some trick of ceiling-shadow, were curved towards her at added height. Their centres appeared to recede as if they were the sides of a tent bellying to a gale that blew outward. The candle-flames lay suddenly horizontal, dragging on the wicks. The door, which had opened a few inches, closed again without sound.

She set down the candles, opened the door, and looked out on the landing. A wash of moon from the stair-windows lay across an edge of the frame of Urden Flare's portrait, but the old man's face was no more than a pallor in the flat darkness of oils. There was no movement. The banisters were a rim of light no broader than a ruler's edge. Opposite her, standing a yard clear of the corner that faced the stairs-head, was the carved wardrobe containing hunting-boots, coats and hats, in which as a child she used to hide. A point of light shone from the Gorgon handle. For a moment she watched it. The draught that had bent the candle-flame ran cool about her feet, and from the depths of the hall came up the rattling of a dog's chain and the click of his claws on the stone paving. Beyond the great wardrobe, in the corner that was thrown into deep shadow by its jutting edge, Irma's eyes discovered one of those nebulous figures, darker than darkness itself, which seem to emerge sometimes from empty night long regarded. It had the form of one whose face was turned away, whose outward shoulder was hunched up by the twisted attitude of concealment, whose draperies fell with the rigidity of a thick curtain. There was no breath in it nor did the draught touch it. To the eyes that watched, it seemed to dissolve again into the gloom and to lay aside its momentary reality. Irma re-entered her room. A parallelogram of moon stretched from wainscot to cornice within a few inches of the door-frame, and, turned in its direction, she fell upon her

knees. But she found no comfort; only a baffled pleasure in the hurt of her knees on the boards. She did not understand her disquiet, nor why prayer, which had been to her hitherto a straight passage into surety, had become distracted and without peace. The images which had accompanied her mind's rest in the past were now recalled by an effort of will—a field of corn in which Christ was walking and in which He had seemed always very close to her, a valley set so thickly with a city's lights that it seemed a meadow in which the daisies were turned to stars, a movement of three battered sailing-ships across a sea which preserved, despite its turbulence, the imprint of feet—all these visions, which had so long been an expression of her heart's peace, came to her again, but they were now nothing but pictures seen in a picture-book. The living thing in her sight, as once these pictures had had life, was now herself. She it was who walked in the cornfield and hers were the feet set in the miraculous imprint. Standing on that sea, she was possessed by terror and shame, for the imprint seemed now to grip her feet so that they could not be moved. The sea opened, and in the revealed chasm she saw the city in the valley, and from it prayer arose like flame, rose to *her*, to her, who was imprisoned in His footsteps, who had usurped His place, who could receive no prayer, who was tortured by the heat of the flame.

She uncovered her face in search for the comfort of familiar things. The vertical bar of light had lost its straight edge. To her eyes, which did not at first see clearly, it seemed to have bulged and lost intensity. Not for a little time did she realize that the moon-strip was now bent upon the outlines of a figure that stood by the half-opened door. To whom was she kneeling? Once before, the door had opened; on the landing, in the cupboard-corner, there had seemed to be a shape concealed. Now, in a silence so deep that when her hands had fallen to her sides there had been a little hiss as her thumbs brushed her night-dress folds, there stood one who had watched her—for how long? How long had she been kneeling there? She rose. "Who is there?" she said.

The figure moved forward and fell at her feet. Hands grasped at the stuff she wore.

"Get up. Natalya, is it you?" She held a candle over the lowered head. "Get up."

"I came here," Natalya began. "I was driven here. Forgive me."

"Driven?"

"Drawn here—by you. I had to come."

"You opened the door before."

"Yes."

"You were hiding when I looked out."

"I was afraid. I came full of courage, quite, quite sure. Then, when I was near you, I was afraid."

"Why?"

"Because you were not afraid. You came out into the dark and stood there. You saw me hiding, but you said nothing. You returned so quietly."

"Did you come here to frighten me?"

"I came to take you away. Come away with me. Don't let me go alone. I can't go again into the world without you, feeling that I've left behind me your power—locked up, wasted."

"You talk to me always about my power."

"And you feel it. Now you do. You are awakening to it. Tell me, isn't it true?"

Irma asked suddenly: "What have you done to your eyes? I have never seen pupils so black and shining. The shadows round them are like the cuts of a knife, so deep and narrow." And, with the first tenderness she had shown: "What have you been going through?"

"I am unhappy." Irma put her arm round the hunched shoulders but it was flung off. The body straightened. "Don't weaken me or drive me back upon myself. I have been trying to escape from myself. My beauty is gone—pleasure gone, lust, ambition—yes, everything. It's true. Don't call them back. Come with me instead. Leave this place. It's too small a world for you. You have no human weakness, no pride, no flesh. Have you ever been eaten by that fire as if it were a vile disease running in all your limbs so that you couldn't think for the thwarted pain of it? Never. And men do what you tell them; children, birds, animals—all in your power because their lusts do not twist you. There is no one can stand against you. You can root out the corruption in the world. No one else can. But you will not! Oh, how can I persuade you? Don't you see the future, what the world would be——"

Natalya had thrown herself upon her back on the bed and was now writhing so dreadfully and crying out in so shrill a voice that Irma laid a hand upon her until quietness came.

"Is this the revolution of which you have often told me? You want me to rouse the people. Why should the people follow me?"

"Because you are without fault."

"If that were true——"

"What are you saying? It is true."

“It is not, Natalya. It is you who have shown me that it is not. If I were without fault I should have peace; I was not at peace while you stood at the door, watching me. There was a time not long ago when I was very happy—perhaps because I had never reckoned happiness. Everything went on outside me. I didn’t think of myself, picture myself doing things, or wonder what effect some action of mine would have. Everything happened naturally, without thought. And now, like you, I cannot escape from myself.”

“It is not the same thing,” Natalya said. “I meant that I cannot escape from my desires—so many they are, such mixed colours, that I can’t sift them and my brain reels. I can’t pursue any one thing because the want of another cuts across the track. It is not like that with you.”

Irma did not know how to answer. She stood gazing at the agonized face turned towards her from the bed and was possessed by one wish that swept for the moment all other thought away—the wish to bring peace, allay the torture, to put an end to this scene in which all mental proportions seemed magnified and distorted. But Natalya cried out:

“Are you accusing me of corrupting you? It is a lie! It must be—for you are incorruptible!” And she continued to scream and sob, biting the pillow and saying repeatedly: “It’s a lie—all a lie.”

Presently, being calmer, she turned on her side and, extending a thin arm, pressed inward the soft bevel of wax that encircled the candle-wick. Speaking slowly and with physical difficulty, she said: “We are very small and weak. Many of us are blind. And those of us who see, as I see, can do nothing, because we are drawn away continually by our little cryings-out for comfort and pleasure. The senses sap the spiritual strength in us. But you ——” She laughed. “What do you care? The senses don’t touch you. There’s nothing to tempt you away. You don’t want admiration, you are never afraid. I fell at your feet here—it didn’t mean anything to you that another human being should lie at your feet. I should have been proud. I should have been drunk with the pride of it. Why—even as I lay there, it wasn’t humility—nothing is ever pure in me—I was thinking of the gesture, of you standing erect with the moon behind you, of myself crouched in the shadows at your feet. Do you understand?—always the effect, myself on a stage, the footlights somewhere, and the black pit full of chins and cheek-bones and eyes. I can’t escape from that—never. . . . But you . . . have you ever known what it is to lie sleepless, crying and crying for the weight of a ghost body on you and the grip of arms and the burn of lips—and to feel lost and floating in unending spaces because your body lies alone and the spring flowers’ scent is torture? You’ll never know that. . . . Child, how you stand there! Are you listening? Am I shouting mad things? Are you wondering

what this pleasure is that wrings the heart—and why? . . . I wonder, if I had the choice now and all life to live again, should I have courage to let it all go, to be as you are, not to know—never, never, never to know, and feel and want and sometimes to attain a little? No matter—you are so made. It gives you power unspeakable. You pay a price, maybe—who knows? But you have power."

Because there had been and there was still no other sound in the room, Natalya's words continued to ring in her ears long after they had been spoken; to ring, it seemed, in a tone increasingly strident and hurtful, as if she had been shouting all that time while she was fingering the hot wax. Yet she had spoken quietly, and Irma had been listening, for the steady eyes had clouded with trouble, and perplexity had drooped the mouth. But Natalya was ashamed. Looking up into the face above her, she found in it an austerity that chilled her. Strength was there, but not love—a power to destroy or to withdraw, but not to create. This she had never before understood. When she had come to Irma's room and fallen at Irma's feet, she had not guessed to what a remote spirit she was making an appeal. Now she saw Irma's spirituality as a thing beautiful and terrible, but barren—altogether strange to the ways of men and women. She lay still, gazing at Irma's upright figure, longing for her to speak, yet shrinking in fear when it seemed for an instant that the lips moved. At what were those eyes looking? They seemed to be challenging a vision, to be answering some unknown regard. She, Natalya, lying on that bed, was overwhelmed by a consciousness of her physical intrusion. She wanted to escape. There were difficulties in the way which kept her chained by their absurd horror. She pictured herself climbing off the bed, the ungainly effort of it; she saw the ridiculous creeping from stair to stair; she heard the loose clattering of sporting prints upon which her groping hand would fall in the dark passages. But at last she forced herself to move and went from the room. Irma did not turn her head, but, having been some time alone, lay down and slept.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NATALYA'S sense of shame and failure endured for many days after that night. She had, indeed, felt herself to be drawn to Irma's room, and had gone there filled with that supreme confidence which had been hers in her youth. Once in Irma's presence, courage had deserted her; singleness of faith had gone. She had rolled on the bed, screaming, and there lingered a memory of the linen softened in her mouth and gripped between her teeth. She had failed not only to convince Irma, to carry her away as she had dreamed, but even in her attempt to make her purpose clear and to focus Irma's attention upon that purpose. She, who had imagined this child as a prophet and saint, a being who, clear of the flesh, should rouse the world to spiritual fight, had writhed and grovelled and retreated. The anticlimax made her hot with humiliation, as if it had been the dull silence of an audience that stares unmoved at a dance. The readiness with which this metaphor of the theatre sprang to her mind cut her more deeply still. She chafed at her own vanity. "That's why I fail and shall always fail. I am incapable of humility—of any kind of simplicity. It's all a gesture. Even my death will be a curtain if I can design it so." And she would see no one. She remained shut up in Flare Manor, watching the sunlight creep round the walls, and torturing herself by realization of her own meannesses of spirit.

Irma, going one evening to Dr. Conrad's house on the cliff, paused on her way to talk to Jim, whom she found in striped waistcoat and apron leaning on the railing that divided the court-yard of *The Three Faithful Men* from the road. He was near to the spot where the bird had lain. With a certain wistfulness he drew attention to this fact, asking if she remembered.

"Yes. We came in by that gate. Will Drake was there—close to the bench, and you and Mr. Bax and Captain Pye behind him."

"Difficult lad," said Jim.

"Who—Will Drake? Why?"

"Don't know, Miss. But difficult he was. Never felt at home with him myself. You know he's come back?"

"Where?"

"He and Captain Pye's with Dr. Conrad now. They was here not half an hour ago. Drake has taken that room—there, over the parlour-window, the room the Russian lady had when she left Fish's and before she went to the Manor. He's greatly changed, Miss—that he is. Captain Pye havin' him educated to start off, and then himself has come on won'erful. Readin' and

mixin' with all manner o' folk has done it, so he says to me. An officer Drake is now, an' a gen'leman too in a manner o' speakin'—not havin' been born one. He carries himself straight an' strong, too . . . Old Meggle would 'a' laughed, Miss, to see his boy now. An' so would Mr. Flare, your grandfather, Miss, if I may make s'bold."

She could imagine Will only as a little boy and tried in vain to force a more probable picture.

"Well," she said, laughing at Jim's attempt to describe the change in the travellers: "I'm going to Dr. Conrad's. I must see for myself"; and thought: "I hope he's not changed. What a strange friendship that was! And the letters we used to write! I wrote the last letter. . . ."

She climbed the hill, sheltered until, as she reached the cliff-edge, a sea-wind struck at her. As she followed the narrow path, her arm went out towards the wind and her fingers opened and closed as if she were catching at handfuls of the eddying air. Though there was still light enough in the open, Dr. Conrad was moving across his window with a newly lit lamp in hand; his head was turned away as if he were speaking to persons concealed in the room. Irma quickened her pace, for she was eager to meet these men, not only for their adventures' sake—though she counted upon adventures—but because they seemed to have come suddenly, almost providentially, out of the past. And between her and the past a gap had fallen.

They allowed her to sit silently among them. She felt that, if she had not been there, they would have spoken just as they were speaking now. Captain Pye sat in a straight chair by the table, his head propped on his fist and his left ear concealed, and Conrad looked up at him from a low couch near the fire-place. Will Drake, having given place to Irma, was perched in the window-seat, his knees drawn up and his face cut by their shadow.

"So I'm done with the sea," said Pye.

"I wish I'd done with it."

They turned on Will. Pye laughed. "For the moment."

"Yes. I suppose so. But, honestly, I'd not want to go back but for . . ."

"What'd you do?"

"That's it—I scarcely know," Will said. "You see, since I was a boy in this place, I've changed—chiefly through Pye there. Then, the sea was everything to me—adventure, freedom, escape, every good thing. But Pye gave me books; taught me himself while we were serving together. It gave me an appetite and I've gone on. And now—well, the sea isn't everything any more." He turned to Irma. "Have you been all this time in Flare Manor?"

"I went once to London," she answered. There was a pause on that answer, broken by Will's exclaiming unexpectedly:

"What peace—to be settled! Not to have to go away again."

"It's a quiet place," said Conrad. "You'd tire of it quick enough."

Will nodded and smiled. "I suppose you'd give a lot to travel. If you did you would be for ever meeting men and women whose whole agony is drift. They throw out anchors but they never seem to hold. Adventure, the bodily kind, doesn't compensate."

"But why 'the bodily kind'? It isn't all a soulless moving from place to place."

"No. But the rest is search. There's a woman said to me—in England, a week ago, before I came up here: 'You must see such wonderful lands and savages.' I said yes, and talked as pleasantly as I could, but I'm afraid she thought me a dull fellow because I didn't describe savages after having been given that opening. Probably she's right. I miss much pleasure that other men get because it doesn't thrill me to *see* new things. I want them to become not new."

"It's the same thing," Pye said, "when he's walking ashore. He never notices the lie of the land—doesn't look for it. He's blind to 'scenery.' He's thinking about your talk and he sees tiny things that I don't notice, the scar on a piece of bark, for instance. And he remembers them, and what you said in passing them, so that if ever you go with him over the same ground again he'll probably lose his way, but each bit of an old conversation comes back."

"I know. It is people who hold me."

There were many questions that Irma wished to ask Will Drake—above all she wanted to know whether he was a man to whom her questions might be put—but in the presence of the others she chose silence. Conrad was pressing him: "You don't mean to say you hate the sea?"

"No—good God, no—I never said that. Not *the sea*."

He would explain himself no further. At last, when Irma broke into the regular flow of Pye's talk to say good night, Will's voice came with a certain unexpectedness: "I'll walk back with you if I may," and she turned to find the sea-sky, faded of sunset, throwing out his head like the relief of a medallion. Pye raised the under lids of his eyes as he took her hand. "I'll see more of you, Irma—plenty now, I hope. You've been silent."

"I have been listening."

He made the fencer's gesture: "Touched!" and smiled. "You shall talk, my dear—if you will. I *can* be silent. Good night."

When she and Will were outside together, she said:

"Will."

"Irma?"

Then silence; after a little while, their ankles dragging at the grasses: "It was down this slope Dr. Conrad carried me."

"I remember. I was drawing past and future on the gravel. . . . Irma, ought I to ask?"

"What?"

"It's been in my mind so long—wondering."

She said without smiling, a bleakness in her voice: "You can ask now. Yes, you can ask."

"The bird was dead?"

"But I can't answer. . . . You have been wondering. I suppose they all have. Do you know, I never questioned—one way or the other—until now. It was lying there; it was in my hands; it hopped away."

"You don't ask me my own thought?"

"No."

"Nor Pye's?"

"I know them."

"Irma—you're not afraid?"

"Of having done—what I did? No." Later she added: "But it's lonely."

They were overlooking *The Three Faithful Men*. Beyond it, against a western sky still stained, the hill of Flare Manor rose like the shoulder of a sleeping giant. The imagined rustle of the trees, whose movement at this distance was but a ripple of darknesses, sharpened the edge of silence. Behind them, deep down, beyond sight, the gentle surf was sucking at the ribs of sand, marking its ebb with bubbling threads snapped by the ground wind; but now the sea's chatter, broken by the cliff, did not reach them, and all the night sounds, save of the wind's curling at their bodies, were but an imagined sequence to movement watched. He, to whom affection was strange, was cut by a desire to give sweet names to her as a kind of defiance to the flat sea at his back. They were still now, and a wild flower, so far beneath him among the grasses that he was conscious of a grotesque clumsiness in his height, leaned across his boot, throwing a filigree shadow. He did not speak. She stood between him and the wash of the sun. A fray of light rimmed the shadowed face and throat.

"Come."

They went downward, stepping warily in the thickening dark, as if wading into a pool.

"I shall have to go to sea again."

"Soon?"

"Perhaps not very soon. When the money runs out, I suppose. And you?"

"I have enough money. I can do as I like—stay here or go. But I don't know. I don't know what to do. I'm being dragged rather—this way and that. Not long ago I shouldn't have cared, because I never thought about my own future. The days slipped by, bringing their inward adventures—that was enough."

"And now—what?"

"I find people depending on me—waiting for me—looking to me to do things, which I might do."

"Do you mean—things which you only can do?"

She turned to him with a gesture of appeal. "Oh! are you going to tell me that? You, too? Was it kindness that made you say it? I wonder. It's as if I had been standing in a green field, free of sun and delight, and as if the earth round about me had suddenly fallen away and away, forming a great circle of valleys, leaving me isolated, looking out over——"

"Irma, who has been telling you about yourself?"

"In part, it's Natalya. Mostly it's what I've seen and done."

"Natalya?"

She told him.

"I suppose she's mad," he said. "Tell me: what's the effect of what you've seen and done?"

"You remember I told you I had been in London. I met some people called Trell there, a man called Lord Drumpeter and some others. I met, too, men and women who are in fact aristocrats——"

"Of birth?"

"And intellect. I found the men on the political left—some of them intellectualizing a revolution by blood, some clinging to the hope of Acts of Parliament. Then priests, passionately or dispassionately sincere, trying to make life more tolerable for harlots, or to make them not harlots, or to make the Trell-world see themselves as harlots—to make Mrs. Trell, with her daughter, see herself as a procurer." She stopped.

"Well?"

“It’s useless. They think in classes. It’s like trying to break a bundle of faggots without untying the bundle. They try to break them with great machines—organizations. . . . Then here, in Flare Royal, and Dedwick. You remember Fish? He is on the same track—or a parallel track. His weapons are made in the same manufactory.”

“You reject the weapons made with hands.”

“One very small, very keen knife to cut the tying of the bundles. Then hands, if you will, to snap the single faggots—easy then.”

“Yes, but the knife?”

“Christ gave it.”

“And where now?”

She held out her hand palm upward.

“Do you see it lying there? Shall I grip it? It has no comfortable handle. It is all edge.”

Desiring to pull her out of this kind of madness, partly for her own sake, and partly because it gave to her beauty an imperious sting that hurt him, he said:

“Why not take the world as it is? . . . No, I don’t ask that. . . . But when you speak as you have been speaking, you seem to go very far away.”

“And you want company?”—a ring of scorn in that.

“I do,” he admitted. “Once you could give it me.”

“And you alone could give it me. That was why I began—to talk——”

“You need it?”

“In the midst of my forming valleys—yes!”

“Irma!”

She drew away though he had had no intention to touch her. The caress had been in his voice.

“It’s useless now,” she said. “I can be no company to you—nor to any but children and animals.”

“What have I done?”

“Changed, grown older, become a man.”

“But you——”

She shook her head. “You have new needs.”

“But you—you——” he persisted.

“Listen!”

There was a shout below them from the court-yard of *The Three Faithful Men*. Jim, a dark shape stretched forward over his white railings, had distinguished their figures, and was shouting to another who, it seemed, was mounting the alternative path to the doctor's house, concealed by a fold of the hill.

"There, away to your right! Fish! Fish! The other path! You're missing her!"

And Irma called: "I am here. Are you looking for me?"

Fish broke over the fold's brow and came running.

"My wife," he said, breathless; "maybe ye'll go to her, Miss. Her time's come. I'm goin' for the doctor," and was gone.

"You're not going there," Will said. "Never."

She went on with quickened pace. "It's early. What's he been doing to her?"

"You can't go. You have never seen a childbirth." He put a hand on her, made her stop, but she had not now—as, perhaps, a minute earlier she might have had—a woman's pleasure in being commanded. She went forward, turning her head only an instant to say: "Come with me."

"You can't help. Conrad is being fetched. There's nothing you can do."

"Come with me. I ask it."

But he stood firm, and she went on alone. As she approached the point where the cinder-track joined the road, she was overtaken by Fish.

"Doctor's comin'. I ran on. Save 'er, Missie, save 'er by one o' them miracles. Ye can. Will ye? Will ye?"

"What have you done to her?"

"It wer' my fault. I'll do anything now. On'y save 'er. I want to keep 'er. I can't do without, I can't."

Roused by their voices, a woman came from the house.

" 'T's no good."

"Dead?"

"Goin'. The child dead."

They entered the kitchen. From the open door in the gallery there came the faint light of a lamp set in the room's depths. Irma paused, her mind filled by the wild flowers on the hill. Her coming from the hill to this room held no clear place in her remembrance, so that her present situation had all the effect of sudden translation. The vague oval of Will's face, seen last over her own shoulder's curve, hung now across the shoulder of the woman into

whose eyes she did not look. Her lips opened to catch at the sea's breath, at the very openness and fragrance of the place in which she had stood, but there came to her the room's air, tainted with cooking-smells and the thick drift of medicines. The woman stood aside to let her pass; Fish's eagerness was thrusting forward into the space between her and the table. The stove had become gigantic, and its bars, from which dripped a glowing dust, seemed to frown upon her. But the stove, the woman whose slightly hunched back gave her, as she stood, an air of Oriental passivity, the man pressing forward without passing her, the gallery banisters that showed their yellow varnish where the light struck them, the great block of shadow suspended beneath the gallery, filled her with the strained melancholy of a tragic fairy-tale, of pitiable giants and dwarfs.

"Did she send for me?"

"No . . . no. . . . Yes, she did, she did. She asked, didn't she?"

The woman made no reply, but smiled, and Irma knew that Fish lied. Now he grasped at her.

"Go on. There's no time. Go on."

The woman bent back a splinter from the scrubbed table and snapped it. And suddenly Irma saw Fish living in this place, wandering from corner to corner after his wife's death in his loneliness of the flesh, the shoulders of the crockery overlaid with dust, the bright-wear dulled, his food gathered to the table haphazard. She saw the tragedy of material things whose significance has been transformed by disaster. He was as dependent as a dog. In heart she bent over him as over a maimed dog.

"Stay here, then."

The woman did not move. Fish crept to the staircase-foot and fell back.

"Angela!"

The door was shut. Irma opened it and went in.

"Angela!"

"Who's there?"

"Irma."

"It's dead."

"I am Irma. Angela——"

"Dead."

The dying hand was taken in the living, the wind-whipped cheek laid against the cloaked bone. The sunken eyes, empty of comprehension, stared out and closed slowly, and the lips breathed again: "Dead."

The eyes opened and saw.

“Don’t lean over me. . . . Away. . . . Away. Dead—the childmilk, never the thrusting head, the little, little head thrusting. . . . Away. You—oh, cold, no woman, empty! Stand away, I say.”

The words, less than a whisper, no more than shapes of breath floating from dry lips, conveyed the woman’s revulsion more terribly than if they had been passionately screamed, for now the screaming was inward, an outcry communicated, almost without speech, from mind directly to mind. Hands parted; the fresh cheek was lifted; the girl withdrew as if thrust by a compelling arm. She shrank into horror and darkness, as a child might shrink who had seen in her mother’s eyes the flash of abhorrence. And Angela, with the mute, rapid wonder of the dying, thought of the thousand gentlenesses that had linked her with Irma in the past, and was half amazed to discover the loathing that now swept in waves over her heart, making her wish to tear the frozen face that looked down upon her. In mind, she rent it with her nails because it was the face of one whose nature was alien to her own suffering. Those eyes unwetted by desire, those lips unbruised, those breasts uncrushed—her hands struck at them.

And, though there was no more movement than a twitch of the fingers spread out over the blanket, Irma was conscious of the attack. Thrust back upon the primitive by child-bearing and by the nearness of death, driven to the very founts of her womanhood, Angela stood at bay to exclude her. It was an exclusion that left Irma sick and weary. She raised her head and went out.

The woman was raking out the fire. At the sound of footsteps on the stair, she turned her face upward, and straightway assumed that attitude of standing aside which seemed instinctive in her. Fish came out of the shadows.

“Going? Not goin’ away?”

“Go to her yourself. You can do more.”

“Can’t you save her? Make her stan’ up. Take ’er by the han’ an’ say to her: ‘Maiden——’ ”

His voice followed her as the night wind streamed across her face. She pursued her way homeward, borne down by an overwhelming heaviness of limb. Unshuttered panes, through one of which she saw children throwing darts at a coloured wall-target, stared at her. Smoke, down-driven from a chimney, stung her eyes. Someone broke step as he passed her.

“God bless ’ee, Missie. Good night.”

She did not answer.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PARLIAMENT having risen—though its sittings had no part in the life of any one of them unless, perhaps, indirectly Norman Colching's—Rory's guests came to Flare. He, Peggy and Lord Drumpeter were met by Irma at Dedwick Station. She had wanted Will to come with her, but he had refused.

"Rory will still think of me as the small singing boy," he said. His thought ran back to the annual suppers in the Flare kitchen. He wished he had seen Meggle again. "Did you see Meggle before he died?"

"Not for some time. It was away from here. He went. We never knew he was ill. We heard nothing until he was dead."

So she went to the station alone, a little nervous because Rory had written that Peggy was now Mrs. Flare, not only by courtesy. Would there be a change in Peggy? If she, like Angela, was going to have a child, would she also . . . ? Irma shuddered, gazing from the platform at the converging glisten of the rails.

Peggy was apparently unchanged. Ten years with Rory had given her an assurance, a steady philosophy of life, that no marriage ceremony could affect. There was in her an almost crude absence of hypocrisy, that stood in odd contrast to her many little stratagems of conduct. She would deceive others with the light-heartedness of a child playing a game; but herself she did not deceive. And few deceived her.

Drumpeter did not. She knew he was better and simpler than his reputation. But his fondness for that reputation made him dangerous. He had tried, almost automatically, to seduce her. She told him quietly and clearly that she detected the automaton. "You don't want me—not the least." Upon that basis, they had remained good friends. When Rory was not there, she let Drumpeter kiss her because it amused her to discover that, though he was fat and laughing and middle-aged, his kisses had variety and genius. On the day she was married, she told him with mock solemnity that he must never, never kiss her again; it amused her that this ridiculous renunciation should be the only mark of her change of state. "Good," he had said, "good. . . . You know, Peggy, it was always rather like a pretty hostess showing a guest to the spare room."

He looked at Irma curiously and treated her with the slightly ironical deference of an old man to a very young girl. She was glad that he laughed so often and so openly, and was for ever teasing her.

"You wrote that Pye and Little William had come back," Rory said. "Changed?"

"Captain Pye isn't, I think. It's a long time ago for me to remember."

"And Little William?"

Irma wondered how to explain that Will Drake was such a man as might be invited to dinner; she knew that this was what Rory wished to know. Before her words were chosen, Peggy interrupted: "Who's Little William?"

"You didn't know him, my dear," Rory answered, and told her of the gallery songs.

As they entered the Manor he ordered dinner at nine.

"Mrs. Trell and Violet are motoring up—bringing Colching with them. They won't be here till after eight. Irma, ask Pye and Drake if you like. I wrote to ask Conrad." He drew her aside when the hall had emptied. "Where did Fish go after Angela died—eh?"

"They say to London."

"Simply walked out of the house?"

"Ran, that night. Across the mustard-field was the last they saw of him."

"So it's empty. . . . Did he take things with him?"

"I don't know."

"Haven't you been to the house?"

"Not since."

He strolled away from her and came back.

"Who buried her?"

"Mr. Bax."

"I mean who made the arrangements—paid for it and so on?"

"He did, I think."

"I see. . . . I told you, didn't I, that Bax was coming to dinner?"

"No."

"He is. I told the housekeeper to have dinner for ten. Pye and Drake will be added. Twelve . . . that's good. Is Drake—all right?"

"Of course."

He looked at her shrewdly. "It's not 'of course' . . . Meggle was good to that boy. Took no end of trouble to teach him. Still—he must have taken care of himself. It's all credit to him."

He went to Natalya, who, dressed already for dinner, had come to the foot of the stairs, and stood smiling at him, one hand stretched out to the

head of the carved pillar, a golden wrap falling in cascade from her uplifted arm. She wore a metallic head-dress.

"Cleopatra to-night?" he said as he passed her.

She smiled: "Will you play 'the strumpet's fool'?"

Her lips remained parted after he had gone upstairs and her eyes settled on Irma.

"You see, I am returned to life."

"I'm glad."

"Twelve to dinner in the country makes resurrection inevitable."

Irma did not know this Natalya. She knew only that Rory had brought with him to Flare the atmosphere of his London house, an atmosphere in which only cut and wired flowers had any being and to which Natalya had swiftly adapted herself.

"Have the Trells come?"

Irma shook her head, and explained that they were coming by car with another guest.

"A man? Who?"

"Colching, I think Rory said."

Natalya stiffened. "For Vi, I suppose. Well, perhaps she is worth no more. But it is early yet."

"Do you know him, Natalya? Who is he?"

"Blessed child! . . . How he and Drumpeter will quarrel! There . . . Who is he? Come. How shall I say it? Come." She said words in Russian. "Do you understand? No?" She mocked and laughed and walked away.

When the Trells came, Irma took Vi to her room.

"When is dinner?"

"Nine."

"And now?"

"We have half an hour."

Vi sat down wearily on the bed and let down her hair. "Oh, it's hopeless to talk now."

The dark coils fallen over her shoulders dwarfed the oval of her face, so that, for all her length of limb, she seemed now to have become exquisitely smaller.

Irma bent down suddenly and undid her shoes for her. As she rose, Vi caught at her hand and pressed it to her cheek.

"That was a dear thing to do. I oughtn't to have let you do it."

Irma kissed her and saw tears in her eyes.

"You're tired."

"I mustn't look tired." She ran with stockinged feet to the mirror. Soon she turned. "Do you think mother will notice? She is angry if I'm ill—if I look ill—or not angry exactly, but—icily solicitous." She sank on the bed again and said with a kind of gaiety: "I'd like to lie here and sleep and sleep and sleep. And then wake up and find nurse laying out a clean pinafore. . . . Show me where the bath is before you go. . . . And, Irma, will you come in here when you're dressed, before going down, I mean?"

"We shall have no time to talk."

"No, no. . . . Oh, well, it doesn't matter."

"What?"

"I should like to have gone down with you, that's all."

The smoking-room, where they gathered before dinner, was little changed since Urden Flare's day, so little changed that Will Drake, as he entered it behind Pye and Conrad, felt the greater shock to see the company it contained. Urden, blocking out the fire with his square body and wide-planted legs, had glared at strange assemblies in that room, but they'd had a certain health about them that was lacking here. Rory introduced Drumpeter and Colching, who stood near him; Natalya came forward to take closer view of "the seamen" and stayed to dazzle their simplicity. "Norman, when am I coming in your yacht?"

"I've sold it," Colching answered.

"And sold my invitation?"

"You refused it."

"No!"

"Yes, indeed. It broke my heart."

"Was that why you sold the yacht?" said Drumpeter. "A pleasing sentiment."

Drake was waiting for the door to open. On every side of him the talk flitted from allusion to reminiscence, none having interest enough to hold the talker or listener for more than an instant. Pye said quietly:

"Well, this or the sea? Which do you choose?"

"You're silent yourself," Drake answered.

"Good God, I've no net to catch this butterfly."

"I wish Irma would come."

Pye laughed. “She was a child upstairs that Christmas. You remember? It seems odd. Hullo!”

Colching was shaking with silent laughter, teeth bared, eyes watering; Drumpeter’s head was thrown back, sending roars of merriment ceilingward; and Natalya, between them, was stroking and stroking her cheek, her thin shoulders quivering, her mouth uncontrollably a-twitch.

“Well, you buffoons,” said Rory, “the joke?”

Drumpeter gasped. “Colching said—about Vi—oh! o—oh! No, we don’t publish it. Peggy there, Peggy’d be shocked.”

Peggy disregarded Drumpeter—he could shout his life through. She looked at Colching.

“Norman, do you know you look much older when you laugh?”

Colching sobered and a hush fell. The two girls came into the room together and all eyes were turned on them. For an instant, Vi was frightened by the silence; then she remembered her mother’s counsel: “Never seem at a loss. Say something!” and her blue eyes hardened and she said: “What were you all laughing at? Do tell me! Tell me, Peggy!”

And Peggy’s answer was drowned in their laughter that flowed up again. Vi, having taken her arm, now gripped it, glancing at Colching.

“Where’s mother?”

“She’s a little late.”

“Oh, I see.”

Irma took her away and introduced her. When they were past him, Drake leaned close to Pye.

“Do you know that face?”

“Miss Trell’s?”

“I know it somewhere.”

“Picture papers?”

“I’ve scarcely seen them. It may be.”

“If you’ve seen any, you’ve seen her.”

Will searched his mind for a key to this familiarity. As she passed him again, he began to talk to her, and at last asked:

“Miss Trell, have we by some chance met before?”

She looked him straight in the face, laughed, and shook her head; and, while she stood puzzled, he remembered. A photograph of her had been shown him within the last few months by a man, who had once been a shipmate of his, named Nigel Sheppard. He remembered the tone—half

proud, half wounded—in which Sheppard had invited his comment, and, on the point of speaking Sheppard's name, he checked himself. But he had not cloaked the look which said: "Ah! Now I remember!" Vi had seen that—and the check.

When Mrs. Trell arrived, the smooth penetration of her voice broke a difficult silence. Mr. Bax had been chosen to take her in to dinner and became, for the occasion, a beaming man of the world. He remembered May Week and his Cambridge days—how he had won a reputation as a gourmet by explaining to a lady in a white frock the whole secret of *Crème brûlée* as it is made at Trinity Hall. An instinct for the appropriate urged him to discuss with Mrs. Trell the relative virtues of champagnes.

Vi was pleased by the loud talk, the wine, Drumpeter's purring flatteries, the glitter, the spiced wit, the very vulgarity of that dinner. She basked in her mother's watchful approval. Colching was far away on her own side of the table, out of sight. His assurance would have chilled her; his eyes, stroking her bare shoulders and arms, would have hurt and pleased her. But now she forgot Colching, taking quick vows against seriousness, and, when Drumpeter insisted on the elaboration of his stories, whipped down the instinct to shrink from him. She laughed back—loudly so that her mother might hear. She wouldn't be scolded for lifelessness to-night!

Drumpeter said: "Bless me, if the child's not in form! . . . When you're drunk you're very like your mother sober."

She was not drunk, she protested. She had had—why, her glass was still full. "Look, Drum, full!" That exclamation, as she heard herself speak it, shocked her to an instant's calm. She was not, indeed, drunk with wine. She was sober enough to hate and despise herself, to be burningly ashamed. Behind the servants, the windows stood open; out there, the night air, birds sleeping, stillness, a twig's snapping. Her imagination dwelt in them; they were so far away from this room's fetid glamour.

"Even if she is drunk," said her mother's voice, "she needn't go to sleep."

Drumpeter took the excuse to press her arm. She was just in time to laugh at him. And, like an echo of the song in her which her mother's words had choked, came the meaning of her next words:

"Asleep? Oh, I'm awake—awake! . . . Rory!" she called up the table.

"Vi?"

"Hadn't we a health to drink? You remember? At Henley? We said we would."

"Of course, yes!"

They drank their secret toast. Colching looked out from a line of faces.

"I'll want to know about that."

She sank back in her chair.

"I'm not drunk, you know," she said quietly to Drumpeter.

"No. I'm afraid you're not."

"Drum, why did you say that?"

"Oh, Vi, be damned to them! They're not worth playing up to."

She laughed at him in a fit of nervousness. "You and I, being reformed characters, had better run away together to-night, hadn't we?"

"Ask your mother."

"She'd love it. I believe she would—honestly."

"Now?"

"You mean—now there's Norman Colching? You needn't have said that."

He twisted an empty glass. "Does it matter? . . . Vi, don't tell Colching about that toast."

"No, of course not. Why should I? As a matter of fact, there's nothing to tell. There was a boat passing at Henley and——"

"No; but he wants to know. Don't tell him."

"I won't."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

"Do you think you'll keep it?"

"I don't know. Probably not. I expect I'll tell him in the end. He'll make mother make me."

"Well, don't let him."

"Why not? There's nothing. . . . O Drum, don't worry me. Why are you suddenly so serious? What does it matter about me? Don't worry me to-night."

She and Drumpeter had been leaning a little towards each other, and Drake, watching them from a distance, wondered what confidence could exist between these two—the stout man, who was so strangely more pleasant than Colching, and the girl, who seemed always afraid and, at instants, bold in reaction. Why was she afraid? Irma told him little, nor, indeed, could he safely question her at that table. Looking at her, in curiosity about Vi Trell, he forgot Vi, and became absorbed by Irma herself. She had said nothing of that night on which Angela had died—nothing of her own

part in its events or of his refusal to go with her to Fish's house. They had allowed the memory of their parting on the slope above *The Three Faithful Men* to drop out of their minds, and had caught up again their childhood's friendship as if no untoward incident had scarred the peace of its renewal. Her loveliness—the fragrance, the manner, the movement of the woman in her—had begun to drag at him. It was near, yet remote; it was at hand, yet he could not grasp it. Sometimes he wished it away, that the new companionship might be as easy as the old had been; sometimes he hated her for it, as if her beauty were a temptation deliberately offered and her aloofness a planned denial. A spiritual coquetry, it seemed to him in such moods. But more often he blamed himself for having changed, for having become conscious of her girlhood—though, he laughed, it was hard to blame oneself for having become a man. It was some unreason in her which made such self-blame even momentarily possible; that he should admire her was, after all, natural enough. In the midst of this dinner-party where everybody seemed to drift and yet to be wearied by drifting, she preserved an extraordinary freshness and strength. Beautiful? The word, his own, chimed strangely with the same word "beautiful" as he had heard it used of Vi. "The beautiful Miss Trell . . ." He turned from Irma to Vi; from the cool, intensely living face, like deep water lying still, to the wet lips, the small white teeth, the strong, quick-moving throat, the eyes that sparkled and clouded, the voice of passionate eagerness and of withdrawal, half shy, half angry. He was glad when dinner was over. The fixity of its arrangement, the fact that its formation must remain rigid until the end, the nearness of lights to faces, the clangour of wit made, by loud voices, deliberately public, laid too strong an emphasis on contrasts. It was as if he were forced to stare at the colour-clash of an advertisement under an arc-lamp's fluctuating blaze. The terrace, where coffee was brought to them, was cool and dark.

Vi Trell stood behind him, a hand on the back of his wooden seat. He rose and put her coffee-cup on the table in front of him, and she took her place at his side.

"You have been a lot at sea?" she said.

"Yes, since I was a boy."

"In the North?"

"Not far North. Chiefly the Americas."

"I see." She talked of the Pacific. She longed to go there. "But it's where everyone escapes to nowadays. It has become sophisticated, I suppose, and self-conscious—like a Soho restaurant when everyone discovers it."

"You'll forgive me. I think that's nonsense."

She gave him a startled, pleased look: but persisted:

"Why?"

"You can make any corner of the world sophisticated. You can make Margate beautiful. It happens inside your own mind. This dinner-party—these people—they'd make a picture-show of the Arctic with emotional close-ups of men dying there."

"What is a 'close-up'?"

He would not explain. "It's a cinematograph technicality."

She nodded and began—as he had now guessed she would: "We knew a man in London who was in the last Arctic expedition."

"We?"

"Mother and I. Nigel Sheppard was his name."

"He's a friend of mine. We were shipmates recently. It was his photograph of you that made me think I'd seen you somewhere before. I couldn't place it at first."

"Didn't you—remember until now?"

"Well, yes—I remembered when I was talking to you before we went in to dinner."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Your mother came in. Everyone started talking of——"

"Oh," she interrupted him, "why doesn't anyone say anything straight out—ever? Even you. You're not one of us. Why didn't you tell me? Not merely because my mother came?"

"I didn't know whether—well, it's hard to say."

"You didn't know whether I gave him the photograph? Is that it? Does that mean anything to you? I suppose it would to *you*. Drum, Colching, dozens of men——"

"Stop a moment. What did you mean by 'I suppose it would *to you*'?"

She smiled. "Nothing much."

"Yes you did. Tell me what you meant."

"I'd rather not." He waited in silence, knowing she would tell him, determined that she should. At last she braced herself, sat up straight, and said in a hard voice: "Very well. I will tell you. It will do me good. I meant that in our particular set we have to invent some kind of traditions and we've invented a scorn for most of the middle-class conventions. The middle classes have converted their women's photographs into a kind of symbol of chastity. A girl doesn't give a photograph to casual men any more than . . ."

She was becoming defensively bitter.

"That's nonsense, too, Miss Trell."

"Is it?" She was angry. "The fact that you hesitated to tell me that you had seen the photograph I gave Nigel proves you have that feeling, doesn't it?"

"No, it doesn't. But we won't argue."

She remained still, chin in hand, gazing out across the terrace.

"Damn!" she said. "I've spoilt this evening. . . . You make me feel ashamed—as Nigel did because I'm always saying cynical things I don't mean. Am I forgiven? . . . Don't you see? I'm shut in partly because I—in moods—I half like it, but chiefly because they don't see, they honestly *don't* see, that there's anything in me they are keeping captive. They despise me at their own level. Drum has an idea of something different, I think. But he despises me, too, because I don't break with it. I can't."

"What do you mean by 'breaking with it'?"

"Oh, running clear away—away and away, like swimming out into a clean sea from a dirty littered beach."

"Yes, but what does the 'clean sea' stand for?"

She laughed. "Why won't you let me escape on the wings of a good, vague metaphor? Nigel was like that; he made me see with such uncomfortable clearness and definiteness. That, I suppose, is really what I mean by the 'clean sea'—a place where one isn't afraid to be normal and straight and to see things through. You see, I've been brought up in a world where impulse is law. It has been made into a law, a kind of virtue, as an excuse for selfishness. Our kind of people can afford to do that because they've enough money to buy some sort of cover for the naked disasters to which it leads them. Poorer people can't do that: they have to think ahead. But with us it's so fatally easy. Fate's a kind of blackmailer; but we can always buy him off. . . . Oh, I've no fault to find with impulse as such. Sometimes it's an amazingly good guide—the only one. Love is an impulse; one knows suddenly; it's a discovery, and it's not till afterwards that one realizes that all the lovely things of the past are somehow a part of it—past and future gathered up into a single moment of absolute, unreasoned certainty. But that's not the impulse our people follow. In certain things, they say, you must calculate; and love to them means one of two things—either mistresses or a contract. If it's mistresses, well—go by impulse; do what you like and justify yourself by despising bourgeois conventions. But if it's marriage, a contract—that's different; distrust impulse, choke down the very spirit in you, twine little doubts into what was absolute knowledge. That's

their line. And, oh, God, a pretty mess they make of it! . . . Do you see"—her voice caught—"Norman Colching—hovering? He'll come in a moment."

"Who is it with him?"

"Natalya." The white shirt-front and the golden wrap moved across the grass's blackness, nearer at each turn. "Unless you want to be left with Natalya, you'd better go while there's time."

"But if you stay here?"

"I can't."

"Then come away if you wish it. Come into the house."

"No," she said.

"You want to wait here?"

"I don't know what I want."

Colching stopped in front of them. "Vi, you haven't told me the truth of the toast you drank with Rory."

Will was glad that Natalya began to speak to him, for he knew that Vi's conversation with Colching would be made the more difficult by silent listeners. But through Natalya's quick chatter, their words came distinctly enough—Colching's assured, almost insolent questions and the trivial wit of Vi's answers. Why, in heaven's name, didn't she give him a curt reply? A blunt rudeness would have rid her of him. But she continued to fence as if she found in it some fascinated pleasure. And Colching was the more experienced fencer. At last she did what he demanded, rose, and went with him. "You must always be master, mustn't you, Norman? You must always have your own way?" But, having his own way, he would not comment on it.

"That, I suppose," said Natalya, "is how his father became a rich man and he more rich."

"By persistence?"

"By not caring that—not *that*—for other people's prides."

"Do you mean that rich men must be cruel?"

"No," she said. "Life is a field full of flowers. If one lives in this world one must trail one's boots through them. Walking there is not cruel, because unless we are artists we can walk nowhere else. But most of us are a little sorry for the damage we do. We go by circuitous paths, trying to avoid damage. But rich men do not. They go straight, quickly. That they tread down flowers does not distress them. At first they say: 'More flowers will

grow,' and we call that common sense. But later they say: 'Flowers do not matter,' and later: 'There are no flowers.' That is the lie."

Her anger with Colching made her at once didactic and gentle, with the peculiar gentleness of passion. In the midst of her flow of words, that tapped and tapped upon a mind but half attentive to them, Will was visited by a sense of unreality, of a life vividly coloured drifting past him beyond his reach. It was as if the persons of a play were moving, while he impotently watched them, towards a danger, uncertain in kind but sure in horror. He wanted to cry out to Vi Trell—what? There were no words. There was no warning he could give. He wanted to drag her for a moment away from the crowd so that she might pause and awake and draw free breath and act with a mind at peace. He went with Natalya through the open French windows into the card-room. As they entered, the silence broke:

"Three diamonds. Twenty-one. Honours?"

"Drum, that spade——" Mrs. Trell's heavy eyebrows arched. She realized that Colching had shaken off Natalya, that Drake was no longer with Violet, and smiled. "I envy your people in the cool. Rory, let's take the table out. Mr. Drake, those candles—would you mind?"

"There's too much wind," said Rory.

"There's not a breath, my dear."

"I won't play cards in that night. . . . Natalya, where's Irma?"

"Haven't seen her. Do you want her?"

"No. I wondered. I'm neglecting our guests. I hoped she wasn't."

"Cut to me," Mrs. Trell said.

Natalya stood behind Rory's chair, watching him gather and sort his cards. Presently Will left them. As he approached the hall, a figure rapidly passed across it. At the foot of the stairs he paused and glanced upward in the direction of the figure's disappearance. Vi stood there, drawn up, her back to him, hesitating. She moved her hand from the banisters, turned as if to descend, and stopped short.

"Is that Mr. Drake?"

"Yes."

"I can hardly see you, it's so dark. Are they playing cards?"

"Yes. I've just come from there."

"Mother playing?"

"Yes."

She seemed relieved and spoke very quickly. "She doesn't like being disturbed. I wonder . . . I needn't go in. . . . Would you tell her I've gone to

bed? I didn't like to disturb her." She began to go upstairs again. "And, Mr. Drake . . ."

"Has something frightened you? Can I——"

"No, no. I'm tired, that's all." She laughed.

He moved until he stood immediately beneath her, his arm against the stair-panelling.

"You're terrified."

"No. I'm tired. . . . Mr. Drake, do you know where Irma is?"

"No."

"She's probably talking to Captain Pye and Dr. Conrad or Mr.—the Vicar, I mean."

"The Vicar left early."

"Well, it doesn't matter. But you'll see Irma before you go to bed?"

"I'm almost sure to."

"Will you make quite, quite sure? Will you ask her to come and see me?"

"At once?"

"Before she goes to bed. Finding I'm gone, she might think I was asleep."

"And you won't be?"

"No. I shan't be asleep." She leaned over the rail. "Where's your hand, you kind person? Good night."

A voice came out behind him.

"Where are you going?"

"To bed, Norman."

"Nonsense. Not at this hour. Are you ill?"

She said slowly: "I am going to bed."

"Sleep well." A shirt-cuff rattled. He walked off towards the card-room.

"Did he see you there?" she whispered.

"Heaven knows! Why?"

"He wouldn't against that dark wood. . . . I wonder. . . . Good night again. Tell Irma. You will? I shall be waiting for her—and soon!"

"I'll tell her very soon—I promise."

When she had gone, the shadow of the upper pillar lay uninterrupted along the stair-wall.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHILE guests remained at Flare, Will avoided it. It had seemed, in his childhood, to be a home of giants, and a deliberate step had been needed to carry him across its threshold, but the fear which had then been his was fear of a straight blow—a dog might spring upon him, or Urden Flare shout at him to brace his shoulders back, or Mr. Angle, the butler, tweak his ear. To enter the Manor had been to take a comprehensible and, in the manner of fairy-tales, an exciting risk. Now there was change. It was as if the giants had shrunk into quick-witted, chuckling malevolent dwarfs. The place stirred in him that cold revulsion which had once driven him from the sight of an ape whose bewildered cunning had gleamed out over a diamond shirt-front and whose jewelled fingers had tossed nutshells across the footlights of a music-hall. Of such was these guests' trained affection of contempt for all that lay beyond the glitter of their own artificiality. It was defensive, defiant, wounded. It awoke horror in him. He saw the ape's eyes look out of Colching's head and knew why it had suddenly seemed necessary to strike Vi Trell into consciousness of danger. And over all Flare—its open windows, its trees heavy with leaf, its blue-shadowed lawns—darkness brooded, a charged darkness such as hangs upon a ship which plague has entered and which lies becalmed upon a sparkling sea. Rory himself seemed always near to an outburst of nervous anger against those who encountered him. In Irma the colour that springs from human contact had grown more pale, as if, while her body was near these people, she yet preserved a solitude in which their light had no reflection.

When, that night, he had given her Vi's message, she had not asked, as he half expected, whether anything unusual had happened, but only whether Vi had spoken quickly "with clipped words," and when for short intervals he was alone with her, he knew that she carried some burden in her mind, a responsibility which as yet she could not share. There was, he thought, a checked impulse to share it with him, but he looked in vain for the clumsiness in himself that might be restraining her confidence. By telling her the sea-tales she loved and by tempting her thought into the past and the future, he tried to win her back to that basis of friendship from which, with the coming of Rory's guests, she had withdrawn. But she remained always haunted and remote. Seeing her cold, he knew himself shut out from fires deep within her. She gave him news that Vi had consented to marry Colching, that Drumpeter had proposed their health, that the party had lashed itself into rejoicing. She gave it as a hard narrative with rigidity of

phrase, and when his impulse had been to say protesting words, her eyes had held him silent.

The Manor emptied at last. Natalya went with the Trells, and on the day after their going Irma came to *The Three Faithful Men*. She found Will setting out for Conrad's house.

"Will, take me to sea to-day. Borrow young Gurge's boat."

He laughed in his happiness. "North or South?"

"Can we go right out and land at Spring Bay on the way back?"

He gauged the tides and nodded. "Will you wait? We shall want supplies. I'll go in and see Jim."

While he was away she sat on the court-yard bench and watched the sign's shadow tremble at her feet. How glad he had been! How his eyes had lighted at the thought of the day to be spent together! The remembrance of his pleasure and the fear that he might regard her coming with him as a foundation for vain hopes urged her to turn and call him and say at once: "No. It is better not to go," but she did not move. This was escape; she so desired it that she could not now deny it to herself. Yet Will had no part in her desire; it was this she wished he could know, at once, before it was too late. Perhaps it was already too late. Did he already love her for imagined wonders of the body that were ghosts in her, for the response she would never give to any man? Of this void in her being she had become but lately aware. Angela had perceived it and had shrunk from it; Natalya's fingers had closed on its emptiness. In Vi's misery there had been for Irma indication of an opposite happiness which could never colour her own dreams. The discovery left her alone, and with consciousness of power. The material world had nothing to give her; it could take nothing away. She would know neither the peace nor the torture of the senses. Because their bodies were no impediment to her, she could make direct attack upon the spirits of men. Hitherto she had rested within herself, and to-day she would rest. Soon, she knew, she might rest no more.

Young Gurge yielded them his boat, his eye twinkling for lovers' sake, and stood long watching them as they drew away from the quay. At last, when they were well settled on a long tack, they saw him wave a scarlet handkerchief to them and, an instant later, drop it irresolutely as if in embarrassment at an action over-bold, and, turning away, quickly take cover.

Will laughed and, with the hand free of the main sheet, waved in return.

"He has gone," said Irma.

"Probably he's still watching through the window of the black shed."

She lay in silence, listening to the chop and suck of the water under the boat. The regularity of sound and movement soothed her. The knowledge that she had left the shore for a stretch of hours gave her the thrill of peace snatched suddenly from turmoil. And Will was an amazing companion; neither his words nor his silences jarred. Here was all the comfort of laying aside armour. There was no need for defence.

"I am glad that Rory stayed," she said. "He and Peggy and I were alone last night."

"Is that different and happier?"

"You know it is."

"Irma," he said, and paused to take grip of himself, "you know it is not Rory only who changes. . . ."

She watched the canvas tauten to a wind-gust and slacken again a little, pouring out the shadows from its curve.

"May I help if I can?" he asked.

Her body straightened and her eyes brightened as they returned to him.

"You remember that first night when you gave me Vi's message? I went to her. She talked to me of Colching; she had not said 'yes' then. She had come away from him, gone to bed, sent for me. It was the last struggle."

He tried to connect this with Irma's own distress of mind and could not. When he tried to question her, she, thinking that he made light of the step which Vi had finally taken, demanded: "Do you know Colching? And do you know her as she is?"

"We talked that night. I think I do know her—enough to see what she might be."

"Might be? No: what she is now, Will—what she is, in spite of all they've done and desired—the girl she is now: still." And Irma added: "It is as if she lived under a spell. . . . They are all under a spell. They know where happiness lies, but they will not and cannot take it. It is a disease of the soul that makes them fight for things which they know will not bring them peace. Most of them know it only subconsciously; Natalya, in flashes, knows it with a knowledge that tears her; and yet the spell holds over them all."

"Do you think Mrs. Trell knows that what she fights for is useless after all?"

"If she didn't know, she would not be unhappy. She is unhappy. And because she is unhappy, because in her heart she knows that all her realities are illusions, she's forced to drag others down. It's alliance against truth." Her face was now turned a little from him, and her words came very quietly

on the wind. “I think that is why revolutions are useless, not because materially they fail, but because spiritually they give a false appearance of success. Power beats them down; tyranny follows; dreamers die on barricades. But that is not the tragedy. We say: ‘Men have died, martyrs to truth’: that is not the tragedy. The tragedy is that they died for what is not the truth. The contest lies, not between freedom and tyranny, as all the world has believed, nor between knowledge and ignorance, but between light, which every man knows is blazing behind him, and the fear which holds him from turning to face it. He chooses rather to watch his own shadow thrown by that light. If he turned to face it, he says, he would be blinded. Blinded to what? To his former darkness. He would no longer be able to see his own shadow. He would no longer be a man of the world, being become a child of light. So it happens that some, preferring a smooth succession of shadows, move slowly; that is called steady progress. Others caper with their backs to the light; the shadows dance wildly in response; that is called revolution.”

“But, Irma, most people care nothing for steady progress or for revolution. They want to live, that’s all—to live pleasurably if they can. They are thinking, not of light, but of the struggle for existence, for themselves and their children.”

“You mean that they are afraid to see perish their own shadows and the shadows of those they love. That is true. But it is not true that they do not think of light. They look for something beyond the perishing. It is the rich, the prosperous, the men who, having seen many shadows bow to their own shadow, have taught themselves to believe in its substance—it is these who care least for the light. But they knew it as children; they knew it again in the moment of love even if their love has been denied and thwarted; they can never wholly forget it. That is why they are unhappy. A completely evil man would be happy; it is the fact that it can never be complete which is the punishment of evil.”

Being now within sight of Spring Bay, they ran for land. Will hoped that the change from boat to shore might recall her from her detachment. He feared her in this mood and feared for her. There was that in her which prevented him from breaking upon her thought—a beauty of tone and manner that held him always at a distance. When the boat had been dragged up, they lay down in the shade of rocks, avoiding by common instinct a position in which their own shadows would be thrown clear-cut upon the sand. He asked:

“Don’t all religions tell of the light?”

“Of the light which men see in the gaps between their own shadows. And because they declare the shadows to be not shadows but real, they tell

themselves also that they are looking towards a light of which the origin is beyond the shadows. In truth the light is behind themselves. They must turn to see it. They must abandon the shadows—beautiful or ugly, beloved or hated, all must be abandoned."

"They must turn their backs upon the world?"

"Upon shadows which they now call, but in their hearts do not believe to be, the world."

"But that is the meaning of the cloister."

"No; when the monk withdraws to his cell, he does no more than withdraw so far from his fellows that his shadow no longer mingles with theirs. He is nearer the light than they, but his withdrawal is useless because he too looks out in the direction of their eyes—peering into the light of the interstices, thinking as they do that its origin is beyond the shadows. If sometimes, in a mystic flash, he does turn to face the light, again it is useless, for he is so far from his fellows that they do not see the light stirring on his face nor can they hear him when he speaks of what he sees."

Will plunged his fingers through the hot surface into the cool sand beneath. "Is there, then, no hope?"

"Men must turn and face the light, standing on the crowd of men."

"And the light—what is it? How shall men turn? How shall they know in what direction they are to turn?"

"They have turned when they accept finally what they already know and fear in their hearts, that there is no substance in material gain or loss, no victory or defeat in the conquest of shadow by shadow."

"But that is all the world. Can I believe that there is no substance in my all? No substance in beauty, in love itself? Are beauty and love also shadows, for they are part of what I now see?"

"They are beautiful not in themselves but because they call upon you to turn to the light which throws them."

"Are not the ugly shadows, then, thrown by the same light?"

"They are ugly only if we ourselves are ugly."

"But I answer that the shadows are beautiful only if we ourselves are beautiful. Their ugliness or beauty is no proof of the beauty or ugliness of the light itself. If I turn, it may be that I face the light which casts the shadows. But I do not know if it be good or evil, God or devil. Am I to abandon what I see and know for such a chance?"

"Yes. If it be God, then let us meet Him. If it be devil, then let us face him." She rose and stood beside him.

“Irma,” he asked, “do you know all you have been saying?”

“Yes. Did you think I spoke in a dream?”

“No. And yet—Irma, I know you can do nothing. I know you will fail. I know you cannot make men face the light.”

“Do you believe nothing can be done?”

“I believe you can do nothing. I wish I could tell you why: I don’t know why. But always, when you speak as you have spoken, there’s a knowledge in me that cries out: ‘Danger!’ It’s like the sudden instinct that comes to some seamen, though all is calm and clear—the sudden knowledge that flashes on them the moment before impact.”

She knelt on the sand.

“I can speak and think more calmly now than for many days past,” she said. “Do you realize, Will, that I’ve never seen the shadows as you see them? I was born with my face turned to the light. I don’t share your sorrow or gladness. I can’t. It leaves me alone. I see the light, but I am alone because all others have pleasure in shadows. And sometimes I am tempted to turn from the light, so that I may have company.”

“I tell you, Irma—live the normal life, make the normal life as beautiful and splendid as you can. You would be happier. At least your unhappiness would be such as the world can soothe. Now, I can’t reach you. I believe in your power. I do believe in that. I believe you have power to live as we can’t live—perhaps, if you go forward into the light, to draw us after you. But I do not believe your power is perfect. Somewhere it has a flaw. If there were no flaw, you would never, even for an instant, be unhappy for the shadows’ sake. Do you see that?”

She did not answer. “I know,” she cried, “that I can twist evil faces towards the light! Am I not to do that? That night, though I broke the spell upon her, though she did see for a little while where her happiness lay, Vi was afraid that the spell would close upon her again. She said: ‘If I go back on this, pull me out of it. I know what is right now. Later, I may not know what is right. If I go back, pull me out by force.’ Under her breath she said it, almost as if she were praying and scarcely intended me to hear: ‘There’s only you *can* pull me out.’ ”

“And you believe that true?”

“It is true.”

He knew it true, but said: “Irma, you can’t do it—you can’t . . . or, even if you can—and, God knows, so it may be—yet put it all away. This force is fire to burn you. There’s no peace in it for you.”

"For me?"

"The evil would close in again after you were gone. They will turn back to their shadows. You may be able to do much—I don't know how much. You can't do all. And, unless you can do all, it is not worth your own life, your own peace."

"What would you have me do?"

The question brought him nearer to her than ever he had been since childhood.

She asked him again: "What would you have me do?"

"Do you know I love you?" he said.

"Yes. . . . Will, if I could give myself to your love, as other women give themselves to love, that would be a peace so new and strange."

"Is that impossible?—not now only, I mean. Is it impossible always?" She turned away her head and he continued: "You know I'm a seaman. I've tried—sometimes I'd tell myself it was for your sake—to make myself something more. But I'm plain seaman still in comparison with you. But perhaps in time it might come to seem different, mightn't it? And it's true love I have for you, if that can plead—love and worship, too."

"Dear, it's not that."

"You do care for me, then?"

"More than for anyone in the world. But, Will, I can't marry you. You don't know how far away from me any possibility of that is, with you or anyone, now or in the future. It can't ever be for me."

"Do you mean that? You can't mean it and not be able to tell me why. Is it the bodily side of love that you are afraid of? It was that I had in mind when I said I worshipped you. Irma, you needn't be afraid. Don't be afraid. If that is your reason and you cling to it, you will do me—and yourself—a great wrong."

"I know how gentle you are—how amazingly gentle and patient. I should never be afraid of you, I think, or say 'no' for that reason only. But, Will, there's a life and a power in me that I can't ever share. It's stronger than the woman in me, and it keeps me apart, so that there's something I can't give—like a secret one can't divulge. I haven't the power to give all myself to you. It's not a question of being unwilling or being afraid or not trusting you enough. It's just that, because of what has been given to me, I am left out of human love. I have to go on alone."

"Will you remember——" he began, but broke off. "Oh, well, it's useless to say that."

“Will I remember—what? That I’ve hurt you is what I shall never be able to forget.”

“Perhaps you’ll find some day that the only way to make your power perfect is the way you can’t take now. I don’t know. I don’t believe the spirit can stand alone any more than the body can. Will you remember, if that time comes, that whether I’m at sea or not it’s for you I’m living?”

She pressed his hand, and released it, and walked away from him to the waves’ edge, where the boat was drawn up.

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In London, at Number Four Starcross Place, Irma was given a room with a top-light that had once been nursery or studio. It was small, but being itself of disproportionate length and being further elongated in appearance by a stretch of low, broad windows on one side, it had come to be known as the Long Room. Irma had chosen it at once, rejecting in its favour a larger and, as Peggy explained, a "much more sensible" room on a lower storey. She was happy in the wealth of light that poured into it, in the great window-seats where children of a past generation had knelt to trace raindrops with fingers that squeaked on the panes. It was approached by a narrow, uninviting stair, and her bedroom—perhaps the old night-nursery—led out of it. Even while her trunks were being dragged across the floor, Irma began to love the place for the silence which she knew would settle over it when the sound of the servant's retreating footsteps grew dim on her yet uncarpeted stair. The room possessed, however, a peculiarity which she did not discover at once.

After tea, for which she joined Rory and Peggy downstairs, she climbed again to the Long Room. Elspeth had unpacked her clothes; and her books, taken out of their deal boxes, were piled haphazard in the window-seat. The shelves stood empty, for Irma had reserved their arrangement to herself.

"You'll tire yourself lifting all those books," Elspeth called from the bedroom. "Better let me put them in; then you can change them round as much as you like afterwards."

Irma, near the window, turned her head to answer. As she did so, her attention was drawn by a faded brown curtain with a stencilled border of passant lions. It was hanging, dull and inconspicuous, on an end wall near the fire-place. If her eye had fallen on it before, her mind had not asked its purpose. Now, smiling at the heraldic beasts, who in one vertical border spoiled their fierceness by standing on their heads, she began to wonder what the curtain concealed. Elspeth had left the bedroom and was standing white-aproned on the hearth.

"What's behind that curtain?" Irma asked.

"A door, Miss."

"But it's an outside wall. There's no room or passage beyond?"

"No: it's in case of fire, I'm told. I suppose the gentleman that had this house in the past didn't trust to those wooden stairs—not so high up. And I'm not surprised. They'd burn like matches."

Irma pulled aside the curtain. The revealed door was locked and its crevices choked with green felt that had rotted to shreds. Its key complained but turned at last; still she was unable to open it.

"I should let it be if I was you, Miss. You'll only have to close it again and refelt it to keep the draught out. I wonder Mr. Rory don't have it built up."

But Irma was determined that the door should be opened. There was no knife with which to cut the felt, and for a moment she stood inactive. She rang the bell and heard Elspeth's voice say: "They don't ring. They are not in order yet. I'm sure I don't know why you're in such a hurry about that door, Miss."

Irma turned from her, went downstairs, summoned a servant, and returned. While the man was picking at the felt and straining at the handle, her eyes were never moved from the door. She sat in the window-seat among her books, her face wearing that fixity of expression which drew towards her Elspeth's most suspicious and puzzled glances. The man, having looked over his shoulder to find Irma's eyes upon him, became uncomfortable.

"What's all this?" he whispered. "Why?" But Elspeth shook her head, shrugged her shoulders, and returned to the bedroom.

"That's it, Miss," the man said at last. "It opens free now." He opened it no farther than was necessary to be sure that it swung on its hinges, and closed it again. "Is that all, Miss?"

"Yes, thank you."

She did not move until he was gone. Then, crossing the room slowly, she opened the door. At her feet was an iron platform, railed, and from this an iron staircase ran down the house-side to the back yard. It was hidden from the street by a group of trees.

When she returned to the room and the door was shut, she saw Elspeth standing in the entrance to the bedroom, her good temper recovered, her arms full of blankets.

"Well, you've had your way, Miss. It wasn't much after all?"

"An iron ladder."

Elspeth set down the blankets. "I'll draw the curtain." She fingered it. "It's a poor thing, though it was a good material once upon a time. Even now, it'll keep the draught out till we can get the felt fixed up again."

"No: leave the curtain back. It gets in the way of the door. The door opens inwards."

"But the draught?"

"There is no draught. And it's summer weather."

Irma was preceded in London by a little fame. Mrs. Trell had contrived that she herself should be regarded as the principal source of information; and in this she was aided by Rory's determined reticence. Irma was his half-sister, he said; she had come to London; she would live with him for a time. Did she like London?—he hoped so. Was she going to parties?—he didn't know. Was she working in London?—he hadn't asked her. Mrs. Trell was more generous in her answers; a most remarkable and beautiful girl; working with the Convent of St. Aidan; a personality, a *power*; but one needed to *know* her—to know her *well*. Of course, Mrs. Trell knew her well; she would undoubtedly be at Vi's wedding though it was true that she cared to go out seldom. In fact, she saw few but her own friends and the poor people with whom she came in contact through the Convent of St. Aidan. . . . She was, indeed, very young to go among such people. Mrs. Trell had suggested as much to Rory Flare. Her eyebrows went up and her fleshy lids stretched and fluttered as she told of this suggestion. "But he listens to no one. He doesn't appreciate niceties of that kind. It's so often the way of worldly men; they're careless of the world."

The precise nature of Irma's association with the Convent long remained an irritating mystery. She spoke no word of it, nor did she appear at the meetings which fashionable priests addressed in its support. The other girls who visited poor quarters under the Convent's auspices could say only that they saw her sometimes and had overheard the people speaking of her among themselves; but her name did not appear with theirs on any list, and whatever work she did could be of no official importance. They did not know that the Convent had applied to Irma for help, and, though not without dismay, had allowed her to make her own conditions.

"My dear," Mrs. Trell once said to Irma, "as you've no mother you'll forgive my advising you? Your mysterious aloofness is charming, charming. It's very clever. It gives an air; but it can be carried too far. People will begin to think that you are really at heart eccentric, and that's a very dangerous reputation. Of course, you and *I* know, but the rest—well, the world is unimaginative, my dear; it likes in the long run the things it can understand without effort."

But, as time passed, she herself became convinced that what she had regarded as a clever affectation was indeed a permanent and genuine defect. There was eccentricity. It was extremely unfortunate. Men would be afraid

of a girl about whom rumours were dangerously increasing. In certain quarters of London, Irma had a personal following. Her presence was undermining the influence of organized charity. Revolutionaries who worked for material overthrow found that, under her influence, men and women were acquiring an infectious indifference to all they might gain from social upheaval. Even hatred had become powerless to goad them on. They would no longer say: "What shall we get out of it?" or "Remember how they've treated us." It was not that they were deliberately submissive, but that their mental direction had become inward instead of outward. The bribes of revolt and of salvation left them unmoved. They did not want power and they were unafraid. They would not accept Christ's death as an insurance against the consequences of sin, a fund upon which repentance might draw to make good spiritual loss.

Spurred to curiosity by the tales that were told her, Mrs. Trell went to the house of a man whose baby son, it was said, had been cured by Irma of fever. "I've got a baby of my own," she explained. "Where does the girl live who cured your baby?"

The man told her.

"Is it true that people go to her house at night—people to be cured?"

"Not only to be cured."

"Really?"

"Just to be with her."

"How do they go? Could I go?"

"Anyone can go. The door opens inwards, she says. You go up the fire-ladder that lays against the wall." The man looked at Mrs. Trell. "It's mostly poor people that go, y' know."

"I know," she answered. "But perhaps she'd let me in. Thank you for telling me. What was the address again?"

She made show of writing it down, closed her engagement book, and asked one more question.

"I've never heard her. What does she teach?"

"Ah," the man said, "I can't tell it as she do, ma'am. All this"—his gesture included Mrs. Trell and the narrow street behind him—"all this rich and poor don't matter—not first, anyhow. It's a revolution of the spirit that's comin' first. We shan't be gainers—nor our children, maybe. But its comin'. The rest'll come afterwards. That's how it is."

Mrs. Trell went at once to Starcross Place. Her brain worked quickly; she saw one way in which the hall-mark of custom could be stamped on

Irma's work. After an hour of delicate questioning, she said: "You should found a little sect. Form a league. You want a capable business man. Appeal for funds." That, she thought, would ensure for the movement a speedy death with all the dignity for which it might now dare to hope. But Irma replied only:

"No. I've no need of that."

She had been convinced by her experience in the work she was doing that she could look for no help from others. The Convent itself was little more than a charitable mechanism which aimed at giving temporary relief from material distress. One morning she went there and asked to see the Sister who, when she came to London, had first received her. She found her in a well-ordered room, surrounded by the varnished furniture of a commercial office. Sharp eyes looked up as she entered, eyes that were for ever in a hurry but which yet retained an uneasy, wistful longing for a more leisured detachment, as if their owner had once been glad to give them quieter work to do and now felt herself to be trapped by her environment. "I thought to escape from the world," they seemed to say. "But the world is strong and swift and has caught me."

But the lips were trained to contradict the eyes' admission. When Irma was seated in an opposite chair, the Sister said in a tone of weariness and contempt: "I suppose you have come to resign. Tired of the work so soon?"

"No. I haven't come for that reason. I shall go on working."

The Sister regretted her haste and asked more gently: "What is it, then?"

"I wanted to ask a question."

"Of faith? Sister Blanche should answer that."

An acquired departmental habit had forced that reply, and in an instant she was grieving for it. Would her Master have given it? With what wrath He would have heard it! Her lips moved in a silent prayer for forgiveness and strength, and to shut out the crowded desk and the baskets full of papers she closed her eyes. Once before, she remembered, she had been uncomfortable in this girl's presence. Her will to command had deserted her. She had been reminded, as she did not like to be reminded now, of her original self-dedication to her Master's service and of the spiritual impulse that had then been hers. That was a long time ago. How hysterical she had been—but how happy! Never could she feel now, as she had felt then, that her way of life was right beyond all doubt. Now the doubts, though deeply buried in argument, were ever present in her soul. Irma summoned them into active consciousness, and, though her eyes were closed, she saw Irma's face as vividly as if they had been open. That face had power, and the beauty, like

no other beauty, of a woman in ecstasy. Beneath what she knew to be its steady contemplation of herself, she could endure no longer to keep her eyes shut, but opened them and looked out with a sort of melancholy fascination as if she hoped, in what she would see, to rediscover and recapture, not merely a memory, but a part of the substance, of her own youth.

"It is not a question for Sister Blanche," Irma was saying, "but for you. Why do you send your people only among the poor?"

"That is our mission."

"Do you despair of the rich?"

"We are not afraid to ask their help, if that is what you suggest. Many of them are our best friends—most generous. When you've had more experience you'll realize that to condemn the upper classes collectively is shallow and unjustifiable."

Irma knew that her meaning was being deliberately misunderstood, but she made no protest and the Sister continued:

"If you think we're inactive among the rich, why don't you collect from them yourself? The money would be most welcome. You have many rich friends."

"I was not thinking—I did not speak of collecting money from them. They have other responsibilities towards Christ than the giving of money. We have other responsibilities towards them than to beg of them."

The Sister's hand shook. "You'll forgive my saying so, but I think you're very young to criticize. We've had great experience. In this world you can't proceed by direct route to your ideal, no matter how lofty it may be. You'll find in the end that our way is best."

"Sister, I am not trying to find fault with you. I am trying to tell you what I believe to be true. This mission is a mission of love; it's not a policy which we have to defend at all costs and as a point of honour. Am I wrong to strike at the heart's centre?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"You know my work—how I work."

"Then your way is not ours; that is all. Yours may be good. Ours is necessary. Mission work of any kind must be run in a businesslike manner. The accounts must be published; a certain definite achievement must be proved. And all our experience shows—and this, I presume, is what you dispute—that the soul is best approached through the body."

"Have you always believed that?"

The Sister flinched and hesitated. She saw herself suddenly as a young girl, straight against the wind and sunshine of the Sussex Downs, and remembered how she had stood still, while the gusts rustled her skirts, and had wondered whether, in some miraculous way, the inward saintliness of one man was communicable to all mankind. Was the world better, not because of his direct service to it, but because he had lived in it, giving out his spirit as a flower may spread its sweetness among those who neither see nor touch it nor have any knowledge of its growth? Was this the answer to those who declared a contemplative life to be a selfish life? These questions, which had first sprung into her mind while her cheeks were glowing with the blood that youth and the sea-wind had whipped into them, had long persisted; and, though she had not entered a contemplative order, all the earlier bias of her mind had been towards the service of her Master by an inner spirituality rather than by outward works. Her reluctant movement from that position and her tragic defence of the movement once made were all the history of her life. Therefore, to Irma's question, she answered at last: "No—if you ask it."

"But you do believe it now?"

"It's practicable. It gives us something to start on. The homes are squalid; there's disease, hunger, dirt, drunkenness. There's something ready to your hand. Fight that. God will guard the soul; it's our duty, for His sake, to guard the body. The people say always: 'How can we be good if we're hungry?' That misses the point, but there's much we can learn from it—we being human. If we did nothing for their material benefit, they'd not come to us. Most parish priests would tell you that. You must realize that this is a very important organization. There are many branches to its activities. To begin with——"

"Sister, I'm not for an instant arguing against the giving of alms, but you said the people would not come to a spiritual teacher who did not offer them material benefit."

"That, I am afraid, is almost true in England now—certainly among the poverty of cities."

"It is not true. It is proved to be untrue by the people who come to my own house every night."

The Sister said uneasily: "We have heard of that."

"Will you come?"

"Why?"

"You said there was once a time before you came to believe that the soul must be approached through the body?"

"I admit that I lacked experience."

"It hurts you to believe it now. Isn't the earlier, quicker faith alive in you still—stronger than all the argument of experience in the world? It would make you happy to come to me to-night."

"I am busy to-night."

"To-morrow, then—any night."

The Sister shook her head. "I can't spare so long. Anything you have to say—say it to me here and now. I'll be glad to listen"—she smiled—"though I think you will scarcely sway my opinion. I am growing old."

She sat with folded hands, waiting for Irma to speak. Her thoughts travelled far away. The washed smell of clean linen near her face and the musty smell of the great ledgers she must attack oppressed her. It was true that the earlier, quicker faith was still alive to torment her. Had this girl power to re-establish it in peace? She looked up. Irma's eyes seemed to have increased in size and brightness. Her own weariness and weakness ran out to her companion's strength as if they would hide themselves there. The fire of her early years, the sureness of a faith uncompromised, a sense of swiftness that had become strange to her, flowed into her heart. She seized Irma's hands, feeling that here life began again for her.

But in that instant she found herself at fault like a runner into darkness. As Natalya had done before her, she touched in Irma a hardness, a remoteness from womanhood that checked the course of ecstasy and drove her back upon fear and a protective self-consciousness. She became aware that her head was stiffly uplifted, that the hands she held were the hands of a girl with whom she had lately contested in argument, that the window-light shone dully through the half-drawn holland blinds, and that outside was the noise of London. She was once more the tired woman she had known herself to be. With a little gesture of impatience at her own folly she drew back her hands and, sitting down, folded them in her lap.

"Leave me to my own world," she said. "You can lift me, but you cannot sustain me in yours. I do not know what the mystery is. But I know that it is a great army in which I fight. In our hands the sword of the spirit may have lost its keenest edge. Still it may do great service."

It was at this period that Mrs. Trell became aware that Vi, being neglected by Colching, was greatly relieved by his neglect. It became necessary to press forward the arrangements for the marriage. Vi's newly re-won lightness of heart was torn from her by an interview with her mother.

She was urged to name a date, and, under pressure, chose one in the following month.

"Well," said Mrs. Trell, "I think you are very wise. I am sure you will be happy. My life hasn't always been easy. You are all I've got out of it. And now I must let you go. But it had to be some day sooner or later. At least, I am glad to have it settled."

Vi spoke with her face turned away. "Mother, it's *not* settled. It can't be settled like that."

"My dear, I don't understand you. Didn't you just now fix a date?"

"I know I did."

"Well? . . . Well?"

"I'm afraid."

Mrs. Trell put her arm round her daughter. "My pet, I was afraid, too. I was afraid. But there is no need for fear of a man who loves you."

"Mother, can I sit down and talk to you about it? Probably you know better than I do. All my world seems upside down."

"You don't still imagine yourself in love with the Sheppard man?"

Vi hung her head, and Mrs. Trell drew herself up to strike.

"You see," she said, "young girls don't always know better than their mothers. You swore to me once that you loved him."

"O Mother, don't!"

"I'm only trying to prove to you for your own good that your own instinct and experience are not infallible."

"What do you want me to say? That you were right and I wrong? Very well. I'll say it. You were right. Absolutely right."

Mrs. Trell smiled. "Well? My dear, it's your own choice and your own life. The responsibility is with you. Act as you think best."

And Vi, with unexpected courage, said: "I don't want to marry him. I won't." She looked up helplessly. "Need I?"

"*Need* you? What nonsense! Of course you *needn't*!"

"Why do you say it like that? Why must you always be like ice to me if I don't do, body and soul, everything—everything small and great—that you wish? You know I wouldn't marry him if there was any kind of escape. You know that quite well—quite clearly. But you're stronger than me. Life would be impossible for me if I refused. You know you could make it so. Don't you?"

Mrs. Trell sat stone-like, her lips fixedly smiling.

“My dear, you won’t move me by insult. You were always selfish and passionate when you were a little girl. And now you seem incapable of believing that your mother advises you for your own good. What motive I should have for doing otherwise, I cannot imagine. I advise you. I then tell you that you are free to take that advice or leave it. What more am I to say?”

Vi made no answer. She made no further protest when the invitations for the wedding were sent out, but she left the house in order to avoid the sight of the cards and the sticking down, the stamping and the addressing of the envelopes. In the evening they lay in completed ranks. She stared at the names. Suddenly she swept a pile of them into her arms and carried them to the hearth. But the fire-place was empty. It was futile; she was a little fool. She dropped the envelopes on to the floor and smiled at the jagged edges of the pile they made—like a pack of cards in *Alice in Wonderland*. When she had first read *Alice in Wonderland*, curled up on the nursery rug that now lay in the passage at the cellar entrance, she had been wearing brown stockings, and her knees, unprotected by the short skirt, had been burnt in contact with the fender. She was wearing brown stockings now, and the thought, because it had no kind of relevance, amused her. The sound of her own laughter recalled the world and, stooping quickly, she gathered up the scattered envelopes and replaced them on the table in such a way that her mother might not guess that they had been moved.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PEGGY, having dressed early for dinner, climbed the stairs to Irma's room. In the passages it was already dark, but she found the Long Room still filled with London's shredded daylight and slashed with those pale streaks of golden orange that are the atmosphere's gift of late sunshine. She had hesitated at the door, being forced to open it only by the thought of the long staircase she would otherwise have mounted to no purpose; and inside the room she was definitely afraid and stood still. Irma turned her head slowly.

"Irma——"

"Have you come to talk to me?"

"I did. Do you mind?"

"I'm glad."

Peggy crossed to the fire-place, sat down, and ran her hand over her dress. "I hate these clothes by daylight," she began again.

"Are you cold?"

"There is a draught, I think."

"Probably from that door behind you. Come to the other side of the hearth. You won't feel it there."

Peggy shook her head. "It's nothing really. Look, I'll put my feet up on the couch."

She had come to the Long Room with a clear purpose and was now afraid to give it effect. The girl in front of her was so disconcertingly calm. It was more than physical stillness, she felt. The face, half turned to the window, seemed sunken in its dark background, and, as she watched it and the great eyes that looked so steadily into hers, she felt guilty of trespass. She saw the lips move and heard Irma's voice say:

"Did you come to talk to me about that door?"

"Yes. I did. My dear, you don't want Mrs. Trell interfering, do you?"

"What has she to do with it?"

"She knows."

"Does she hope to make me close and bar it?"

"I don't think she means altogether badly, Irma. She sees things from the point of view of the world outside, you understand. And naturally, although I —love you, and although I know that it's all right, I do see that we must recognize that point of view. You won't think I'm insulting you? I'm not

saying anything against the door being open or even the—the people coming in. . . . It's hard for me to say all this, because perhaps I'm not the one to say it, as you know. It makes me feel ashamed of myself to come lecturing you about that kind of thing. But you see—of course—I know it's all right—but it's what others think, Irma. You must reckon with that."

"How did you know that people came up the ladder and through that door?"

"I was told."

"By Mrs. Trell?"

"She told Rory."

"And he you?" Peggy nodded. "Did he send you here? Surely not?"

"No, I came. No one knows I came. He just laughed—chiefly to annoy Mrs. Trell. But she won't let it drop there. . . . My dear, you see, it makes it difficult for me. They know what I was, but now I'm married, I'm responsible in this house, and—oh, I feel such a fool talking to you like this! You don't think I wanted to interfere? You won't hate me for it? I couldn't bear that."

"Peggy, tell me what it is you want me to do. To have the door screwed up—just that—or more?"

"Just that. The rest—oh, I'm miserable about you—but the rest's your own life. That can wait. Just have the door shut. Just do that, Irma. It's such a small thing. Then, when next Mrs. Trell says—anything, I shall be able to say——"

"No, no!" Irma said softly. "What good would it do to you? Do you not know you are asking what is impossible? Am I to stop these people coming to me? Or are they to come through the house? Or am I to go by night to them? The way I have chosen is easier for you, if you think."

"But why do they come? What do they want?"

"It makes them happy. It helps them to see."

"To see?"

Irma rose and spread out her hands in a held gesture. "How many men and women have you heard say—say so often that it has become a truism—that the things we desire lose all their charm when we have attained them? Doesn't that mean that the whole direction of men's will is a wrong direction and that, so long as they follow it, there is no way out? It is as if we tried to read a book written in one language with the aid of a dictionary written in another."

Peggy lowered her head. “Is it Christianity you’re teaching them? Why not leave it to the men brought up to teach it? Are you promising them a reward in heaven? That’s the trouble of it all. It’s too far away to be of much use now to people who have to fight to live.”

“I am offering them no reward.”

“Oh, I know; not really, of course. But salvation of their souls.”

“I am offering them no reward,” Irma repeated.

“What *do* you offer them? That’s no kind of religion.”

“I’m not asking for good acts—not for kindness, even; that comes of itself. I don’t ask them yet to love God or to love their neighbour. And I am trying to save no soul. But I am letting the living spirit go free. They used to believe that they must fight for their own supremacy or for general equality, and they knew in their hearts that both were empty things that left the heart hungry. And some were patient, some rebellious; some self-denying, some selfish; and they were sick within them because whichever path they had chosen seemed to have no ending. ‘But surely it matters,’ they said, ‘whether we are rich or poor, cruel or kind. Surely it matters. Everything depends on it.’ And I answered them: ‘It does matter—afterwards. It does not matter—first.’ And they said: ‘Oh, you’re telling us what they all tell us: that we must lean upon Jesus and He will provide.’

“I’m not telling them that. They must provide for themselves whenever they look outward, whenever their being moves outward towards the world. And to look for salvation or for heavenly reward is to look outward. To lay your cares upon Jesus is to look outward and there’s no peace in it. But within is a citadel no force can storm. Beyond the citadel life goes on—there, if you will, fight the battles of riches and poverty, of equality here, of life hereafter. That is slow, patient work. But, deep in the heart, there is peace now. To attain it is so simple an act of withdrawal that Western civilization has overlooked it. We go about the streets seeking peace: we can’t find it. We look heavenward for it and can’t find it there. Only in the citadel where no earthly desire can approach us is there peace.”

“But all life is earthly desires. You can’t get away from them. If you did, you’d cease to live,” Peggy said.

“Can there not be two lives? Do we not speak of a man’s life in his home and of his business life? So he may have his inward and his outward life.”

“But you can’t divide things up like that.”

“They are not divided. It is one man. It is a life within a life. The inward life permeates the outer. That is why I say that good acts come afterwards. That is why I say that ‘to lay your cares on Jesus’ does not bring peace. It

means no more than that by an act of faith you lay aside care for a time. That was never His teaching. He taught a vast and continuous spiritual adventure in the midst of all the traffic of life. And withdrawing to the inward life, you do not withdraw from the outward: you move to its centre: you see it whole in its perfection. For the inward citadel is a high place set in the midst of a city in a plain. From the plain, from any of the thousand points of the city, you see only a part of the city; from the citadel the eye is free of the whole city and of all that lies beyond it."

The voice, the quiet sureness of it, soothed Peggy. She began to think to herself: "How nice it would be to believe like that—to believe anything as she believes that!" Then, looking at Irma's white face, she said, scarcely knowing why she said it:

"I think you must be mad. I think mad people must sometimes be very happy."

"Do you mean 'mad'?"

And, at that question, Peggy strove to take back her accusation. What was it to be mad? Some physical disease of the brain? Or some twist of vision that made the whole world seem not the same world as that which others saw?

"I mean that—no, of course not mad—my dear, how could I say that? How could I think it? No; but, Irma, it's not worth while. It's not, I swear it. Come away from it. Can't you drive those ideas away? Can't you be just like—though better—like what other girls are? You may be right. I don't know. You make me feel you are, though I don't understand you, and I expect you have made those poor people feel you are right, though they don't understand you. But, even if you are right, yet kill and forget it all. What is true, matters so little in people's reckoning." Made nervous by the cynical ring of that phrase which she had intended only as a persuasive recognition of fact, she added hurriedly: "No, no, I mean that. You get no credit for the truth—only loneliness. And I see more than you think. You're not always happy. It's only flashes. There are times when you'd like to be closer to us all."

Irma's eyes narrowed in pain and fear. "How did you know that I have not the strength of my own truth, and am afraid of it? How did you know that often it is failure and isolation? It is. That is true. How did you know? Do men see that? Oh, if they saw it, they would not follow me. They would fall away suddenly as the Sister of the Convent fell away. Was that why you were not moved by what I said?" Her voice had become raised and harsh as Peggy had never heard it—so raised and so fierce in anger that the listener

turned away her eyes so that she might not look upon the face that approached her. But by the rustle of skirts at her side she knew that Irma, being come near, now stooped over her, and there was breath upon the lids she closed and a hand laid upon the fingers that grasped the wooden moulding of the couch.

"You have seen what it is not good to see," said the voice above her, now gently speaking. "Do not remember it. Think that I am happy always as sometimes I am happy."

"My dear," Peggy said, glad to speak of commonplace things, "you will make yourself tired and ill. You must not sit in this room alone and watch it becoming darker. You must make up your mind: cut clear: have that door closed: live——"

"No, never."

"But how shall I prevent their coming here?"

"My people?"

"No. Rory, Colching—how shall I stop them? If they come, I know, I know something terrible will happen. You will be angry. You will drive them out—your eyes like flame. Oh, Irma, don't give them that chance to laugh and be fools and swear and laugh again! I couldn't bear that. Don't give them their chance!"

"Do they intend to come here?"

"Just to see what happens, they say."

"Who?"

"Colching spoke of it, and Mrs. Trell."

"Mrs. Trell will not be here to-night."

"No. Vi and Colching, though."

Irma threw her arm across her eyes and stood with bowed head. "They must come if they wish it," she said, "though, in God's name, they were better not to touch this thing."

Peggy rose. Her fingers travelled across the mantelpiece. A half-empty matchbox clicked as she touched it.

"Light your candles, Irma. Light all your candles. Dress. I'll draw the curtains. The little end of daylight makes the heart grey."

She moved busily across the room, embarrassed by what suddenly seemed to her, when she had used it, an over-poetic phrase. She was glad of action and glad for the slow turning from blue to primrose of the first candle's flame.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THAT night, looking across the round dinner-table, Peggy watched Irma with increased disquiet. What was it she had said to the girl which had so roused and transformed her? She had known that Irma was sometimes unhappy; she had tried to say so, intending her words to be words of kindness. Irma had acted as if she had been surprised in a practice of shame, and Peggy took blame for some unknown tactlessness in herself. She had spoken from a generous heart; she had forced herself to speak because she believed it to be her duty, though all her instinct had warned her to be silent. And now, as a result, Irma seemed more than ever withdrawn from them. Peggy was baffled and miserable. She was gay because Rory expected her to be gay always; but to-night, in the words of her own arresting thought, she would "catch herself laughing," and wonder, as if she had been a listener, why the laughter came.

Marriage had imposed upon her new responsibilities of the strangest kind. The ceremony made no difference in the guests who came to the house, and but little in their attitude towards her. But that difference was enough to rob her of assurance. Men and women, who would never have openly admitted that they went themselves and took their daughters to dine with any man's mistress, had always come to Rory's table. To do so had become a fashionable and excusable eccentricity among those people to whom eccentricity, and a name for daring, were an essential prop. And, while Peggy had remained Rory's mistress, there had at least been no reason why such people should pretend that these dinner-parties were in the ordinary course of their lives. Now the pretence was necessary. They had not enough imagination to discard it. In all the essentials of their behaviour they treated her as mistress still, but in forms and reticences they did service to her wifehood. Each trivial change she read as sarcasm, and received hurt from it. They seemed to say: "You—why you are pretending now?" and Rory's politeness, which had in fact undergone no change of which he was conscious, seemed also to accuse her of pretence. She herself felt "false," as if she were wearing clothes that did not belong to her, but there was enough of her old self left to comfort her with the thought that she had attained her security. She was his wife; she had longed and fought for that.

Yet, if she had remained Rory's mistress, she would have been less troubled to-night. She would have been sorry for Irma, have petted her in a kind, ineffective way, and have worried her head not at all. And she would not have been made angry by the alternate airs of contempt and possession

that Colching affected towards Vi Trell. She would have been sorry as she was sorry for all women whom men used vilely, but again she would not have worried her head. Now her sympathies had become somehow officialized. She felt that they imposed duties. She sought vainly the phrase with which, she imagined, a great lady would set Colching in his place. As it was, she sat helpless, watching him as, blind to Irma's mood, he made love to Irma, and sometimes herself laughing at his words, capping his phrases, adding a barb to his arrows. Through it all she was afraid—afraid that Irma might move suddenly in her place and, in some manner at which there was no guessing, freeze their lips. She saw how the little party would grow still; how there would be silence; how Rory's hand would lie extended across the cloth; how Colching would laugh through his fear and how his laughter would die out. At any instant, she felt, these things might happen. Didn't they know? Didn't they see? Why could they not read the new, fiery danger that stood clear in Irma's face? She wanted to cry out, warn them, check them, but could not. She laughed with them. She was altogether beyond her depth.

"Tell me," Colching was saying. "I'm enormously interested. It seems so curiously beautiful that you should do the work you do."

"You do not know what the work is," Irma answered.

"But I know you."

"Do you?"

Rory's voice broke in. "Then, by God, you know more than any of us, Norman. Isn't that so, Vi?"

"I didn't hear. I'm sorry."

"Thinking of other things?"

He had spoken gently, but Colching turned quickly on her and forced her discomfort.

"Thinking of other things?" he echoed.

She made a schoolgirl's retort with nervous carelessness. "Not of you."

"I'm crushed."

"For the first time."

He turned deliberately to Irma, leaving Vi hot with shame for the tinsel of that altercation.

"Well," he said, "why that look?"

"I cannot say here what I would say."

He laughed uneasily. "Perhaps you'll explain my offence—afterwards?"

"You have no need of my explanation."

“I would rather yours than all the world’s.”

When they had left the dinner-table and gone into the smoking-room, he drew Irma apart.

“Let’s have it out. Why do you treat me as if I were some poisonous thing, Irma? God knows, I’m tired of it. And I won’t stand it; I tell you that.”

“Will you let Vi go?”

“Let her go?”

“She doesn’t love you.”

“Do you realize what you’re saying? D’you realize that she and I are engaged?”

“I know that you can claim a right to refuse to answer my question.”

“You have no right to ask it—none whatever to interfere.”

She turned aside as if to pass him. “Very well.” But he barred her way.

“No. Say what you wish.”

She answered quickly, steadily.

“You are determined to marry her?”

“Certainly.”

“I tell you she hates and fears you.”

“Then why did she say ‘yes’?”

She gazed at him. “You know well enough.”

“Look here, Irma. What is it you’re getting at?”

“You are asking that question. Do you ask it again? If you do, I am free to answer it.”

“Yes.” He smiled. “I ask it.”

“You bought her. Her mother sold her to you.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“It cancels debts.”

“And if it does? When I marry, may I not settle money as I wish?”

“And already you treat her as a bought thing. If you care so little for her, why will you not let her go?”

He knew that he could not let that proud, frightened, contemptuous child go from him until he had possessed her. He looked no further forward than that; the future might care for itself. And suddenly anger against Irma burned up in him because she had so forced him to look into his own mind. Hers was a mental force greater than his own and he hated her for it. His

anger filled him with desire to destroy its cause, to be, if only for an instant, Irma's master.

"Irma," he said, "I assure you that you misunderstand the whole situation. I promise you that."

"You will never marry Vi Trell," she said.

"So you will prevent me? How?"

"Do you believe what I say?"

"No."

Her eyes drove down his gaze. "You do believe what I say. You believe it now."

"Irma, you'd better try no tricks."

"Let her go now, of your own will. Break it. There's time."

"Nonsense."

"Is that your choice?"

"You're mad, girl! What's come to you? Why are you staring so out of your eyes?"

"You will never marry Vi Trell."

He blustered as one who sought to prove scepticism to a ghost that struck terror. "If you play your tricks—I know them—if you play them ——"

"Do you know what you fight against?"

"The devil, I think," he declared at venture. And the same agony that Peggy had witnessed passed suddenly into Irma's eyes, and she turned from him and left him.

"Where are you going? Irma——"

And Rory shouted after her as she opened the door:

"Irma! Here—Irma—here a moment!"

But the door closed behind her.

"Oh, well! oh, well! oh, well!" Colching cried, running across the room. "She's mad, that young woman. Thank God for a sane child that doesn't pass like a ghost through one's hands." In the midst of his laughter he took Vi into his arms and kissed her lips. The suddenness of his action swept her into physical response. She heard Peggy trying to say: "Norman! Norman!" and Rory's laughter ring out as he clapped his hand on Colching's shoulder. As if her individuality was drugged, as if she had neither will nor hatred nor any dreams, she yielded. She was glad. There was in the instant an overwhelming colour. Her lips moved under his kiss and her weight leaned

to him. And, when he let her go and their flakes of laughter and talk were fluttering on the after breeze of that incident, she began to see herself objectively as she had been when she was held to him, and despised the girl she saw, and hated the girl she saw, and jumped up from the seat she had taken, and cried perversely with that seen girl's voice:

"Let's be mad! Irma's mad, Norman says. . . . Peggy, play. Yes, play something. Quick." She dragged her to the piano. Rory began humming a tune to which Colching supplied the bass. The piano woke to accompaniment. Vi tilted her chin and smiled, and sang with the pretended twang of a chorus-girl.

At that time Irma was opening the door of the Long Room. The throb of music from below came to her in the passage's darkness, and penetrated even to the Long Room itself. At its sound, and the sound of Irma's entrance, the occupants of the room turned their heads. They were sitting or lying on the floor. Except by the heads' movement, no attitude was changed, but their eyes followed Irma as she went to sit among them.

"Music?" said one.

"I thought I heard it," his companion answered.

"I like a bit o' music, I do."

"Let's go out'n the passage an' listen—or open the door?"

"She's here."

The other nodded with new content. "She's here, yes. Let be, then. I like the door shut. Now she's here."

A young man rose up by the fire-place. He was sallow and hollow-cheeked, and black hair grew low on his temples. As he stood with arms straight hanging, stiff cuffs of a blue and white pattern fell almost to the level of his knuckles and beneath them long fingers of parchment colour with flattened nails were pressed together at the tips. His great height and this nervous rigidity of pose seemed to lend a certain importance to the attack he was so clearly determined to make, and the regard of the others was turned upon him.

"I've come here to-night——" he began. An unexpected reluctance gripped him and he looked at Irma.

"Yes?" she said.

"I've come here to-night to say that I think we ought to do something and do it at once. You——" he said, and looked at Irma again.

"What do you want me to do?"

"You can break the power of those trampling on poor people. You have only to lift your hand. You have only to go out into the streets and tell the poor where and how they are to attack. They will follow you. They will follow no one else. But you have a spell, a magic, a flame that draws them. You can do it. . . . And yet you say 'no'; you want to turn the individual mind; you won't use force in mass because force reacts. Very well. That may be. But if you don't use force, I say nothing will ever be done—nothing ever."

A woman with a baby in her arms said: "I'm tired of banners and them things. You're new here. I like the place—it's without fightin'. Fightin's never done no good, I say. I like gettin' away from it. It's here one gets away. You're new. You don't understand yet."

The young man shot a contemptuous glance at her and addressed himself to Irma.

"Look," he said. "It's you I want to hear."

"To fight with shadows, you must turn to shadows," she answered.

Her own words echoed in her mind when she had spoken them. The peace she had known in childhood was not now continuous in her; it was as if her spiritual life had been built upon an imperfect foundation and was rocked in the weather of the world. There were instants when she too looked outward—as this man had done—and was tempted to strike outward, to use her power directly as he wished her to use it. She knew that such an attempt would be made in vain; yet she was now tempted to satisfy men's common demand for an achievement to be reckoned in their own values. Vast achievement of that quality, of which in a lesser degree popular priests and popular reformers were capable, was within her reach—the healing of the sick, the striking down of enemies, the rousing of social upheaval. At her feet were spread out all the kingdoms of the world. If she forbore from seizure, there were few who would understand her. She would go down into the grave, having in appearance failed, leaving behind her those few whose spirit had caught light from her own, to carry forward in their own hearts the unrecognized revolution. How soon or late that flame would spread to the relighting of Christ's obscured face before the world, she could not know. To her own cry there would be no answer; to her own extended hand, no touch.

Yet its silence and the fact that it was intangible were the essence of her peace. The dark moments of temptation came even now seldom, though indeed they came with increasing frequency and force. To-night they had come, first in Peggy's presence and again in anger against Colching—swift impulses to strike, to act, to destroy. Even as she turned to answer the young

man, Mrs. Trell's imagined face rose before her, and she had to struggle with herself in order to maintain her calm while she sat among the people who had come to hear her.

Later in the evening Mrs. Trell and Natalya came together to Starcross Place. Vi rose as they entered, glad that they had come to take her home. But Mrs. Trell at once suggested bridge. The game was planned in her mind. Rory would play, and Peggy and Natalya. But Peggy said no.

"And why not?" Mrs. Trell demanded.

"I'm not good enough," said Peggy.

"But we'll play very small stakes. You must learn, you know."

It was implied that Peggy must learn, must do as others did, now that she was married, and she said: "I don't think I care much about learning."

"But you do *play*?" said Natalya.

"Yes, I do *play*. . . . But I should spoil your game."

"Why on earth should she play if she doesn't want to? Norman can play," Vi said.

"No, I'll stand out," Colching answered.

Mrs. Trell threw a glance of contempt over her daughter and turned away. "Very well. You're all amazingly dull to-night. What's the matter?"

"Shall I?" Peggy whispered to Rory.

"Better." He nodded. "Keep her quiet."

"But Vi? Leave her with him?"

Rory smiled. "Why not?"

Peggy spoke aloud. "Come, Mrs. Trell. I was only joking, you know. I'd love to play if you'll put up with me. It's the only way to learn, isn't it?—playing with people who . . ."

Mrs. Trell graciously laughed away excuses. They went out together to Rory's card-room. When they were gone, Colching allowed the silence to make its effect. To break it, Vi spoke quickly and at random, her eyes fixed on the door's handle, which now gave out a steady flash that she desired to watch.

Colching sat beside her and took her in his arms and turned her face away from the door. She pictured the bridge-players drawing chairs to their table, and answered Colching with a mechanical affection because the affording him so much satisfaction staved off questioning and allowed her own thought to wander far from him. It was for this only that she had now

any active care—to avoid the immediate unpleasantness of dispute with him or her mother. Quietness came through yielding. It was half pleasant to yield, to renounce responsibility for the life she could not control, to cheat herself into belief that complacency would somehow bring reward of peace.

Cushion folds were billowy against her cheeks. As she lay there, with Colching's words sounding to no meaning that her mind clearly recorded, her body was lulled by repose, and her will lulled also as in the first moments of waking. She saw Colching: the open texture of the flesh of his cheek as he drew back his head from the kissing of her. She saw the curl of his lashes, the expanse of his heavy lips, the black hair-stumps that shaving had left—saw them all as the detail of a giant's face because of their closeness to her. And, lashed suddenly into resistance, with both her hands she thrust at his collar so that the linen bent and crumpled and his body swayed away from her. She sprang to her feet.

"No," she said; "no . . . I want to get away"; and, when he rose to approach her, cried: "I hate you! You're cold and hot! There's a glaze on your eyes! I hate and loathe you!"

The brass knob turned under her fingers. Outside, the hall was dimly lighted. She heard Rory's voice. As if possessed by one of those panics of childhood that had set her running towards the expanding daylight at the end of an avenue, she now cried out and ran up and up towards the wooden staircase that led to the Long Room.

The card-room door opened. Faces appeared, wide-eyed, to encounter Colching.

"Well?"

"She shrieked."

"Nothing."

"A game. . . ."

"It sounded as if—like fear."

"Nerves.—Where is she?"

They looked foolishly upward, grouped at the stair-foot.

"Let's go up!"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Trell—coming?"

"Are those people there?"

"Let's see. Let's go."

"We shall want light. Peggy, the lamp off the card-table."

“Don’t go up—oh, don’t!” Peggy came clear of the door. She gave them the lamp and watched them move forward. They made of it a kind of hysterical game.

“I’ll go the other way,” Colching said. “Outside; up the ladder; through that door. Meet you there.”

Natalya turned when she was half-way up the first flight.

“No,” she said to Peggy. “I’ll stay with you. We’ll wait, in here. Shut the door. Let them go. Don’t speak to them. Let them go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

IRMA was already alone when she heard Mrs. Trell's car draw up in the street. Elspeth, entering soon afterwards, found her kneeling in an arm-chair, her elbows supported by its back, her face between her clenched fists. It was as if she were still speaking to one of those who had gone from the room, for, when Elspeth spoke her name, she did not at first change her attitude and gave no sign of having heard.

The old woman put her hand gently on the girl's head.

"Are you ready to go to bed?"

"Not yet."

"It's late."

"There's more to do to-night."

"They're all gone."

"Not yet."

She touched Irma's shoulder. "But the room's empty."

"There's one just come to the house."

Elspeth was alarmed. She took Irma's face between her hands, searched her eyes, kissed her cold lips. She began to chafe her hands as if she sought to restore the warmth of one near to death, and Irma, physically passive, said:

"They'll come here presently."

"Who? No one will come. Are you afraid of something, Irma? Little child, tell me what you're afraid of."

But there was no fear in the eyes into which she looked—only a braced expectancy, a gathering together of strength before effort—and, finding that her words, her comforting, her tenderness awoke no response, Elspeth allowed the room's silence to be folded about her also, and sat staring at her interlaced hands and at the carpet beyond them.

She had remained thus for a little time when the sound of ascending footsteps broke in upon her. Lightly and quickly the footsteps came, their regularity blurred once by the stumbling of excessive haste. Elspeth's hands parted; she raised her head. Irma had risen, and stood now so erect that height seemed to have been given to her. Vi Trell gathered control at the door. Her footsteps paused there an instant. When she entered and stood dazzled, she was bodily calm. And she said in wonder:

"It's quiet here—quiet!" And in Irma's arms murmured: "Hold me. I'm afraid. Don't let them come here. Don't let me go back to them ever."

"What have they done to you?"

"I was yielding. I saw myself. I saw to what. I hadn't the will to stay and fight—not then. Just strength enough to break away and run—and run here. . . . Oh, I can't go through with it! I can't!"

"You'll fight now?"

"I don't know. Need I? Need I? Can't time just stop a little while? I want rest—not fighting any more. It's good to be here. It's all I want. Keep me. Keep that door shut. Don't send me away. I can't go down those stairs. . . ."

And hearing now voices and the sound of footsteps and a song of Rory's, she sprang away and, with an arm flung out stiff, cried: "The door! Lock it, for God's sake! Keep them out! Hide me! I can't face them! I can't—not now!"

"I swear to you that they shall let you go free," Irma said, and, because Vi, in the grip of fear and weeping, made no reply, she repeated: "They shall let you go free."

"Keep them out!"

"Let them come to you while I'm here. They shall not harm you. When they go, you shall be free. They shall set you free."

"They won't. Nothing you can say—Irma! Behind you! The door, your own door . . . it's opening." Her voice broke and she whispered: "Opening. He's coming in. He is—from the dark——"

Irma turned to face Colching. He stood at the head of the iron ladder. Through the open door the light from the room fell upon him. His evening clothes, his exquisite detail and smoothness, his whole light air of being engaged in some house-party escapade, the gesture of an amateur mime with which he came forward, had the effect of a false jest thrown suddenly into tragedy. In Elspeth's throat there arose dry, weak laughter that made no sound; her eyelids and furrowed cheeks twitched to tears. She wanted it all to stop—a curtain to come down, lights to go up; she wanted it to stop because she felt that it had gone mad. Why should the child cry and scream and whimper? Why should the man move with such ridiculous gesture? There came the sound of Rory's voice singing. He was close and the words were distinguishable:

"Oh, ride the horse, the wooden horse,
The old green rocker shatter.
Race the witch that rides a broom
And Sprat who rides a platter.
Out of the window, over the hills,
Ride for the fairy-cottage light.
Shout! and ride for the Quixote mills,
And find the True Princess to-night."

Rory's song was followed by a shuffling of feet at the door and by Mrs. Trell's voice saying: "Here? Is it here? I can't see. Hold the lamp." The two entered. The hand-lamp, held close to her by Rory, threw its yellow light on Mrs. Trell's powdered flesh and on the diamonds that seemed to grow in it. Colching's bow seemed now scarce completed and Vi's outbreak at the sight of him but an instant uttered.

"What stairs! Norman, you beat us. You cheated. You must have run. Let me sit down."

"I knocked," said Colching. "I bowed. No one regards me. It seems that I'm disgraced."

"Where are those people, Rory? I see nothing more interesting than my own daughter hunched up in that couch. I didn't climb those stairs for that."

"Gone. We're too late, I suppose."

"Where's Natalya?"

"Below."

"Why?"

A shaking of heads.

"We might have played bridge here." Then to Vi: "You can play, Miss. Come. Get up. That's enough nonsense."

Vi had already begun to move in obedience. Irma walked straight to Mrs. Trell and stood before her, and Mrs. Trell, after a single glance at her face, cried out: "She's mad! She's mad! Her face! She's going to strike me. . . . Norman!"

Neither Colching nor Rory moved. Even Mrs. Trell's power to resist withered. Her face was upraised, a face which lacked now the will and spirit that had given to its artificiality a certain resolute magnificence. The skin, tautened and enamelled, the lips' skilful line, every detail that had once been composed into unity, had lost their accord. Even the shadows about eye and mouth had minutely shifted at diverse angles, giving to the expression the tragic humour of rhetoric interrupted. Here, in an instant, terror had drawn a

savage caricature of the social graces—the harsh smile puckered, the eyes weakened, the defiance travestied. The whole face, which no strength could turn from Irma's, seemed to have fallen loose.

Mrs. Trell's last clear perception of those who were watching—it had seemed from a great distance—was that the light of a low-hung lamp scarred their faces with upward shadows, so accentuating the cheek-bone and flattening the cheek's surface that they had the appearance of unsmoothed carvings in wood; and, though as individuals they became more and more remote from her, being gradually overwhelmed in her consciousness by her stricken preoccupation with the eyes that commanded the gaze of her own, yet the effect of woodenness, the horror of being observed by beings somehow inanimate from whose inquisition there could be no escape, lingered, and seemed to concentrate the full burden of her agony upon a single point in her mind. She felt herself to be standing in nightmare isolation between gigantic walls of darkness. From above her, from arches of a span measurable only by the stride of stars, carved faces watched. The enclosure was of multiplying immensity; its limits receded and dissolved; from darkness to darkness the unseen but seeing faces wheeled outward; from dome to dome an impenetrable sky enlarged. And she saw this sky and saw its blackness pierced by a beam of light which plunged towards her from the pole, and became in flight a narrow sword of which the point struck to the pupil of her eye.

An extreme terror of impact seized her, and, as a sleeper, by the climax of his dream, is half awakened and lays hold upon the fringe of a waking consciousness, so was she given, for a stumbling instant, grip upon the conventional life she knew. In a pitiable attempt to command, she said: "Vi, get up. I won't have you lying there. Go and get cards. Go and fetch . . ." And though she was now becoming again vaguely aware of an eye whose light blinded her seeing of her known world, her flagging voice continued: "I'm tired, you understand. I want a cushion under my feet. I'll not have you behaving—I'll not have——"

And above her she saw clearly Irma's eye regarding her, and cried out and cried out: "Let me go! Let me go!" and tried to shelter her face, but could not. She gripped at the table but her fingers were limp on its edge. The skin of her throat was dragged into tendon-like ridges as she raised her head to scream. "Let me go!" she wailed. "Take your eyes away!" Her voice sank to an insane, desperate coaxing. "Please take your eyes away from me. They burn. Look"—her face lit to a new hope—"if you'll let me go, I'll give you—what'd you like? Think. Anything. Just help me up. Carry the lamp for

me. Lead me downstairs. You're a good, kind girl, I know, and you will help me. You see, I'm tired, so you'll give me your hand. There!"

But the hand she extended fell again to her side and darkness rushed in upon her. She passed through an instant of oblivion. Her mind then attaining to a startling clarity, she found her thought moving with new vividness and directness. It was curious that though her body remained unmoving by the table and though the people she saw watching her still seemed strangely distant and were still distorted by upward shadows, though, indeed, many of the peculiarities of the phase through which she had passed were unchanged, she yet found that, when Irma spoke to her, there seemed no strangeness in her tone, and her own answering words impressed her by their normality.

"Mrs. Trell."

"Yes."

"Look at Vi."

"I am looking at her."

"What do you see?"

"Flesh, gold in lamplight. Warm, too. Young. I'm proud she's so pretty. You see," she continued, in a dreamer's murmuring voice, "I was once. You can see that in me now. Men used to say how gay I was, and clever, and what a success I'd be. But real success doesn't come in a generation. You can't get it so quickly. I've got very far. But Vi can get farther. When I'm dead, they'll forget me, won't they? And then Vi will go where I can't go now, and I shall be going with her always, though they won't know it. They won't know, or won't remember, that it's my blood in her. You see, they can't keep me down—not always. They can bury me, but that won't keep me down. I shall win. The fools! they pretend to despise me. They say I want breeding. . . . But Vi can have blood—anyhow, her children can. She can keep the knowledge of what I am, locked away. They'll forget; she'll remember; that will be her strength. She'll win where I've failed—just the final yards I can't cover. She'll win. Then she can beat down these proud, contemptuous people that despise her mother; and it'll be in my blood in her. Won't it? Won't it? Eh?"

She looked out eagerly with the vulgar curiosity of a greedy child.

"Then why Colching?" Irma said quietly.

Mrs. Trell remained for a little while silent. Her lips were curved by her thought into a narrow smile. Slowly the cross-motive gained ascendancy in her mind, and, with a jerking forward of her body towards her daughter, she said: "She makes me sick and angry. I hate her. She'll go those last yards I can't. You see? She knows it. She knows she's better than I am—finer stuff.

And that's why . . ." The voice rose to the breathy screaming of dreams. "Oh, why, in God's name, should that soft slip of a girl be proud over me? Why should she? I've fought. Can't she carry it on? . . . And Norman"—she patted her bare arm and looked downwards with a travesty of a girl's shyness which was made horrible by the flesh that folded under her lowered chin—"he knows how to treat girls. I like to think of her with him."

She was purring and crooning over her thoughts, twisting the great rings on her fingers.

"Mrs. Trell, do you know what you've said?"

She turned her head slowly. Her face wore the expression of an old woman disturbed in the fondling of a lewd toy. This vague, weak surprise became darkened by anger. She sprang up, her eyes flashing.

"What's this trick? You've made me say things I don't mean. And there you stand calm. There you stand——"

She took a quick step forward and struck at Irma's eyes. Having struck, she fell back a pace.

"Oh, in God's name," she cried, "what have I done? I can't breathe in this room. Is there no mercy in you? Why do you torture me? Leave me. Let me go."

"Let your child go."

"You've taken her."

"Let her go freely. Take your hold from her."

Mrs. Trell cried out in assent: "Yes! Yes!"

"Go, then. . . . Rory, take her." And to Colching: "Go the way you came."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

As with a thaw feeling returns to limbs numbed by an intense cold, so did fear and shame and the pain of tiredness slowly reawake. Vi's mind stirred and shivered in the reawakening. She began to perceive anew the colour and texture of physical things, to be aware of the successive touch and lift of the clothing upon her breast. Elspeth, with head deeply bowed, was going from the room. Her movement across the stillness had the comic dignity of a dwarf's, and her shadow, broken at the wainscot and flowing upward, seemed part of a mocking, processional rhythm. Through an open window came the murmur of a passing car. The imagined red of its light, drawing a rosy line upon the wood-blocks' gleam, shrank into an imagined distance. Behind Irma a curtain's edge was wrinkled and flattened by the wind.

Irma said without moving: "Why don't you go? Why do you stay here to watch me? Go—quickly, while there's time. Don't stay in this room."

Vi stared at her and at the sorrows of her face.

"Irma! Move, for God's sake. I'm tired as if I'd lost blood. But you stand there—like that—as if you'd never, never weaken or cry. My dear, come and lie here and rest. Don't stand—there against that table—frozen."

Irma's movement was like a bird's attack. Vi shrank before it, and her hands, which had been outstretched in eagerness to draw Irma towards her, were now drawn up to shoulder-level and her arms stiffened to repel and defend. She found her lips repeating silently, as impotent lips speak in the terror of dreams: "Irma's mad." And her thoughts ran on, telling of a new beauty in Irma, a beauty men would want fiercely. Her thought continued: "Mad, I think. Somehow with the devil, and yet lovely, beyond dreams lovely." It was this word she repeated until the loveliness itself became menacing and she cried breathless, with the backs of her hands sheltering her eyes:

"Keep away! The window's open! I'll lean out there and call and get help if you don't keep away! . . ."

Irma smiled. "I shall not harm you. I'll not touch you. Don't be afraid. Come and let me look at you. I want to see into your eyes. . . . There, now I can." Her arms imprisoned Vi's shoulders. "I'm envious of them."

"Envious!"

"They're a woman's—flesh and blood. They'll have the mist and sparkle of passion; they'll shut in the agony of birth. That's your hold on the world

—I haven't got that. I've other things." She dropped her hands to her sides. "They're frightened now. Look at me. Why are you frightened of me?"

Vi did not answer. "Would you be less frightened if you knew I'm weak because I haven't your weaknesses? My power made me happy once. It was like walking on the ridges of hills—looking clear out over Dedwick Vale. But I'm lost now. I'm captive. I can't find the world. I'd be happy and unhappy as women are if I could find the world."

So soon as she understood, from the gentleness of the voice which spoke to her, that she was in no physical danger, Vi began thinking that in the morning her mother would be as she had always been. Irma's influence gone, the old power would reassert itself. Perhaps now Colching would cease to be her mother's instrument. That in itself could bring neither happiness nor freedom. It was relief unspeakable, but a negative relief, a breathing-space. Beyond it lay a period of dreaded inaction compared with which even the fight against Colching, seen in retrospect, had a certain perverse allurement. It had been at least a fight of measured forces upon known ground. But its conclusion marked the beginning not of peace, but of a progress, under her mother's guidance, towards another struggle as yet unrealized. To-morrow her mother would be unusually kind, unusually gentle, admitting even that she had been wrong, and declaring, with a subtlety of manner which had again and again won eager belief and acquiescence, that she would now do all she could to make her beloved daughter happy. But the experiences of to-night would in fact make no lasting change in her. Gentleness would endure a little while; suddenly a vicious whim or a new twist of ambition would end it. There would be another fight for tolerable independence of soul and body. It lay in her mother's genius to make her half ashamed to struggle for the maintenance of those values of which she was most proud. And each new battle sapped her power of resistance. She knew in her heart that she must either break away or at last surrender.

How should she break away? Irma's will said: Go into the world without asking of the future, burn your boats, break clear—go! So had the Princes gone out to seek their fortunes! So had they come upon magic. But from this world was there a breaking away? "Can't time stop a little while?" she had asked in despair.

Now Irma's voice chimed upon her thought. "Will you never believe that you are free? that your mother will never trouble you again?"

"Is my mother dead?"

Irma cried at her. “Fear! Always this fear holds you. You feared her living! Now, if she were dead, you’d fear the remembrance of her. She’s not dead, but there is change in her. Her heart’s changed.”

Vi shook her head. “I’m afraid of you,” she said quietly. “But I don’t believe what you say.”

Through a long silence Irma watched her. The wind had slightly risen and the flutter of the curtain was audible. Irma passed a hand over her eyes.

“Your mother is changed,” she said, “beyond our recalling. I know that. My own strength is in the change. You’re free, and yet you neither believe nor love me. . . . You don’t believe your own freedom.

“Listen,” she added suddenly.

Faintly, below them, Rory’s voice was calling.

“Irma! Irma!”

Vi started towards her. “What have you done? Why’s he calling? I’ve never heard his voice like that. Why don’t you go? It’s you he’s calling.”

The door opened. The voice below sounded more loudly, and in it was the throttled intonation of fear. Peggy came in, carrying in her hand a candle. Its dancing flame set the high lights flickering on the glasses of pictures.

“You’re to come. You’re to come down. You’re to come at once, Rory says. Don’t you hear how he calls?”

Vi ran to her. “What’s wrong? Tell me.”

“I will come,” Irma said.

They went out together. At the door’s closing, a draughty eddy swept over them, licking away the candle’s flame and leaving them in darkness. On their way downstairs, Peggy’s voice repeated continually: “Quickly! Quickly!”

At the foot of the stairs they met Rory.

“Where is she?” Peggy asked.

“There, with Natalya.”

“My mother? In that room? Is she ill?”

They entered the card-room. Mrs. Trell sat erect by a baize table, and over her Natalya was stooping and saying:

“Listen. Listen. You’re Mrs. Trell. Don’t you understand? In the morning you’ll be better, I know.”

And Mrs. Trell turned upon her eyes surprised as a child’s.

“Why are you standing so close to me? I’m perfectly well. I’m very happy. Why was Rory shouting in the hall? I want you all to be happy, too.

Come and sit by me, and we'll tell each other stories. There's the story of the Princess who came to a King's Castle at night and knocked. They didn't know whether she was a True Princess, and so, before she went to bed, they put——"

"Mrs. Trell," Peggy cried in distress, taking her hand and dragging at it as if she sought to arouse her from a sleep, "you mustn't go on talking like that! Look, here are Rory and Natalya. Don't you recognize them? Don't you know who I am?"

"Yes," Mrs. Trell answered, "of course I know. Why shouldn't I know? I don't understand you all." Her eyes fell upon Irma. "Look, she's like an angel, but she's dark and tired as if she were lost. She'll tell me stories and not laugh at me."

Rory stooped to Vi's height and whispered.

"It's odd how it makes her look younger. Death does that, too. . . . Happened without our knowing it. She was angry at first. And then just snapped somehow—and then like this."

"She's mad," said Vi, staring. "I suppose she's mad; and yet look—gorgeously happy!"

"Mad people are often very happy," Peggy said.

Vi summoned her courage. "She must come home."

"You can't take her home like that. Not you alone."

"I can."

They consulted hurriedly. Perhaps in the morning, when she had slept, she'd be herself again. Perhaps if Vi were brave enough it would be best to take her home quietly; then, if she recovered, no one need know—no one need know. They nodded, they whispered; their shadows flickered and wheeled; and Mrs. Trell sat calmly regarding them with amused, wide-open eyes.

Vi crossed the room and knelt beside her. Looking up into her face upon which the artificial colouring contrasted so strangely with a new simplicity of expression, she shrank from the memory of her mother as she had been and again from the terrible unfamiliarity of the woman whose features were now turned towards her. The flabby hand somehow suggested an unhealthy child's, and she could not touch it. She looked for a moment behind her, saw Rory's tall figure with a hand fingering the throat; saw Peggy clinging to his arm, and the pale angles of Natalya's face cut in the darkness at his shoulder. And, seeing first these three watchers and an instant later the smile upon her mother's lips, she felt herself cast out from the known house of life. Cold she was—that was it. Then she remembered that effort was required of her.

"Come away now," she begged wearily.

"But why?" the smiling lips answered. "Won't you be happy with me a little while? You look so tired and worn. The corners of your mouth are drooping—like coming home from a party. Let's go out on to the lawn and make a ship that will sail out over the dark grass. Think how far it would sail! Out of sight; and then we should never know how much farther it would sail. We should lose sight——"

"Oh, stop, stop!" Rory crossed to Vi's side and touched her shoulder. "It's of no use to wait here. She's perfectly quiet; there's no trouble to fear. Lift her up from the chair——"

"I can get up from my own chair."

"Lift her up. Natalya, have the door ready. It's best so. It's just shock. If she sleeps, who knows what a night's rest will do?"

They urged her towards the door. Rory, though it was he who had called Irma, had not spoken to her since her coming. Now, as they passed her, he stopped and said: "Well, can't you undo what you've done?"

"Do you think her mad?"

"She is."

"Does everyone think her mad?"

"But she *is* mad."

Irma bowed her head and did not answer, and Rory, his anger rising, taunted her: "Don't you see what you've done with your tricks? Can't you make her again the woman she was?"

"Am I to bring the evil into her again?"

"Call it that. . . . You've made her useless in this world."

"To you?"

"To all of us."

"So is she to be counted mad? Will she be shut up, Rory—will they shut her away?" Her voice was broken by the horror of such blindness, and by her realization that so indeed men would be blind, calling this woman mad who was happy in a happiness not their own. And she said with a momentary recovery of her old calmness and assured strength: "Take her away, then. Do what you will with her. You can't harm her now." Then she seized Rory's coat as if she would tear it, and cried: "She's happy! Can't you see that? Can't you see what Vi saw? Rory, can't *you* see the light in her?"

"Why *me*, for God's sake?"

"My mother was your mother."

He gazed at her, his eyes solemn a moment. Then he laughed: “Anyhow, let’s get the woman out of the house.”

She remained alone while Mrs. Trell was taken away. The hall-door was shut quickly. Peggy and Rory’s footsteps returned from it.

“Where’s Colching?” she heard him ask.

“Never came in.”

“His hat still here. . . .”

They paused, moving the hat perhaps. There was the rattle of an umbrella that slipped in the rain-tray and fell noisily; afterwards long-drawn silence.

“Rory, we must stop this——” said Peggy’s voice.

“Hush!”

“But we must. You see——”

“We’ll go to Flare.”

“Flare—yes.”

Irma went out to meet them.

“We shall go to Flare,” Rory repeated.

She looked steadily at him. “Yes. Take me,” she answered.

There was no strength left in her. Her eyes did not fall from Rory’s, but, as if they were pools that froze visibly, a glaze spread over them so that they gave no longer any indication of thought. The two figures, seen clearly when she left the card-room, were now become masses without colour or dimension. They confronted her as did her failure, vast, insuperable, blank. They became merged in an expanse of darkness that closed in upon her like the walls of a circular prison of shrinking radius. There, within a pin-point of light, as if upon a stage infinitely remote, the people of her thought moved, like tiny marionettes, to a flickering departure. Vi, she saw seated on the bed that first night at Flare; then, by a sudden shift, she beheld her in the present, guiding her mother up the stairs of the Trells’ house. And Mrs. Trell—how she smiled and nodded and was easily led! The diamonds hung away from her flesh because of the body’s inclinations, and a fleck of light darted through them into the breasts’ shadow. . . . Irma knew that she had hated this woman. Hatred had corrupted the spiritual act; its fruit had gone rotten beneath her eyes. Mad, they said—that was all; that was the end of it. And Vi had gone. . . . Flare. There, once, the spirit in her had been a spirit of exaltation and of a calm beyond the rages of the world. Then pain had come. She remembered its first impact, seeing herself standing at the nursery window, Urden Flare behind her, before her the imagined snow. . . . Alone!

her mind sang to her. And not strong enough to go alone. There'd been evil from the beginning—that was it—a seed—she hadn't guessed. That was why the fruit was rotten. . . . Will Drake. She saw him stretched on the shore at Spring Bay; she saw him on a ship's bridge; she envied him the cold rail under his hand. A cold thing to hold to. . . .

Rory's raised voice. "Quick! Catch her! Here! She's falling!"

The grain of the newel post was rough under her fingers; slipped; ceased. The floor-boards' gleam slid at her eyes like a soft ball of fire.

BOOK FOUR

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

WHEN IRMA came once more to Flare, she turned away from the world with no wish ever to encounter it again. In solitude she would build up spiritual defences. The power she had was fierce and destructive when it was given outward freedom; henceforth it should be isolated from mankind. She would live in the spirit only. Gradually all humanity should become to her as the shadow of a dream, and the remote ecstasies, which now came to her intermittently, should be the perpetual condition of her life.

A great, and at last a visible, change worked in her as the autumn weeks passed. Elspeth knew there was change, and feared because she could not understand it. Irma would fall into long trances—Elspeth could find no better name for them—during which she was not numbed but, beyond all doubt, vigorously conscious. All her faculties were active, all her senses alive. But what she heard and saw were not the sounds and sights of this world. And when these trances were not upon her and she was engaged in the normal occupations of life, still she seemed to look back with longing upon her entranced existence as if it alone were real to her. Rory and Conrad had at first made light of Elspeth's fears. They had seen what they had taken to be an increasing quietness in Irma and had been glad. When they saw her set out to ride or walk with Will, they told themselves, with confidence in physical exercise as a cure for all sicknesses, that at this rate she would soon be strong again. But at length they also were compelled to misgiving. She was not unhappy or ill; but there were periods, passing and repassing, in which she was intangible, not to be seized upon, ethereal in the sense that she seemed scarcely of the same flesh and blood with them. She was separated from them, as an image seen in a mirror is separated from those who watch, by a transparent barrier; and, though she was pale, hers was not the pallor of a woman diseased or suffering, but of one whose interest in those things which are the blood's summons was slowly dying.

One evening, when this sense of increasing distance between himself and Irma had been strong upon Rory, he sat late in his room with Conrad beside him. Their chairs were drawn close to the fire, and the glow of logs, passing between the fingers of their outstretched hands, fell in warm bars across their linen and struck stars of deep red from the decanter between them. Little was said. They were helpless at the end of a vague and barren argument. Irma was in the minds of both, and when the door was heard to open they sat up startled. But it was Peggy who entered. Rory rose and lifted another chair towards the fire.

"I thought you were asleep long ago."

"No. Sitting reading. . . . Well, have you talked to the doctor?"

"Yes."

"Decided anything?"

"It's pretty hopeless, Peggy; there's nothing to go on."

He added a log and some twigs. She stretched out a foot towards the blaze.

"Do you think it would be better if we went back to London?" she asked.

"To London? Why? Didn't we deliberately run away from there?"

"I dare say. But one seems so hopeless and alone in this place. One lives so close to—to whatever it is that's going wrong. And we're doing nothing. It can't go on like this."

They came again to a standstill, and watched the flames chase diamond-portraits on the chimney-soot.

"I'd better be getting home," said Conrad.

"But we've decided nothing."

"We're getting no nearer. Better leave it to the morning. If we sit up and worry over it, Peggy will be getting ill and we shall have her on our hands."

"Leave it to the morning!" Peggy echoed. "That's always the way. And then till to-morrow evening, and then till the next evening. Meanwhile, nothing's done."

"You're not blaming Conrad, are you, Peggy?"

"No. I didn't mean that. It's as much beyond his reach as ours. . . . I wonder what sort of a night it is."

She sighed and rose.

"Fine when I came," Conrad said.

She crossed the room slowly and pulled back the curtains. The window through which she looked out was the window at which Rory had stood on that distant night when he had heard Angela calling him. Now nothing was to be seen but the vague grouping of trees against a sky little lighter than themselves, and Peggy, having satisfied herself that there was no rain, was about to let the curtains come together, when a shape fell across the window and there was a tap on the pane. The tap was vigorous and, when Peggy stood aside to allow the room's light to fall outward, the shape was easily distinguishable.

"Captain Pye!" she exclaimed, and, seeing at that moment a second shape behind the first, she added: "And Will Drake, I think."

"What for, at this time of night?" said Rory. "I suppose they didn't want to knock the servants up. I'll let them in at the front door."

He left the room, and, at a sign from Peggy, the two shapes disappeared.

"Will was talking to me about Irma some days ago," Conrad said. "He has ideas of his own about her."

"It's better than the rest of us who have none."

Conrad smiled. "I dare say; but his ideas are pretty odd."

"I don't wonder. He loves her. He might as well love a ghost."

"Does she love him?"

"Not as we reckon it."

"But in another way?"

Peggy came to the fire again and stooped over it. "I believe in a way she does, but I don't begin to understand it."

The three men now came in from the hall. Will was excited and eager, and Pye, wearing an anxious air on his friend's account, was trying to calm him.

"We're very sorry to come in so late," Pye said when he saw Peggy. "Will would come. We went up to see you, Conrad. Found you were out and had dined here. Then——"

"It seemed a chance of us all being together," Will broke in. "I suppose you've been discussing what's been in all our minds."

"Yes," said Rory.

"Well?"

Rory shook his head. "We were just breaking up when you knocked. Conrad was going home. But sit down now. There's port, and there's whisky at the side."

They took whisky, lighted pipes, and settled themselves deep in leather chairs.

"It's perfectly useless to argue it all out again," said Peggy. "Haven't we said all we can say? All we can do now is to take Irma to Harley Street. I don't care particularly what name you give to it, but I believe she is going mad."

Will was glad that Peggy had used that word. It was definite and cleared the air. When his opportunity came, he would seize upon it and fight it, but for a little while he chose to listen rather than to speak. He had seen more of Irma and had thought about her more than the others—had thought more clearly, too, he believed, and had reached a conclusion. His conclusion,

however, involved a risk which—though he had come to urge that it should be taken—still frightened him. He might be wrong. She might be going mad and the action he proposed might make the final disaster quicker and more painful. Yet, there was an instinct in him that bade him go on.

Part of the conversation drifted by him unheeded, but presently he heard Conrad saying:

"Harley Street—my dear Peggy, what on earth's the good of Harley Street? It's not madness as they understand it there. It's not madness at all unless every hermit or saint who lived apart from the world is to be called mad. She's drifting away from us into a spiritual existence of her own."

"That's all very well," Rory began—and they fell away into a profitless dispute about the meaning of the word "mad."

Will's eyes travelled beyond their anxious faces to the walls behind them. Odd, he thought, that in this solid, prosperous room, with its familiar prints and the quills that bristled from the writing-desk, they should be gathered together in the small hours discussing this subject. Upstairs somewhere she was lying without a thought for any one of them, wrapt in vast fantasies, travelling in different worlds. So, at least, he imagined her. Or was she awake, restless, struggling as they were for the truth of her condition? Or was she afraid? That had been the starting-point of all his late arguments with himself—his discovery, reached suddenly when he and she had been returning from riding at dusk, that she was afraid. This he shot out at them.

"Have any of you realized that she's desperately afraid?"

"Afraid?" said Rory. "That's the last thing——"

"Yes, yes, I know. Irma's not a coward. It's not an ordinary fear. But fear there is; and that, as I believe, is the key to the whole matter. Somehow we've got to make her unafraid."

"What's she afraid of?" Conrad asked.

"Of her own power. Since that night with Mrs. Trell, she's been afraid for the effects of her power. You were there," Will said, turning to Rory and Peggy. "You might have guessed long ago. To me, what happened at Starcross Place has come second hand. It's taken me time to piece it together."

Rory stood up and, back to the fire-place, looked down on them all. "I've always thought," he said, "that what she tried to do to Mrs. Trell that night amounted, in fact, to an attempt to cast out a devil. That's probably how her intention would have been described in the past. She wanted to cast

out a devil——" He took in a hard breath and strode out of their circle. "She wanted to cast out a devil as Christ cast them out."

"And failed," Will said.

"Failed!" Peggy's voice rang with astonishment. "Failed! You weren't there. You should have seen Mrs. Trell when she left us that night."

"I'm not denying a tremendous effect. I know Mrs. Trell was shattered—oh, I know all that. I'm not denying the existence of Irma's power." He looked across the room toward Rory. "But you spoke of Christ," he went on, "and in that she failed clearly enough—and knows it—and is afraid of it."

Conrad, who had been long silent, shifted suddenly in his chair. "The human spirit can't stand alone," he said. Then, realizing that he had spoken out of his own thought and that they had not understood him, he explained: "Something Will said made me think of your mother, Rory, as she was before Irma was born. She was wrong then and Irma's paying for it now. A spirit that hates the world may be powerful, but it defeats itself in the end."

"But she doesn't hate," said Will.

"Her mother did."

"And there's something in Irma," Rory added, "something that I can see better, perhaps, than any of you, which is very like my mother—something that hates in spite of herself."

Will nodded. "That may be. I can believe that. But she doesn't know the cause, doesn't connect what is happening now with her mother. And she's lost and afraid. All she sees is that she failed with Mrs. Trell—disaster came then, may come again if her power comes into contact with the world, and she's shutting herself off from danger, from the Trells, from all of us."

"Yes," said Peggy, "but how much further does that take us? What can we do?"

"We can make her understand."

"Tell her about her mother?"

"How much does she know already?"

Conrad said slowly: "About her birth, you mean?"

"Yes. Does she know what you know and have told us about the circumstances of it?"

"I tried to tell her once. She wouldn't listen to me then. She hadn't reached a point in her own experience at which she could see the drift."

"But now?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "I think it's too late."

Will jumped up in anger. “It may be, God knows. But I believe not. Anyhow, it has to be tried. If she knew that the flaw in her life was the result of her mother’s obsession, if she could once accept it as a human flaw and not as an unknown, remote, causeless thing, half her fear would be gone. She’d come to grips with what she is fighting. Now her antagonist slips through her fingers because she doesn’t understand. There’s never anything to do but to run away from what can’t be understood. But that’s not all.” He looked to Rory again, and said, speaking more quickly than before: “You’ll understand. I believe that already she is changed—altogether different from what she was that night in London. There’s a new peace come to her. She no longer *wants* to attack evil with the same weapons. If she were here now, in this room, and the Trells were with us, she’d not attack Mrs. Trell as she did then. But she doesn’t realize that she is changed in that way. She’s desperately afraid that, if she allowed herself the same opportunity, she’d be drawn to the same attack. Until she discovers that she is wrong, the fear of touching the world again will never leave her. There’s only one way to convince her.”

“Well?”

“You must ask the Trells here.”

“But are you so sure,” Rory said, “of what would happen if she met them again? Are you sure she wouldn’t attack? That night——” His eyes narrowed at the remembrance of it. “It’s a great risk.”

“It’s impossible,” said Peggy. “Much better keep her quiet and hope ____”

Will turned on her. “You said that you believed Irma was going mad. You asked: ‘What can we do? What can we do?’ And now you’d have nothing done. . . . I am not sure of what would happen. Of course I’m not sure. I don’t know, either, what will be the effect of telling her about her own birth. But she must be told, and the Trells, Drumpeter, Colching, they must all be asked here. Let her see how she has changed—that there’s a way out for her still. Ask them.”

Rory seemed yet undecided, and Pye, who had deliberately remained a spectator of this scene, could rest no more inactive. That Will was right he did not doubt. He saw, too, as perhaps no one else was capable of seeing, that Rory’s decision was the key not only to Irma’s, but to Will’s life. The two seemed to him spiritually interlocked, necessary to each other. And, because he had always seen Will, and saw him now more than ever, as a father might see his son, he was moved to anger by the blindness and

timidity of those who were resisting him. He dragged his hand away from his crushed ear and stretched it out, trembling.

"Can't you see," he said, "that the boy's right? It's the one chance left. Half the saints of the world have been plunged into darkness of the soul because they have not understood the vanity of spiritual hatred. Seeing their works again and again turn to dust, and not knowing the cause, they have become afraid of their power. Seeing the effect upon the world of a spirit corrupted by enmity against the world and not understanding the nature of its corruption, they have doubted of the spirit itself. There are more devils than are dreamed of by those who hate the world. There are devils that haunt the saintly spirit itself, and their name is legion, for they also are many. This sort goes out, not by withdrawal, by prayer and fasting, but by closeness and love." He grasped Will's arm as if to stay himself from falling, and, in the low voice of sudden reaction and exhaustion, added: "The boy is right. Get these people here. Get them all."

Rory paused before he could answer. At last, turning away from Pye's fierce regard, he said: "I can't ask Natalya. We've lost all touch with her."

"Where is she?"

"Gone—where, Heaven knows!"

"The others, then."

Seeing that Rory was yielding, Conrad said: "Having the Trells here—is it wise? It may bring a disastrous smash. Irma's near the edge."

"You've considered that?" Rory asked Will.

"Yes. Shouldn't I, above everyone else, have considered it? But ask them."

"It's impossible," Peggy said.

Pye cried aloud: "No! No! It's right! It's the only thing!"

"But they can't come," said Conrad. "Isn't Mrs. Trell mad? How can she come?"

"She'll come," Rory said. "She'll come if we ask Colching too. It's too late, Conrad, to be cautious now. I believe it's true—what he says: it might change her. As for Mrs. Trell—mad or not mad, I don't know. Irma shattered her, and there's a queer result—cunning and malice and childishness. And Vi, poor girl, the horror of it has crushed her. Colching's gone; the engagement's broken—for a time. The break won't last long. Vi's at the end of her tether. It might have been better for her if he'd stayed. She despises him; but I saw her twice between that night and our leaving London, and physical needs are sapping her. If she were poor, she'd be on the streets;

that's the line of her weakness. As it is, one lust will follow another, I suppose. She'll make some sort of jangling romance of them all. Then at last she'll become defiant with her mother's cruelty twist and that defensive aping of a great lady. Giggles when youth is gone; a slice of indecency to prove you're gay still—you know it? And a slow coarsening and hardening—each little lust demanding more decoration to make it even for an hour worthy of the footlights. And for Vi it will be worse than ever it was for her mother. She knows what she's becoming and she can't forget what she might have been."

"Irma loves her," Will said.

"I love her." Rory laughed nervously, ashamed of his own feeling. He took Will's shoulder. "They shall be asked," he said. "You write to Vi, Peggy."

"If you wish it," Peggy said. "Oh, I hope you're right, Will. I do hope good comes of it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Soon after the evening at Starcross Place, Vi Trell had begun to realize that her mother was recovering. Mrs. Trell would never again be as she had been, but the early phase of childlike innocence, which had been lovable whenever Vi had been able to put aside thought of the contrast between eyes made gentle and a face cruel, hard and passion-ridden, had swiftly passed away, and had been succeeded by another phase which Vi dared not attempt to interpret. If one devil had been cast out, others had entered in. Though a visitor who came by chance would have judged her to be mad and ineffectual, Mrs. Trell had resumed power within her own household, and it was a power increased now by an element of the pathetic in her. Vi would fight her no longer. She had begun to think of her as "poor mother," and yielded for pity's sake what she might never have yielded if Mrs. Trell had seemed in full possession of her senses.

It had happened one morning, while her mother lay in bed and Vi was tending her, that her vague eyes had suddenly hardened and, after a thick drawing of breath, she had said:

"Where is the pretty ring you used to wear?"

"I don't wear it now," Vi had answered, wondering how much was going to be remembered.

"Don't wear it? And why not? It was such a pretty ring."

"I sent it back, mother."

"Sent it back."

Mrs. Trell had sunk into her pillows, repeating the words and crying. The next day she cried again for the ring, and began always to cry whenever she missed it from Vi's bare hand. Colching began to come to the house again and Vi did not resist his coming. He would spend long hours with Mrs. Trell, and Vi, passing the door of the room in which they were together, once thought she detected in her mother's voice the old asperity with which she had been accustomed to sharpen her purposes to their cutting-edge. Vi had passed on quickly, running up the stairs as if a dream were at her heels, but afterwards she had met Colching on his way out and had tested him with—

"Do you think she's getting better—more her old self?"

"Perhaps some day," he had answered. "Not yet. Not a sign of it. She was babbling about our ring."

"Babbling? Is that all?"

"She misses its sparkle from your hand. Vi, don't you think you could ever begin to miss it, too? I miss it. It's like—like all the stars taken away."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, sickened by the falseness of that. "Norman, you may have been much to me and I to you. We may be again; I don't know. . . . Oh, yes, I'm willing to say that. I'm lonely here. I admit it. There are times when I want you. I dare say you'll have me in the end. But stars? Not that. With us it's body to body. I know how you think of me—you see me lying in your arms."

"Vi——"

"No, no. I accept that. That's as it is."

"There's much more; there's——"

"I wonder if you think so." She laughed. "I wonder. Do you know the dreams a girl has before the world touches her—of how *her* love, at any rate, is to have unearthly magic in it? She doesn't think of it in terms of men or of any kind of lust. It's vague imagining. She reaches out for big words to express it and if ever she tries to speak them—well, it sounds nonsense—weak, false-romantic stuff. One in a thousand wins through to it. I think most of us are given one chance. I was given it. I remember once—a winter day it was, near a river with swans. The sun was in little flat gold leaves on the backs of the swans as he and I looked down from the bridge. We went beyond the bridge, through a village with a hill in it, into a lane between meadows where a thorn hedgerow was glistening and the sun yellow in the cart-ruts and in yellow wrinkles on the oak-bark. And he said something—I forget what—some small tenderness, as if he knew that he had to catch at that instant and stamp it on our minds so that it should go on living always. And I realized suddenly that no word he'd ever said and nothing he'd ever done had clashed even once with my dreams of what love might be. I said breathlessly—almost to my girlhood's self I said it, scarcely to him: 'You are the most wonderful lover in the world.' "

She broke off, seeing the sneer in Colching's eyes. "Oh, yes," she went on quickly, "the words fall flat now, I know. They've been so often said. But they weren't flat then."

"So he, whoever he was, held the stars for you, did he?"

"Yes."

"And I'm to be blamed for it? Anyhow, it seems he let you go. I'll never do that."

"No," she said. "I believe you. You want possession. Do you count it weakness in him not to have taken—oh, a hundred chances?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes you do."

"Well, if he'd loved you enough, he wouldn't have gone off——"

She smiled and shook her head.

"All's fair, you know," Colching began.

She flinched under that. "Don't, don't, don't say that, for God's sake, Norman. Is it all no more than capture to you? Just that? . . . No, I'm not angry with you. What you have to give is what I've left myself of life. I'm changed from what I was then. But every woman, when she comes near marriage itself, looks back and thinks: 'Well, this is the day I used to imagine.' She matches it with her dreams. . . ."

"And I'm not the dream, eh?"

She looked at him with eyes aflame. "You don't pretend to that, do you?"

"I don't care much what you call it."

"So long as you get me?"

"Vi," he said, "why should you be cruel like this? I'm not pretending that I'm your first love. I'm not pretending to any unearthly magic."

"No," she answered wearily. "I suppose not. Was I cruel? I'm sorry. . . . Let me go for to-day, Norman."

"*Let* you go?"

"Leave me alone, then."

"And you'll forgive me for—for the way I love you?"

"I forgive you."

"Kiss me, then."

She let him kiss her, her white face fallen back. She felt his fingers travel across her shoulders and suddenly caught at him and drew herself up to him.

"Kiss me. Kiss me. Kiss me," she whispered, and leaned her face against him. "I've been a fool, fighting for what can't be now any more."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WHEN the ring was restored to its former place and Mrs. Trell saw it there, she took it from her daughter's finger and laid it in the palm of her hand. Thence she tossed it an inch or two in the air, and caught it, and tossed it again, and at last, turning on her side so that her back was to the light, placed it on a satin cushion which was hunched up between her body and the sofa-back. There she examined it. The jewels glittered in the pit of shadow she had made for them. She crooned over them; cupped her hand to hide them, exposed them, hid them again. Then, holding them up at arm's length above her so that they struck full window-light, she crowed at them, like a baby at its toy.

Vi stood beside the sofa, her lips compressed. Did her mother understand what this ring represented? Was her pleasure, indeed, in the sparkle of the jewels and no more? What had been said between her and Colching? Vi turned away. She might never have answer to those questions. To her, the woman on the sofa never spoke of marriage—never gave any direct sign of understanding this issue as she had once understood it.

What arrangements had to be made for the wedding, were in Vi's hands and she remained inactive. The cancelled invitations were not renewed; there should be no public ceremony. The clothes had been bought and there was little more to be done. But she would give no date. Colching might see her as often as he would, might kiss her when he chose, might command her—as he loved to command her—in a thousand things. But she clung to delay. Though she told herself that she did intend to marry him, it seemed to her an intention formed and pursued in nightmare. Something, she felt, would intervene as morning intervenes upon the disasters of dreams. There would be provided some way of escape other than by the battle of wits in which again and again she had failed and in which she would fail always.

When the invitation to go to Flare reached her, she welcomed it. She accepted for her mother as one accepts for a child, not telling her until the reply had been written. But the letter had not been posted; if Mrs. Trell had resisted, she would have had her own way. But she made no show of resistance. She appeared to accept the name of Flare as vaguely and pleasantly familiar. It would be lovely to go into the country! Yes, it would be lovely to go away! And, with no more words of the project, she stooped from her sofa and rolled her brightly coloured ball across the carpet. Vi brought it back and thrust it among the greedy fingers held out to receive it.

She had not thought that Colching would be asked to Flare, and the knowledge of his having accepted a separate invitation came to her after her own answer had been posted. Should she now say "no"? It would be easy to satisfy Peggy with a plea of Mrs. Trell's illness. Yet, she could not change her plan without doing battle with Colching and—the thought came to her like the touch of steel—perhaps with her mother's unbearable weeping. She shrank from that. She would go to Flare.

"And after we are back?" he asked.

"Yes. I'll give you a date then."

All day she would go with Colching where he wished, and in the evening would allow him to invite himself to dinner. Reluctant to meet him each morning, she was yet nervously pleased when in his company, caring nothing for what he said or thought, but proud of his vigour, his quick step, his abrupt decisions. His eyes had always a hard brightness, and she was flattered by their quick following of every movement of her body. Not until he had at last gone from the house did she permit reaction in herself. Then, sitting alone by a dying fire that she had not the energy to replenish, she would be swept by disgust. She would survey the day she had spent with him—his pleasure in food, his ostentation in all things, his flat comment on the play. He made her think always of an extremely intelligent and well-dressed animal. The strange thing was that he knew she wanted more of him than this, and strove to supply it. There entered into his letters—served at breakfast with flowers in a scarlet box—patches of sublimity, always relieved by a facetious exclamation-mark. "While you were saying good-bye to me in the hall this evening," he wrote, "the light of the street-lamp came through the stained glass of the door and made me think of what you once mentioned that Keats said about throwing warm gules on Madeline's fair breast and what Kipling said in the wireless story. You see I'm not so unpoetical, darling!" She disliked it less when he ended a letter: "I want you. I want you. I want you." That was certainly true; it happened also to have been the curtain to the last play they had seen together.

Thinking of him, she became contemptuous of herself, who had not courage to break free of a man she despised, and, above all, contemptuous of her own bitterness. If she was a woman who would accept him because he physically pleased her, she had no right to look down on him. Her bitterness was a pose; her claim to something more than he could give her was a pose also: so she argued. And if these things were false, then there was falseness, too, in all her dreams, in all her resolves to make of her own love something less bestial and less commercial than love as it was understood in her mother's house. She was of her mother's stock, bad stock; and she was, after

all, little different from her mother—as small, as lustful, as bitter, as self-deceived. Who knew but that, as the years advanced, she would become as cruel?

As she leaned over the fire on the second night before their going to Flare, her heart was torn by a sense of her own worthlessness. The coals shook and foundered in the dusty grate. A clock above her head tinkled a small hour and another clock at some distance answered with deep chime. She remembered that at nine in the morning a murderer, of whose crime the newspapers had been full, was to be hanged. Lying awake? Lying awake? she wondered. Or was there peace in the very definiteness of that?

At last she summoned enough resolution to go upstairs. As she passed her mother's room, a voice called her. She entered and stood in darkness.

"Is that you, Vi dear?"

"Yes, mother."

"Late, isn't it?"

"Very late."

"I've been lying awake, thinking about you—in a pretty white dress I saw you in once. That must have been a long time ago, wasn't it?"

"I haven't got a white dress."

"No." Mrs. Trell returned to the point at which she had begun. "I've been lying awake, a long time, thinking about a pretty white dress, shiny it was, and——"

"Yes, mother. Is there anything you want me to do for you? It's cold standing here. I'm going upstairs to have a hot bath."

"Hot bath; yes. And then put on the white dress and come and stand here in the sunshine——"

Vi went to her own room, undressed quickly, laid her night-dress by the electric fire and, with a dressing-gown wrapped round her, ran to her bath. Its warmth lulled her, and she came from it sleepy and comforted, thinking only: "I'm glad my night-dress will be warm by the fire. There'll be a lovely glow in the dark room when I open the door. But it will be cold in the passages. I must run through the passages and down the stairs."

When she was in sight of her bedroom-door, she was checked suddenly. The door was partly open. Thus she might have left it, though she had intended to close it so that the room might be warm for her return. But there was bright light within, a far brighter light than could be given by the electric fire which was all she had left burning. She paused on the stairs long enough for a shudder of cold to pass over her body, and at last went forward.

Opposite her bedroom-door, its back to the more distant wall, was a mahogany chest of drawers. This was now no more than a series of rectangular caves of darkness, for the drawers had all been pulled out, and Mrs. Trell was kneeling among them on the floor. This was evidently the last stage of her search, for all the other furniture had been rifled, and its contents scattered abroad. She looked up when she became conscious of Vi's presence, a lace boudoir-cap low over her fierce eyes and an embroidered wrap fallen apart at her breast.

"It's here," she said. "I've found where you were hiding it."

"What, mother?"

"The white dress."

"I told you I haven't got a white dress."

"What's this, then?" Mrs. Trell stooped over the drawer nearest her and drew out its contents. "There," she said, standing up and holding out a dress on her extended arms. "What do you say now?"

"My wedding-dress!"

"Why did you lie to me?"

"Mother, I didn't lie. You don't understand. I didn't think you meant ____"

"Don't go on lying."

Trembling, Vi approached her and laid a hand on her shoulder with what firmness she could summon. "Mother, you're not well, you know. You'll catch cold if you stand here. You must go to bed now. Come."

Mrs. Trell shook her off. "I'm not mad. Don't you think it. I may be sometimes. But not now. I've been lying awake for a long time, thinking of you in your pretty white dress, and now you're going to put it on."

"No."

"You say no?"

"It's my wedding-dress, mother. You can't want me to put it on. You don't know what you're asking."

Mrs. Trell did not lower her arms, but took a step forward so that, unless she retreated, Vi could not help touching the dress. When she withdrew a few inches, Mrs. Trell followed her.

"Take it," she said, and waited. "Don't dare to disobey me. That's right. Now put it on."

"I can't! I can't!" Vi cried with her hands hidden in the shining folds. "Am I to dress again now? I've come from my bath. I have nothing on. Am I to dress now? It's three in the morning."

Mrs. Trell stood back and smiled.

"Take off what you have on. Put on the dress. That's enough. A wedding-dress, you say? That's odd, isn't it?" Then suddenly she raised her voice in menace that it was impossible to mistake. "Come, come! Do what I say, at once—there, by the fire!"

She drew back so that Vi might pass her, and, leaning against the vacant chest of drawers, watched intently. Vi walked into the fire-glow, dropped her gown, put on the dress. It hung loosely and the lining was cold against her flesh. She knew that she must look grotesque in it. Her feet were bare, her hair streaming upon her shoulders. The blood flowed and receded in her cheeks. She threw up her head.

"Is that enough?"

Mrs. Trell smiled and nodded, but gave no answer, and Vi, suddenly forgetting that the wedding-dress made her movement ridiculous, walked up to her mother.

"Why do you hate me like this?"

The eyes remained fixed, but the lips answered: "Hate you? My pretty, my pretty, listen—they are all watching the sunshine fall in the chancel, and they are leaning over as they watch, and are saying that you are the loveliest bride they've seen and that you deserve the sunshine. And outside the photographers are getting ready." She added, after a pause: "I'm proud of you—very proud of my little girl."

Vi turned away. Her nerves could no longer endure this madness which seemed no more than a dreadful emphasis upon the truths of her mother's character. The words were spoken in the clear, deliberate voice of a sane woman, but each phrase, interpreted as Vi was able to interpret it, created for an instant a bright patch in a rank wilderness of mind. To what fresh imagining would her mother's thought suddenly leap? And, because her mother's thought had power to entrap her own, there followed the question, to what new track of terror would her own vision be drawn? She tried to shut her eyes to it. She sank down upon her knees beside the bed and hid her eyes in her hands. But she heard her mother's voice pursuing her:

"There—kneeling—the sun like a cloak." And the voice continued with the even balance of priest and congregation: " 'Be unto them a tower of strength—from the face of their enemy. O Lord, hear our prayer—and let our cry come unto thee.' "

"O my God," Vi whispered, "deliver me from this. Deliver me from this," but she felt a hand laid on her head and heard the voice repeating: " 'Not having spot or wrinkle or blemish or any such thing . . . and they two

shall be one flesh . . . one flesh . . . and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the——' "

Vi flung out her hands and beat upon the coverlet and cried aloud: "Christ, come into the room now and make all this clean! And take away this pressure from my head!"

She continued to murmur the name of Christ and heard no more any words that were being spoken above her. At last, her heart grown quieter, she became aware that there was no longer the weight of a hand upon her head. Perhaps her mother was withdrawn to a little distance from her. Perhaps there was no one in the room now. She raised her head and looked behind her. She stood up. There was no one in the room. Her eyes travelled over the disordered furniture, over the clothes that lay in stiff and many-coloured heaps, and fell at last upon the white dress she was wearing. She smoothed the skirt. While doing so, she paused suddenly and, with a movement of panic, slammed the open door. She then walked slowly to a mirror and began to contemplate her image.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Will Drake had quarters at *The Three Faithful Men*. The window of his bedroom looked northward to the moors. By leaning out of it, and turning his head to the left, he could see Flare Manor, embedded in its wooded hill. The adjoining sitting-room was open to the morning sun rising over the sea.

Will would sit there many hours, looking eastward, too uneasy to read. Through the uncertain floor, heavy treading and the burr and cackle of voices came up to him from the tap-room. Little had changed since he was Meggle's boy. Some of the old figures had vanished into Mr. Bax's churchyard but their successors who, in several cases, had inherited their clothes, seemed to have inherited also their gait, their emphatic down-sitting that was itself an order for drink, and their personal manner towards a mug of beer. This, on wage-evenings, they had by the quart, not in the pint-pot of latter-day niggards. They gave it a personality, talked to it as they talked to all useful things, whether a tool or a God, a horse or a woman. Warming, they sang to it, and the table-bump of an empty tankard, the uplifting of song at first hesitating, then of full, ponderous rhythm, were so perfect an echo of Will's early memories that there seemed to be stretched out before him, as he listened, a continuous scroll of days and evenings uninterrupted by any absences of his. How close was his remembrance of the day when, thinking of his first sea-voyage, he had stretched himself on that bench beneath the inn-sign and had scratched his name on the ground with a stick! He heard again the chink of gravel, the rattle of Jim's pail, the voices of Pye and Bax behind him. He saw the frozen bird, and Irma, carried in Conrad's arms over the frozen grass. Seeing these things of the past, affected to hurting-point by the exquisite continuity of the inn's life, his heart was gripped by sadness. He had loved, or worshipped, Irma, even in those days of childhood, and not, he thought, with a love far different from his present love. It was as empty of fierceness now as ever it had been, as unpossessive—and as vain. He would come near her sometimes, as he had at Spring Bay, but she would drift away from him now as always, like a mist floating across the surface of a metallic sea.

Since her return from London, she had ridden or walked with him day after day, and often they would return to the inn together. On the day which was to bring Rory's guests to Flare, they had been on horseback since morning. Towards dusk, they entered *The Three Faithful Men* and sat in Will's east window, tired with exercise and speaking little. He knew that

Drumpeter, Colching and the Trells were already arrived at the Manor. Irma, having been out all day, had seen nothing of the preparations made for their coming. It was left to him to tell her. It had been left to him also to tell her of the circumstances of her birth, but all day he had lacked courage to break the peace of their companionship. Now she must be told.

Soon he must go to sea again, he reminded her, speaking out of long-held quietness.

"That will mean being lonely?" she asked.

"Yes; I shall be sorry to go."

"Not because you hate life at sea?"

"It's lonely to me now. But no—not chiefly for that reason."

She leaned towards him. "Oh, my dear, it makes me sad—all sick at heart—to know how much I hurt you sometimes."

It was that hour before evening, of all hours the saddest or the happiest, when the sea darkens and all the ribbons of road stiffen in the dusk. Thought grows calm, and planning cools to meditation. Children tell stories ghostly or gay, and men who are solitary in body or spirit feel themselves visited by an equivalent anguish or content. Imagination, which the pressure of the day's activity has deadened a little, quickens again, and Will knew, as he thought of his next voyage, how often he would look back to these hours of fading magic, and how he would blame himself, with aching reproach, for having failed to make his own what was so nearly his. In future it would seem that he had missed his opportunity; as the years passed, he would say of these moments that were now his: "If only I could live them again!" But now, as she sat beside him, her eyes filled with tears by the sad thought that had accompanied her last sad speech, he could find no words, no small phrase of tenderness but had an ugly stiffness in it. He reached out and took her hand, but presently, with the lulled pain of what is known to be inevitable, released it. It lay still beside her, wan among the low shadows beneath the window-frame. A secondary fire-light, dully reflected from a square of varnished panelling, spread a narrow gleam along her fingers. "I should lay her hand down just as I did now if she were lying dead," he thought; "with the same helplessness and stifled calm. And I should remember how it looked and the last lights I ever saw on it, just as I shall remember now."

That thought was so powerful that it drove him to search for the contrasted life of her face. She was stretched forward, looking down the Dedwick road. A high-wheeled gig, with a fan-shaped hood of old fashion, was crossing the distant bridge. Its two occupants were barely visible. One,

a man who held the reins, sat farther forward than the other; his companion, guessed to be a woman from the momentary flutter of some light substance about her head, was altogether obscured in the hood's blackest gloom. They came at moderate pace, as if a drive of some distance lay before them and the pony were being spared. Soon after the bridge was crossed, and while the new-comers were still too far away to be recognizable, Irma lost whatever interest she may have had in the gig, pushed back her chair, and walked away from the window to the fire-place, leaving Will as the only spectator of the scene.

He too would have turned away if a peculiarity in the driver's bearing had not aroused his curiosity. The man's head was bent forward in a position inconvenient for driving and his felt hat was pulled low. He never permitted himself to look up, and the woman, as if sharing his desire to avoid recognition, remained far back in her seat, sheltered by the unnecessary hood which was a formidable hindrance on so gusty a day.

When the gig was within hailing distance, the driver raised his head for an instant and seemed startled to find himself within range of the inn's windows. One hand drew sharply at the slack reins, the other stretched the whip in a hasty flourish and brought its lash to a curl round the pony's belly. The animal threw up her head, plunged so that the gig rocked on its springs, and broke into a canter. This sudden call for speed, strengthening his earlier suspicion, caused Will to watch the more closely, and what he saw, or believed he saw, stung his curiosity with dread.

As the gig passed, the back of its hood, which contained a round window of mica, became visible from the inn. The mica, being torn, flapped over its frame, leaving in the leather a clear gap some nine inches in diameter. Through this the woman was looking out, the top of her head hidden from the brows upward, but her face, unguardedly pressed close to her spy-hole, bespread with evening light. Deep interior shadows lying across her throat gave to the head an appearance of having been severed from the body. It seemed suspended by its hair, tossed among the leathern darkness of the hood, its features sharpened by pain's swift contraction, pale as if beneath death's touch, framed stiffly by the circular window.

He sprang up as recognition came, and pressed his cheek against the glass pane that prevented him from leaning out. The head disappeared, the woman having sunk back into her seat, perhaps with curiosity satisfied, perhaps in obedience to some warning command from her companion. The gig was now growing small to Will's left. A thin cluster of trees partly concealed it, and when it emerged its detail was obscured by distance and the increasing dark. Had his eyes deceived him? Was his supposed

recognition as false as his ridiculous notion of a swinging head? If this was Natalya, why was she in Flare? Who was her companion? They had, it seemed, come from the London train at Dedwick. They had already passed the westward road into Flare village, and there was no cover to the north save a few isolated cottages upon the moors. What was their destination at this hour?

When he turned, he saw Irma standing beyond the fire-place with her back to him. The forward poise of her head, which made of her neck a narrow wedge of even light, suggested that she was held in long contemplation. From this she moved without haste or shock, but with an air of quiet awakening, and said, as her face appeared to him:

"You recognized her?"

"Recognized?"

"Natalya: in the carriage. Fish with her."

"But you didn't see?"

She raised her hands to her face and suddenly pressed her eyes against them. "Why have they come here? Why have they come now to trouble me?"

Dropping her hands, she came towards him.

"Will, you're so gentle to me—so amazingly gentle. I wish I could make you understand. But there's something new that I don't understand myself."

He took both her hands and held them.

"Can you tell me why you are afraid? Are there visions that terrify you?"

After a little while she began slowly: "No. There are no separate visions with faces and hands and voices. It's as if I lived within a vision. One power, one voice, one overwhelming, all-containing light and life—a perpetual force in continuous impact. It excludes all the world. While I feel it, there is nothing but itself."

"Since you came from London?"

She nodded. "Do you remember Angela when she was dying? I told you. She shrank from me. She saw some sort of poison in me—some evil that shut my power off from any beauty in the world. She was right. There's a flaw that I don't understand. I went on then; but I know now. In this world I'm a destroyer. I crushed the Trells. It's all turned to dust. There's no new life springing up in the world because I've been in it—just burned things everywhere which this fire of the spirit in me has destroyed. And now there's peace in withdrawal—putting away the world—living more and more within the spirit. It's all I have—my only safety. But it must be

complete. Natalya and Fish break in—bring the world back. Destructive fires burn up in me. If ever I met the Trells again——" She stood quivering, with tears in her eyes.

Watching her now, he feared more than ever to tell what he must tell to her, first of how she was born, then of the Trells' presence at the Manor. Would she listen to him any more attentively than she had listened to Conrad when he had tried to speak to her of her mother? And, if she did listen, what would be the effect? Fresh understanding and the peace of mind that springs from understanding?—so he had hoped once. But storms were in her now. Her face was dark in the shadow of them, her eyes were clouded with inward terrors. Was it not dangerous to trouble her more?

Yet, he could not now be altogether silent. The Trells were at the Manor. Better—whatever the present risk—that she should be warned than that she should come upon them unawares. And, if she was to be told of them, then she must be told of her birth also. He gathered his strength, and said:

"There's something about yourself, Irma—a part of the history of your own life—which you've never understood, but which I believe I understand. Will you let me talk to you about it?"

"Does it matter?" she said.

"You said just now that there was a flaw in you—a flaw in your spirituality which you didn't understand. If you came to understand it, wouldn't that matter?"

She looked at him through her tears, seeming to say by the despair of her expression: "Will, you can't help me now; there's no way out but the solitary way I have chosen." But she did not speak, and he went on:

"If you saw that the flaw could be taken away, wouldn't that matter? It all began long ago—before you were born. Have you ever thought what your mother was?"

She sat down listless and exhausted.

"Dr. Conrad tried to tell me once."

"You didn't listen?" She shook her head. "Will you listen now?"

She smiled. "If you say so. If you wish to tell me."

Will was troubled by this apathy, more even than he would have been by resistance. What it foreboded he could not guess, for never, he felt, had he been further off from the track of Irma's mind than he was at this instant. Suddenly the outward vagueness of the whole prenatal theory that he had to put forward struck him with embarrassment, and kept him hesitating. He himself was convinced of its truth, but convinced by instinct rather than

reason; and no words, however he chose them, could communicate the force of instinct to another. Irma wouldn't see the drift of it all, or rather—though she might see it coldly from without—wouldn't be carried away by it as he had been. It seemed that he couldn't help her, and he looked at her with sad finality as if she were resolved upon a journey which he had already failed to dissuade her from taking.

Turning away from her to the window, he bit his lip in the awkward discomfort of his own silence. Instantly his mind was whirled away to the inconsequent thought that at sea you never watched dusk fall through window-panes. The glass through which he was looking was becoming gradually opaque, taking on the dark, reflecting glitter of uncurtained windows at night, and the solid objects near to him—the mounds by the roadside and the bushes beyond—were growing bulkier, heavier in appearance, as variety of shadow and colour departed from them. At sea, the night's coming was foretold by no such intimate signs, familiar since childhood. Its approach was a pageant that dwarfed the puny spectator. An open sky would fade in vast gradations from pole to horizon; the air would brush cooler against cheek and hands; the ship's movement would grow more and more secretive, until at last it became a whispering progress which seemed to imply a desire to slip into darkness unperceived. He imagined himself turning from the bridge-rails towards the quartermaster at the wheel and suddenly remembering these thickening windows of *The Three Faithful Men* as part of a deserted and irrecoverable past. Irma's face floated up before him as a memory of what once had been. That she was near him now, waiting for his words, was forgotten.

Having thus travelled, within a few seconds by the clock, great distances in time and space, he came back to the present with a sharp alarm of one who has dozed and been roughly awakened. Irma's voice was saying, very quietly and gently:

"What is it, Will, that's so difficult to say?"

He felt her outstretched hand take his and draw him towards her as if he were a child to be reassured in the midst of terror, and he allowed himself to go to her and fell upon his knees by her side.

"It began long ago, before you were born," he answered. Then, with her eyes upon him, he was suddenly rid of fear. He no longer wondered what effect his words would have or felt the chilling need for cautious, deliberate argument. An assurance, a triumphing enthusiasm, unloosed his tongue and he spoke with an effortless force that he had never known to be at his command. He told her all he knew of Mrs. Pennell, all he guessed, all he believed—how to him it appeared that Irma's spirituality had been warped

by her mother's obsession, how it might even now be made perfect and in harmony with the world. She interrupted him neither by movement of limb nor catching of breath, but listened with attention so profound that he felt as if he were speaking not to her reasoning mind but to her innermost spirit, and as if, within her spirit, a fire were being kindled by his words. When he had done, he sat silently watching her. Soon the fire, fed by her meditation, would burn clear.

She rose slowly, very calm and pale, and said in a tone that seemed to demand space for her thought:

"Let's go into the open, Will."

They left *The Three Faithful Men* and began to walk towards the Manor. Long afterwards Will remembered that, as they passed from the inn's front passage, where an oil lamp gleamed on the varnished surface of a wall-map, he had been surprised to discover how much light of day still endured. He remembered, too, that the tapping of their feet, striking across the sea's low rhythm, had seemed to give to Irma's silence a quality of permanence; it was as if she would never speak again and their footfall be for ever continuous and regular like a footfall in dreams.

"But can a mother *make* a child in that way?" she said at last. "The body may be influenced, and the mind—but the spirit?"

She had expected no answer but an answer given within herself, and Will went on by her side without speaking. The road now steepened toward the hill on which the Manor stood, and ran upward between gutters gouged deep by the late rains. Irma lingered at the foot of the ascent. Her eyes, when Will met their gaze, held an expression of joyful discovery. He could no longer doubt that she saw her birth as he had seen it—as a key to the mystery that had been locked from her. "Isolated from the body, the spirit is a destroying flame in this world," his heart said in what seemed an echo of the thought moving in her. "Within the body it is light. That is the meaning and purpose of the Incarnation, and the physical suffering on the cross and the resurrection of the body. The spirit and the flesh are one. It is the opposite belief that has tormented all the history of the world, producing the agonies and cruelties of ascetics on the one hand and on the other——" She turned from him and went forward. His thought, released from the spell cast upon it by her own, was free to take notice of his surroundings, and, seeing the Manor growing larger as they more nearly approached it, he remembered its occupants and that Irma must now be told of their arrival.

"Irma," he said, "there has been a change in you, hasn't there?"

“A great change. What you have said——” She hesitated and stood still. “It makes me see all that has happened from a new angle. It means that the power I have isn’t evil in itself, but only its isolation is evil. It throws new light on what is past—but it’s too late; it doesn’t change the course of things.”

“Would nothing change that? Can’t you take a fresh hold on life? If you met the Trells again, you wouldn’t attack now as you attacked then? If you were at Angela’s deathbed, do you think she’d turn from you now? It’s all deep in the past—buried for all time if you’ll have it so.”

Some hint given by his manner prompted her to ask: “Is there still something you are trying to tell me?”

“Yes. Yes, there is!” he cried. He looked away from her towards the Manor. Light shining from a few windows gave it the appearance of being suspended in the surrounding dusk—as if it were some magic building struck suddenly out of darkness.

“There?” she said.

He turned towards her with nervous fierceness. “Yes. There. They are in the Manor now. O Irma, for God’s sake, see it as a fresh chance—a chance which, if you can take it, will bring you nearer to us all, nearer to Angela. I believe you can take it. I believe you’re changed far more than you understand.”

She looked up at him, saw with how much love he stooped over her and implored her, and trembled in the shock of sudden passion towards him. Was it true that a new way was opening out to her? Was it possible that now—now as never before—she could meet Mrs. Trell and break free of spiritual hatred? Could she leave her unattacked—pass beyond her into loving communion with men such as Will, with women such as Angela? “Spiritual violence,” she began to think, “fails as physical violence fails. It is in the world of the spirit that we are to obey the words, ‘resist not evil.’ To preserve, within the world, a spirit that lives but is not angry—that is the key of life.”

Where they stood, in the elm avenue leading to the Manor, the prevailing dusk was barred with deeper glooms and the exposed tree-roots had begun to shine with a greenish phosphorescence. While Will looked at her and in his heart made treasure of her beauty against a time when it might be finally withdrawn from him, he thought that, if they had been lovers, it was, perhaps, upon this spot that they would have paused before going into the house; and that they would have kissed here; and that her breast, upon which

there lay now a cold shaft from the sky, would have been darkened by his shadow and her fingers have been bent up in his hand.

“Dearest,” he said, “how can I help you, if I may not love you?”

Even then she did not at once answer him, but suddenly she took his hand and pressed it to her cheek. “Be patient a little while longer for my sake,” she said at last. “Let’s go on together to these people. I can face them now.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE surprise which Peggy felt on the first evening of her house-party changed into satisfied contentment as the days went by. All her fears were proved baseless and she came at last to believe that she had never feared. On the fourth night, seated by her dressing-table, she twitted Rory with his earlier foolishness.

"Well," she said, "it looks as if Irma were going to be all right after all."

Rory, who had been pacing the room behind her chair, stopped and smiled.

"You think so?"

"I always did think so."

"Didn't you suggest taking her to Harley Street?"

She laughed over her shoulder. "I believe I did. . . . Do you remember that night when we were sitting over the fire, and Pye came and tapped at the window, and you let him in? Do you remember how nervy we all were? And Will Drake took it all so seriously, and even Dr. Conrad was afraid to have the Trells here?"

"Yes, I remember well enough."

Peggy sighed. "I think Will Drake's a fool sometimes. He's full of queer ideas—never content to let nature take her course. Here's Irma getting quieter and easier every day. I must say I didn't think she'd get well so soon; that's why I suggested Harley Street. But it just shows how wrong Will Drake was. All sailors are superstitious—they believe in ghosts and magic and God knows what."

"Doesn't it occur to you that what has happened may be a proof that Will Drake is——" Rory broke off and stretched over her to a box of cigarettes. "Oh, well, never mind."

"That he's *right*, you mean? O Rory! How could it mean that?"

The house-party ran its course and drew towards its close without unusual occurrence. Irma mingled little with the guests, and when she met them they were aware of nothing more definite than a passive reserve of manner. Mrs. Trell came seldom downstairs; she spent most of her day in her room, which was connected with Vi's by a communicating door. Once she encountered Irma by chance, and flinched, but Irma spoke to her a few words with natural calm, and passed on.

Rory had arranged to celebrate the end of his entertainment by a dinner. People would come in from the country-side; afterwards they would dance. Some must be in costume for good colour's sake. Colching smiled—not for him. Drumpeter welcomed the chance to be gloriously ridiculous and telegraphed to London for a wild extravagance of feathers and slashings. Vi telegraphed, too. She would be Lucy Lockit—yellow dipped in blood—red shoes, red mittens.

She dressed early that night and, wishing, for a reason not expressed in her own heart, to avoid company until dinner should make her acceptance of it inevitable, went into a small room where no lamp had been set and the blinds were still undrawn. It was the room, leading out of the hall, in which Pye had found Peggy on the morning of Urden Flare's funeral.

Vi closed the door. No one would look for her there. She stood still in the half-darkness. Enough pale light washed in from the window to reveal the presence of massed books, and a shouldered screen, standing near the window, cast upon one of the shelves a block of darkness that resembled a human form. Vi imagined an old man, in whom all bodily fires were long ago burned out, moving from shelf to shelf—this room his world. If there were such a man, if he knew the working of her own mind, he would, she thought, turn to her, and lay on her the passionless touch of the old upon the young, and speak to her of his undisturbed pleasures of learning. And she, like a child, would ask him questions, partly to please him, partly to please herself. She'd come again and again. Always he would speak to her with the same calm, and one day she would find in a book of his the story of a girl who—her own story. The reality of her present torment would fade into an impersonal, abstract thing. She'd be an observer of herself in a book. She'd be escaped. She'd grow old in the detached quietness of this room.

Ah, well, life wasn't like that! There was no old man. Soon she must open the door, go into the light, laugh at Drumpeter's costume, meet Colching, fence with him, laugh again. She would never read any of these books—never open or touch any one of them. And yet—just to tread on the edge of the skirt of the vanishing dream—one book! She felt her way to the shelves, curled a finger in a top-binding, pulled a volume down. She went towards the window with it and tilted it towards the pane. At that moment a groom leading two horses drew level with the window. She opened it and leaned out. From the left came Will Drake and Irma, and began to mount. Vi called to Will.

"Yes. Hullo. Who's that?" he replied.

"It's Vi. . . . Are you two shirking the party?"

Irma said something with her face turned away. Vi heard only: ". . . across the moors."

"When will you be back?"

"Late."

"Lucky people! Well, good luck to you, and good-bye!"

"It was odd of her to say good-bye," she overheard Will say in a low voice, but Irma's answer, if any was made, did not come to her.

"Good night!" they both called.

When the hoof-beat out of the dusk could be heard no longer, the stillness became hurtful. Tears of desertion started to Vi's eyes. With no more thought of it, she laid her book upon the window-sill, crossed the room, and opened the door.

"Where's Vi?" someone was saying.

"Not down yet, I expect."

"Yes. I'm here." She went forward, stretched out her hands at them. "Am I to dine in blood-red mittens?"—and laughed.

All that evening, she could think only of Irma and Will riding across the moor. Drumpeter, finding her bad company at dinner, had sense and charity enough to leave her alone, but Colching, his eyes continually returning to the red cut of her mittens across the white of her bare arm, was blinded to her mood. Inflamed though he was, he was yet not incapable of cold calculation. To-night marked an end to an opportunity. She had promised to marry him, but he was no nearer marriage than he had been when the promise was made. His power over her was her desire for his body; only thus could the matter be clinched. "You've little time," Mrs. Trell had said when he had visited her in her room. He had asked what she meant, guessing, but hardly believing, her meaning.

"You've little time," she had repeated.

"You mean that now—to-night——?"

She had silenced him. "Don't be a fool. Act. It's what the girl wants, if she wants anything. I honestly believe it's for her good."

To-night, then, it should be, he was determined. All his dances with Vi were an imaginative anticipation, for, in this matter, even his imagination was far-reaching. Withdrawn from the others, he kissed her passive lips, wrapped her passive body in his arms. He had an extraordinary pride in not hesitating where weaker men would have been balked by their own honour.

In the long run, Vi would admire him for that. From such self-congratulation the stirring of her fingers beneath his shoulder called him back. Her face was flushed, so flushed and with eyes so heavily sparkling that he asked himself if her passivity, which had disconcerted him a little, were after all some anticipatory pose. He had a ready call on phrases and his mind began to run with "passionate languor" often repeated, until at last it seemed the title of a picture, clearly seen, of her head drooped from a pillow, her dark hair flowing in a stiff, vertical stream floorwards, and her breast laid open beneath a slack throat. This picture remained with him as the imagining of horse-hair ruffled close to the saddle by sea-wind remained with her. It deceived him, convinced him of conquest, so that near midnight he was whispering to her of coming to her room when the house was still. She didn't hear or heed him at first; then awoke suddenly and realized to what proposal her silence seemed to be giving acquiescence. She saw his face as a vile face risen suddenly out of the dark at stirrup-level, and mentally struck at it.

"No, no, no!" she cried, and broke from him.

"Little fool," he answered.

"Fool!" Anger caught at her throat. With a great recovery of calm, she added: "Nor ever, Norman. It's done. I've been wrong. It's all horrible and impossible to me. That's final now."

He accepted it with a smile, turned away, left her, danced with her no more. The guests who had come in from the country-side were leaving. Through the hall-doorway the lamps of their carriages gleamed from a still night. Vi went upstairs without farewells.

When she reached her room, she set down her candle on the hearth-rug and, kneeling there, piled wood and dry sticks on to the sunken fire. "That is final now," she said softly, bringing her lips together with the visible pressure which was a sign always that she was trying to force a determination. She was proud, she was free, the tangle of revulsion and desire which had so long entwined her was at last unravelled. She might begin to make new plans. "Turn over a new leaf," she thought, and smiled into the blaze.

The warmth lulled her, and her eyes closed. Her resolution slid from her. "That is final now," she repeated slowly, without sound but with moving lips, "final—final." She tried to make of it a joyful word, but could not. She saw again the little, scornful lift of Colching's shoulder when he turned away from her; saw his face twisted towards her over that shoulder with a

gathering of loose skin between jaw and collar, and heard him say: “Very well, I’ll take you at your word. This is final now.” And she heard herself answering: “Yes, there’s no more we need say.”

The pleasure of having rid herself of a tangle, and the zest for making new plans, ebbed away as she sat before the fire. “Oh, I’m irresolute, hopelessly irresolute. I can never take a clear line. There’s never been a clear line in my life, and never will be, I suppose.” She would not, however, allow herself to sink back into any conscious regret for her decision, but went on saying, in vague, splendid-sounding words, that life was beginning again for her to-night and that she would awake in the morning feeling clean and liberated and happy as she had not felt since she was a child.

Thus she nodded towards sleep, her yellow dress brilliant in the hearth-glow, her back propped against the side of an arm-chair. Sometimes, disturbed by the movement of a log, she opened her eyes heavily, imagined herself getting up and undressing, and allowed her eyes to close again. Sometimes, on the edge of nervous sleep, her body would be seized by a swift convulsion that would throw her erect, wide-eyed and taut, until silence and warmth lapped her again. In this restless slumber, her thought wandered far from her present circumstance and each awakening found her in the tracks of pleasant imaginings of past days. Their dominant note was of lightness and purity. Bare feet across meadows; sunshine on a toy-strewn carpet; prayers said formally with palms pressed together—of these she dreamed. On each occasion, consciousness of her present self flooded in like a defilement, making her feel so sick and careless that, even while she was reproaching herself for the indiscipline of lingering miserably by the fire, she smiled at her own shuddering. “That’s what I’m like, I suppose. Not different—not a bit different really from other slackers, though I try to give reasons why I should seem different.” And then: “They all live without any reckoning of God—a hopeless, scattered drift it is.”

There was a sound in the passage—she thought a footfall. Norman?—after all? The feet of fear began trudging over her to and fro, but she did not move. She sat rigid, suddenly aware of the pressure of flesh against flesh in the leg she had folded under her. But there was no further break in the silence. There had been no sound, or she had mistaken it. Had she been glad as well as afraid when she heard it? Suppose it had increased, advanced towards her door down the passage’s black length—how the instants would have thrilled suddenly to colour! How bleak and grey they were now! A chasm of degradation opened at her. “Final—final—final,” she said, audibly now, as if the sound of the word served to keep her on the hard track of a deliberate and governed mind. It was no longer any more than an

incantation. Buffeted by irresolution's chill, angry winds, she wept with the noise and seizure of tears but with dry eyes. At last she forced herself to her feet and began to undress. Her face was crumpled with self-pity and self-contempt and the desperate survivals of pride. It added to her misery that, though she wanted to take off her clothes with a leisurely, orderly dignity, she found herself incapable even of this. Again and again she fell into long, rambling meditation, fixed in a chance attitude, staring into a long-glass in which she saw reflected nothing but a streak of fire-gleam on silk.

It was cold beyond the fire's range. When, in order to do her hair, she lighted the candles on her dressing-table, the bare skin of her extended arm was ruffled with cold. There was no sound anywhere. The party must be ended now and everyone in bed. She had no idea how far the night was gone towards morning. When she drew back the curtains, she looked out on to a western sky; its darkness told her little. Her watch was stopped. It increased her feeling of lassitude and drift to have thus lost all reckoning of time. She could not avoid asking herself again and again the same useless, unanswerable question, until at last she began to ask it aloud without any thought of its meaning: "What's the time? I wonder how late it is." Her Lockit dress was lying on the floor in an angular, yellow mound, with red shoes beside it as she had stepped out of them. With her hands raised to her hair, she gazed at them, fascinated by their crude colour in that sombre room. This dismal finery, which had seemed so splendid a patch of brightness a few hours ago, had now the ghastly reproach of all artificiality in disarray. It began to represent, in her eyes, something outside itself; to stir revulsion in her; to expand to great planes and spheres of yellowness, having somehow the jagged rigidity of a dead body that has stiffened haphazard with elbows and knees crooked in ridiculous and tragic permanence. She became afraid of it, just as a child becomes afraid of a material object, ordinarily well known to it, which has been endowed by candle-shadows and feverish imagination with unnatural proportion and significance.

She was aware of a strange renaissance of childhood in her that night, and the knowledge struck her to mingled defiance and sadness. She remembered innocence and longed for it; remembered childhood's curious expectancy, its trust in the continuous protection of a personal Christ—how if she was good, all would be well with her; how happy it was to be good; into what misery and confusion and outer darkness wickedness would lead her. The break with Colching had recalled her to this early condition of mind. "Turn over a new leaf," she had said, and, between the pangs of sickness and despair which now assaulted her, the direct, crude phrases of her childhood came back to her. To be good. To begin again. To be lifted up

in Christ's arms. But the freedom of innocence escaped her except in those broken dreams of bare feet and meadows which had come to her while she nodded by the fire. Now, awake, gazing beyond the yellow dress into a darkness which held for her the substance of an all-merciful Redeemer, she struggled towards that freedom. That she might be a child; that a door in the darkness might open; that, though her faith was soiled and her will broken, He would yet remember her; that from the outer darkness she might be taken in! She moved forward one step. Her eyes shone with tears, flashed suddenly to joyful anticipation. She held out her hands; she began to whisper: " 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?' "

Then, as always now, the literalness of childhood fled, the self-consciousness of her present circumstances seized and checked her. She saw the raising of her hands as a theatrical gesture; it had not been so in its inception. She checked in horror at the word "why," hearing in the phrase, which had sprung at first spontaneously from her heart, nothing but empty blasphemy. She had meant it when her lips had first moved to speak it. Suddenly something in her had failed, as it had failed in Peter when walking on the water. She was sinking. She had become incapable of following her own spiritual impulses. There was in her a continual thwarting, like the thwarting of nightmare, which prevented her from running to the arms that would have made safe the child in her. It was as if she were swathed round in clinging garments and could not break free.

"Irma!" she cried aloud. "Come to me now! Comfort me! Give me strength and peace at last!"

When she had spoken and was still remembering how her own words had clashed with the room's silence, she began to burn with desire for Irma's companionship and with assurance that, in a few moments, it would be given to her. She had been rescued once; she had failed and weakened; she would be rescued again. Irma would return from her night-ride—was returning, was at the gate, was in the house, was upon the stairs! There had been no sound of horses to second Vi's imagination, but she did not doubt Irma's intervention, and, having reached that point of consciousness, commonly encountered between waking and sleeping or between reason and collapse, at which things substantial and unsubstantial swing together to a sudden identity, she saw in Irma's coming the coming of Christ to her. Irma's touch would be His touch, her speech His words; her comfort His divine strength. In this faith she knelt, and lay down upon her face, with her head circled by her arms and her arms part-hidden in her hair. She remained still, aware of new composure and dignity, believing that peace was making its approach to her. She was no longer alone in the room; the presence of

another was coming near to her; was stooping over her. At last she knew that Christ was kneeling at her side. His eyes were turned upon her, His hand, moving towards her, would touch her hair and raise her. She lay in hushed expectancy of the touch, expectancy that possessed her whole heart like a vast impulse towards song. When a hand did, indeed, touch her, she thought only, without ghostly fear, "He will speak," and did not move. When the touch itself grew to a summons, she turned swiftly in an ecstasy of faith that she might be gathered into the everlasting arms, and fell back with a stricken, choking cry.

The shock of that recognition left her with a part of her mind in suspension. She did not relate her own personality with Colching's, but stared at his face, without shame in herself or fear or hatred or passion or any sort of regard for him. She felt no more than that an impersonal grossness was near her, a wrapping pollution that left her helpless and speechless.

Knowledge of him and his words awakened slowly. At first, he was praising the beauty of her body in hollow-sounding, conventional phrases. Then he said: "You were waiting for me. You thought I'd come"—she stirred to the irony of that—"I knew you'd not meant it to be final." She murmured "No," without care for meaning. "You're cold," he said. She was then covered, arms were put round her, she was lifted towards the fire. New logs blazed up. There was a gap of talk she did not hear, and laughter—his and her own.

Laughter spurred action. She saw herself slack in his arms, gave a name to the impersonal grossness, singled out from it his flushed cheeks and hawkish eyes. Their assured possessiveness, for which her own impassivity —seen by him as deliberate yielding—had given warrant, dragged her to revolt. She saw in them a self-congratulatory gleam; he was preening himself on his boldness and guile, anticipating his skilful victory—near now. That must be fought. She sprang up; he too. She drew from him; he followed, smiling.

"I told you it was final."

"You did—and waited."

"I say it again."

He laughed. "That was hours ago. Why weren't you in bed? I saw the light under your door."

"You thought it was for you?"

"You couldn't sleep? Admit it!"

"Without you?"

"If you like."

"You're a fool, Norman. You don't know, I suppose, how wrong you are."

His heat had put him beyond reason. "I know how right I am," he declared, and dropped suddenly from brutal sternness to stumbling endearments. His hands were over her; his lips, flattened to the teeth, were at her throat. She felt him draw up close for the physical twist which should overpower her, but she could not bring herself to strike him. She cried out—two quick-forced cries that had more of pain in them than alarm—and he fell back. Having cried, she remembered that her mother was in the next room. If awake, she must have heard; if asleep, perhaps had been awakened. They waited for a sound of movement, she with her face turned a little away from him, expectantly towards the green door. There was no sound. As he remained fixed and would have stayed her if she had tried to pass him, she drew breath to cry again. As she did so, she looked at him and saw in him, not any sort of fear or embarrassment by reason of her cries, but a faint smile, the smile of a much older man, which seemed to say: "Shout the house down—much good it will do you." The dawn of what she took to be that smile's significance froze her spirit. It was arranged, then? Hence his daring—her mother's stroke, not his? It had marks of her mother's generalship—to force indecision by attack.

Where was her mother? Discreetly withdrawn to sleep elsewhere? Or an ally listening from within? . . . Not that. The suspicion was thrust away—not to be believed. The smile—a glance at Colching showed the smile continuing—had been misinterpreted. Of that last, deep infamy at least she must acquit him. He hadn't thought she would cry out; vanity had counted on acquiescence. He must have forgotten that her mother slept there. The smile must be of sureness, triumph—no more. He could have no idea that help was so near to her.

She began retreat towards the green door, hoping he would remain still. Having seen a way of escape—not from his strength so much as from her own weakness—she allowed courage to mount in her; when she reached the door and opened it, this terror would snap as darkness snapped into light at a tunnel's end. But at the first sign of movement, he had swept her up again and was blinding and bruising her. One of her hands was free. It stretched across the panels, closed on the knob. Her weight and his tipped sideways, and the door fell back on to a room full of light.

This room, which Peggy had converted to her own taste, was a flash of polished metal and white enamel on a background of pink. Vi, who had seen it before by daylight only, received from it now an impression of massed

dazzle, powerful as a blow; it was as if she were standing in the heart of an enormous pink jewel. Her eyes slowly distinguished the wall-paper, ribbed and glossy; a dressing-table bearing a lamp and a pair of double candlesticks; two tables, widely separated against the farthest wall, on one of which stood another lamp and on the other a vast candelabra of sky-blue shepherds and magenta shepherdesses in china. Between these tables appeared the four posts of a brass bedstead, each decorated with a satin bow. This had been Peggy's wistful striving towards pretty ingenuousness.

In the midst of it, propped up in bed with a four-legged supper-tray straddling her knees, sat Mrs. Trell. A mauve wrap was on her shoulders, and *point de Venise* hung over her ears and wrists. Her hands were now occupied in carrying food to a mouth from which the teeth had been removed. Her lips clung with sustained relish to the edge of the emptied spoon. Over it her eyes, like cut steel under a film of oil, were directed towards the door. Vi looked into them. They were the same that had compelled her to the wedding-dress; they held the same determination, inflexible and obsessed.

While Mrs. Trell continued her meditative supper—which she did without lowering her head or shifting her regard—her jaws did not move except to admit the spoon, but her lips, wrinkled together, performed a series of sucking revolutions as she pressed soft food against her palate and circulated it to her taste. Presently she laid down the spoon. Her jewelled fingers spread themselves on the pink satin of the coverlet and her nails picked at the piping. Thus, embedded in rose-glow as a gigantic toad is embedded in the prevailing emerald of leaves transparent to the sun, she stared at her daughter. Over all, the light blazed. That it was a deliberate, a festive illumination it was impossible to doubt.

Nevertheless Vi ran forward—with a sense of forcing her way through a tangible barrier of light—and, throwing herself on her knees by the bedside, grasped her mother's hand.

"Oh, thank God you're awake, thank God for that!"

There was, she thought, a momentary responsive tightening of the fingers that touched her own, and her heart leapt at the tenderness of it. If ever it was real, it ceased instantly. The hand was cold and rigid.

"The milk's sour," said Mrs. Trell.

"Mother—do you understand me?—Norman's there, behind me, in my room, in the dark."

"Here it's light."

"Listen. Do listen. I'm frightened. I've no control. Everything's sliding —a sort of glistening fear. I've no hold anywhere. Mother! Oh, oh, in the name of Jesus, help me now!"

She was convinced that her mother heard and understood every word. She struggled, in the depths of her soul, to discover any appeal that would reverse this negative of silence. And as, pouring out words and tears and moaning, she felt the hand remain as coldly rigid as ever and, looking up, found the same eyes turned upon her, her fear changed to a sudden, overwhelming loneliness. She seemed no longer to have roots or substance in the world. None would hear her, though she cried; none pity or comfort her; none sustain her, in this vast, expanding desert of spiritual isolation. And she cared no more. Calm fell upon her like obliterating snow. A lapping satisfaction rose like a tide over all her consciousness as it rises over men who fall asleep among snow. The muscles of her uplifted arms slackened suddenly; her face lolled at the satin coverlet; she felt herself very slowly sliding and sliding backwards, sliding, she thought, like a quoit on the side of a glacier. She watched the quoit swell and gather speed on the iced incline.

Being lifted up awakened her, and she knew that it was in Colching's arms that she was held. They passed out of the light room into the dark, and a door closed. She was very cold, as if dead: the candle's furry globe stood sentinel above a coffin. As warmth came, life returned. She grasped at warmth, now with a dull, sleek pleasure, now with consuming joy that excluded all other joys and pains, and overwhelmed her identity, so that when, remembering the coffin in a backward flash of mind, she strove to engrave a name on it, she could remember no name for herself, and began laughing and singing—or it seemed that she laughed and sang, though there was no sound but the sound of breath like the panting of boars in an undergrowth.

A long time afterwards, when there was no more candle or fire-glow and pale ghosts were leaning out of the window-curtains, she saw the hawkish eyes choked with sleep and the flushed cheeks sunk grey. She began to be very cold again and, sitting up beside him, remembered, and understood, and saw herself.

After humiliation came anger, after anger despair, and out of despair a calm that stifled all her heart's tumult. She rose with her determination clear and fixed, put on the yellow dress and red shoes because they lay nearest to her hand, passed swiftly through the deserted passages, and let herself out of

the house. Morning had begun to open. It was without splendour, grey, cool and fresh. When, in a few hours, the sun was up, the waves on the beach to which she was going would curl and break with the powdery crispness of autumn. She would not be there to see them; but she saw them now in her imagination, and saw, in tender remembrance, all the annual pageant of the sea—winter's harshness and heavy beating, summer's languor, the breeze-ruffled sparkle of good days in spring. Autumn was dearest of all. The waves had then a steadier dignity than at any other time. They alone persisted in energy while all nature was fading and falling.

The waves that ran their full curve into Spring Bay were so far advanced by the tide that, when Vi reached the cliff that overlooked them, they left exposed none but the higher sand-reaches. These, in the shape of an irregular crescent, had, at this hour, that faint luminosity which is the property of all white sea-shores at the two ends of day. From the cliff-path they looked like a battered moon seen through frosted glass. As Vi approached them, however, they and their nebulous patches of darkness took solider form and colour. The yellow of day rose in hazy patches out of night's neutral colouring of the sand, and isolated rocks exhibited, with all their old tricks, those rough-hewn human features which make them, in children's eyes, monuments to legendary buccaneers. By such a rock, Vi let fall her shoes and went forward barefooted. Night's terrors she no more remembered; Colching and her mother had no longer any existence for her. She was absorbed in the present, cut off from the past by an absolute decision. Her purpose was so far detached from the experiences which had prompted it that there was a blithe vigour, almost a gaiety, in her movement, and she thought of the death to which she was approaching as she thought of the sea which should accord it, seeing them both as wide, flat, empty expanses into which her path would certainly lead her.

On the water's edge she paused. The sand oozing between her toes and the cold lip which sucked now and then at the arches of her feet sent thought dancing back to childish days. A ghost of the night's memories breathed upon her then. Now that she was free and was going away, she regretted none of the wrongs she had suffered, nor, indeed, remembered them as wrongs. That she had loved once, but to no end, was a shadowy grief. It was as if she were leaving a house for ever without having looked into its garden. Tears came into her eyes, but not of wrath or bitterness—tears of wonder for an untasted thing, never to be tasted now.

She retreated from the water and lay down upon the sand, made leisurely by the sureness of her own resolution. She would die, and it seemed no difficult thing to die. For her it held no excitement; it was like walking up to

a door, opening it, going out, and shutting the door again. If they found her body, she hoped that they would find it in a gentle attitude of repose—not a horrible, but a beautiful thing. It should not be in this yellow dress, bedraggled by sea-water, that they should find her. She stretched herself and gazed full into the lightening sky. She must not delay long now.

Delay? The mental word prompted her to hesitation—the first faltering she had known in this, her final undertaking. To crush it she rose quickly and threw off her clothes. They looked squalid on the beach; they drew the heart out of her. She thrust them under the overhanging face of a rock and weighted them with smooth, grey stones. The wind struck chill at her limbs, and though she strove to recover her former serenity of purpose, she knew, as she drew her clasped hands to her chin and sheltered her body with her elbows, that her old enemy irresolution was upon her. She went forward, nevertheless. The cold of the mounting water shocked her. She was not now thinking of death but of the splashing edges of bodily discomfort. She forced her way on. The water was to her chest. Her face was wet. She dared not fail now.

Then, seeing herself with the sharp eye of ridicule, she laughed gaspingly aloud. Could she not make a good end to herself? Could she not go forward, three, four steps boldly? At that instant, she knew, deep within her, that, though she would go forward a few steps more, she would never in fact drown herself. She saw herself turning back, the water growing shallower round her. When she reached the shore, what should she do? How should she conceal her attempt when she returned to Flare?

So thinking in her backward mind, though consciously she was still contemplating the fulfilment of her purpose, she moved forward, lost her foothold, and sank with a rush of waters about her head. She reached out with her foot for sand and found none. She struck desperately with her hands and obtained no support. In an instant she would be safe again; she could not doubt it. She had complete confidence, in common with all sheltered people, that from the final, exceptional misfortune she personally must always be exempt.

Swept to the surface, she saw how far she had been carried from the shore. She knew then that decision was taken from her; that it was in this place and in this manner that she was to die. A pang of shame, of overwhelming, restless misery struck at her heart. Why had she not been able to hold firm? Why was she now dying without resignation, without pride? She summoned pride, strove for a quieted soul. She remembered words from a history-book—“O Lord, into Thy hands I commend my spirit”—and was ashamed of them upon her lips. Then resistance and

striving fell away. She was tired at a journey's end. She was in a room where she might rest, away from the world's demanding eyes. She laid down her head with a sense of love encircling it. She was very tired, very happy at last. None would disturb her.

Meanwhile, Colching had slept. Awaking, he found her gone—he knew not whither. He arose slowly, lighted a candle, and, going with it into the passage, began moving towards the stairs, intending either to search for her or to return to his own room—he knew not which. He was smiling at the thought of his own power—a prince among men.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

IRMA and Will had set out northward across the moors, keeping as much as possible to the hill tracks so that they might not lose sight of the sea. The deepening of dusk had given a frostlike whiteness to the ground mist, and their horses were fetlock-deep in an opaque froth. The going was sure and they made easy progress. Both were glad to be away from Flare that night, and all their talk—of Will's coming voyage, of the sea and foreign places, of their childhood together, and so, at last, of old Urden Flare—was light-hearted talk, with now an unseen smile, now laughter, now a gap of silence while they rode swiftly or apart.

Near midnight, while they were on their way homeward and, at their leisurely pace, within half an hour of the Manor, they saw, clear against the moonlit sky, a cottage built on the borders of a beech copse that stood on high ground near the sea. Irma turned her horse suddenly towards it, and Will followed her. He knew that, beyond the slope which they were now ascending, the ground fell away easily to the cliff-edge, leaving the copse, if regarded from seaward, perched conspicuously on a ridge. The copse was a shield for the cottage on the land side only, and Will remembered having said, as they passed the place on their outward journey: "Those windows must rattle like musketry when there's an east wind." Irma had not answered him then, and now he had begun to follow her without clearly realizing the purpose of her change of direction.

But as the lower slope began to steepen, he saw that she was intent upon going the full way to the cottage, and called after her: "Irma, why do you want to go up there?" Because she did not answer, but, with her face hidden, went steadily forward, the old alarm gripped him and he urged his horse to draw level with hers.

"What do you expect to find there?" he asked. "There's no light in the windows."

"There may be towards the sea," she answered, without seeming to care whether she was right or wrong. "Even if there were a lamp on this side of the house, I doubt whether we should see it at this distance and through the trees. Not if blinds were drawn."

"Do you imagine someone lives there?"

"Perhaps. Anyhow, we can rest before riding home."

They were dismounted now, and, when for a moment Irma checked her climb, the unled horses stopped beside her.

"No one's ever lived in that place so long as I can remember," she said. "We used to regard it as more or less a ruin."

"I know," Will answered. "A brother of old Gurge's used to live in it at one time—had lived in it for years, I believe. But I remember him only as a very old fellow. 'He's a bad man, a very bad man,' Meggle used to tell me. 'He does no good—alone in that place.' I used to wonder about him. My picture of Silver when I read *Treasure Island* always included the old man's face—which I'd seen only once, looking out of the window as we passed."

"Which window?" said Irma. "Towards the sea?"

"Yes. The nearest of the windows overlooking the cliff. We can't see it from here."

"Then that's the living-room probably. That's where any lamp would be—hidden from us here."

She continued her way up the slope, saying as she went: "Don't you trouble with the climb. I should like to look into the place. I'll go on alone."

Something in those words shocked him into a fixed determination to go with her. There was a ring of deception in them—innocent deception, he thought—as if a child were solemnly tricking him into leaving it alone while it played some secret game. Yet, if that had been all, there would scarcely have arisen in him this feeling of fear as the space widened between him and her receding figure. He knew at once that though she had spoken so lightly of resting in the place, no persuasions of his could now deter her. Her words had had no bearing upon the essential thought in her mind. Her whole being had become suddenly engrossed in what lay ahead, up that hill, within that cottage; and he had lost grip on her. In order to compel her mind to consideration of those things from which it was withdrawing, he overtook her and stood in her path, and, with his hands laid upon her shoulders, forced her to encounter him.

"Will," she said, "you are standing between me and what is necessary to me."

"Then you are not going to the cottage just to rest there?"

"No."

"Turn now," he said, "while it's easy to turn. Let's mount and ride away."

She shook her head and smiled as if he were asking an impossible thing, the impossibility of which he did not understand.

"I know what you intend," she said. "But it is useless to attempt to oppose this by force. You know it is useless and dangerous. Let me go on."

"Then I come with you."

To this she made no reply, but, when he was at her side, went forward quietly as if her progress had not been interrupted.

When they had drawn nearer the cottage, Will saw that the southern wall was blank.

"The man who built this didn't care for sunshine," he said.

"There's one window," Irma answered without raising her head. "There's a small window which probably belongs to an attic of some kind—high up under the gable. Do you see?"

Looking up, he saw the window. Its breadth was greater than its height, for it was of the kind that swings on a horizontal hinge at the upper edge and can be propped open by a bar with holes fitting upon a spigot. It was so blotched in the darkness of the deep gable that he wondered how she had noticed it when her attention had not, as his had, been specially drawn to it. When had she noticed it? He hadn't seen her look up, and his eyes had been upon her.

He turned to the window again. Ivy aided the concealment of the moon-shadow—shrivelled ivy, it must be, sered by harsh weather, so that if you stood in that attic, close to the window, and looked out, you'd hear the leaves' brown edges click like knives against the panes. Will's imagination carried him within the attic and gave him the musty smell of it, and that curious putting of teeth on edge which results in such places when a layer of soft dust is ground between leather boot and planked flooring. He thought of himself climbing a wooden ladder, thrusting his head into the attic's blackness, stumbling over some fat bundle as he made his way to the window. He saw himself stand on tiptoe to look out. Misjudging its distance, as one does in the dark, by a fraction of an inch, he'd feel the cold glass touch the flesh of his face. There'd be the ivy tapping level with his eyes. There'd be the two figures coming up the hill, leading their horses following long shadows. His own horse's white stocking would flash up clear.

And out of his imagining of himself as a watcher from the attic, there emerged a flicker of doubt about the window upon which his eyes were fixed. Set in its oblong, there seemed to be a gap in the general darkness. This, as he watched it, became something more positive—a substantial pallor with shape and, he thought, with life.

"Do you see?" Irma's voice was asking, and he answered: "Yes; there is a window there of some kind." But his thought ran on. "So they've seen us coming—from the back windows, probably, through the trees. But why run up to the attic—and so quickly? I wonder if we'll find ourselves hammering

at the door of a house that gives no answer, as if everyone was away." But, as they turned the cottage's south-east corner, they found full light unblinded shining from Silver's window, and throwing a yellow splash upon their path.

The horses' hoofs and their own boots, though they had made little sound on the turf, seemed to leave a flat silence when they stopped before the door. Irma knocked with the bone handle of her crop and, the door falling instantly open as if someone behind it had been waiting for the knock, they found themselves blinking at a brass lamp with a globe of frosted glass. This had a pattern of ferns and tritons; beneath it, the stand and the wick-winder glistered with oil, and the supporting arm, bare to the high-rolled sleeve of a print dress, was ridged with the shadows of outstanding veins.

"Yes?" a woman's voice said.

Irma walked past her, the suddenness of the advance causing the arm to be instinctively withdrawn so that the lamp should not be overturned. There could now be no slamming of the door.

"Would you give us tea?"

"Tea?"

"Yes, a cup of tea while we rest."

"I don't sell no tea."

"Then may we rest a little?" And to Will: "Could you tether the horses? It would be best behind the cottage. I should think. Then we'll wait here."

"I can tether them where they stand," Will answered. "There's a scraper here that will do as a peg. Then there needn't be the trouble of opening the door twice."

The woman was trying half-heartedly to shut the door, but not until he was across the step did Irma give way and move down the passage. Silver's room, when they entered it, was dark, for the lamp was behind them, but the woman followed them reluctantly and, replacing the lamp upon a ring of oil which stained the centre of the deal table, turned her back on her visitors and began to rake ashes from the fire.

"Well," she said, "since ye're here, ye'd better sit yourselves. But ye can't be stayin' long, I warn ye. I'm that busy to-night with none i' the house to help me."

The babble continued while she went about her kitchen business. She was moving the tins and crockery that lay upon the dresser, rearranging them, taking some away that she might pile them on a wooden chest which served her as trunk and wardrobe, picking them up one by one and

examining them, with an air of scrupulous attention, in a light not powerful enough to reveal crack or blemish. She remained always between her work and the lamp, her back turned to the visitors so that they did not see her face, and her words came to them indistinctly as if they proceeded from the great shadow of herself that stooped over her from the whitewashed wall and ceiling.

"Lonesome it be up here," she said. "The sound o' plates when ye wash up do so clatter in y' ears an' the clang o' the bucket's handle when ye set it down—they sound cruel when ther' ben't a soul to speak to. An' a'terwards I sits in that chair 'earin' 'em still—they do ring so. An' I starts always at the gratin' o' the chain o' the cuckoo clock when the big fir-cone slip sudden, as it do sometime."

Irma's eyes were wide.

"Do you think," she said, "that all your words keep back what you are hiding? You were in Fish's cottage when Angela died."

"What is it I'm hiding, then?—I'm hiding nothing."

"You were hiding your face from me."

The woman turned and backed a little towards the corner where stood the wooden chest, her body curved forward, her left cheek sucked in and held inwardly between her jaws. Something like fear in her shifted to a spasmodic menace. Her lower lids drooped so that her eyes were cupped in pink flesh. Will started up to calm her, but she thrust her way past him with great nimbleness, and, standing on the hearth-rug, said:

"I knew ye as ye stood at the door between the horses, as I saw ye standin' in that other door, with Angela, poor soul, moanin' an' clawin' the sheets in the room near by an' Fish crouched at ye like a great dolt t' his god." She raised a hand wildly moving. "An' now, go fro' this place. Go, or in the devil's name I'll drive ye, else ye'll send us all pitiless like swine into the sea."

Irma had risen.

"Why are they hidden? They had nothing to fear. Go, and tell them that, if they come to me, they have nothing to fear."

The woman did not answer, but weakened against the table, drooping her head like a tired and ashamed child. From time to time she glanced sidelong at Irma as if in expectation of physical attack and shifted her position inch by inch along the table towards the end nearer to the door. At last, judging that her opportunity was come, she sprang suddenly into life and, with a clatter of loose slippers, made her escape from the room.

"Irma, what is this house? Who are these people?" Will asked, but she seemed not to have heard him speak.

"Irma!" he repeated.

"Will you open the door?" she said. "There is no way out except by that passage. They must come that way, if they come at all."

"Who?"

"Do you remember that night when we were walking together near the cliff-edge, and Fish came running up the hill from *The Three Faithful Men* to call me to Angela? Just as you did this evening, you tried to prevent me from going. I went. I found this woman in the house."

"But who else is here?"

"You yourself saw someone at the attic window."

"Yes."

"And that afternoon, when a gig drove past *The Three Faithful Men*, you saw who was in it?"

"Natalya?"

"With Fish." She warmed her hand by the lamp, and repeated: "Open the door on the passage."

He opened it and saw opposite him an edge of light shining beneath another door now closed. Crossing the passage, he opened this also and looked into the room to which it gave entrance. He had flung back the door quickly, and was surprised to find no one within. On the floor, set close to a pile of bright-coloured satin cushions, was a lighted candle. Beside the candle was an open book, turned hastily on its face, and the cushions were crushed to the imprint of a human body. The general appearance of the room was that of a cottage living-room of the kind that is reserved for occasions of ceremony. There hung on the northern wall, facing Will as he entered, an oleograph of Christ walking upon the waters. Near to it, on the same wall, was a photogravure of a little girl, in mittens and a flounced frock and a sunbonnet, seated upon a mossy bank with wild roses growing near her. Over the fire-place was an enlarged photograph of a middle-aged man in Gladstone collar and flowered waistcoat, and, above it, a framed certificate or testimonial of some kind. With these decorations the furniture was in accord, save that everywhere there was a profusion of cushions. There were, too, certain details, contrasted with the manner of the room, upon which Will's attention became directed as his eyes grew accustomed to the light—a cut-glass scent-spray partly covered by one of the cushions, a shallow bowl of sang-de-bœuf porcelain which contained cigarettes, a leather strap tasselled at the end and embroidered, through pierced holes, with orange and

purple wools, and a labourer's soiled red scarf. Will picked up the strap, thinking that it was, perhaps, Fish's belt, but it was without a buckle or any means by which its ends could be fastened. Returning it to the sofa over the back of which it had been hanging, he saw among the bric-à-brac on the mantelpiece a perverted ikon in an open morocco case, and, having considered its design, he turned from it and looked with new eyes at the room.

He found its atmosphere suddenly oppressive. The single window, which gave eastward, was closed. Though his back was turned to the ikon, he seemed to see the obscene figures of which it was composed form and be magnified before his eyes. Life awoke in them; the enamelled limbs took the texture of flesh. Did Natalya worship this thing? Or was it no more than a wild defiance, a thing to be knelt to and laughed at, to be stroked and hated —to be brandished in the face of obtruding memories? He swung on his heel and, fully regarding the ikon once more, imagined Natalya kneeling before it, arms upraised, knuckles standing white between interlaced fingers. He perceived how, in such instants, there would remain no comfortable barriers between her present knowledge and her childhood's unforgettable hopes, how the chance fragrance of a holiday morning would return to her and fill her with the memory of sweet resolves, and how, memory's own boundaries being overridden and the hedges of all the years trampled down, the child herself would seem to be kneeling there, the child's eyes would look for an instant upon the ikon, and Natalya would see the present with the unspeakable horror of a child's evil dream.

The room gave token of the fleshy excess to which she was come. She was an exile in one extreme, as Irma was an exile in another, from the accord of body and spirit. "Such exiles," he thought, "look back across infinite distances to a peace they have known or have guessed at. In complete abandonment to what is, they try to forget what was and what might have been." So thinking, he could see in this room, not a place from which vileness spurted forth, but an emptiness into which love might flow. And a great burden was lifted from him, and he remembered Irma's words: "They have nothing to fear," and all his heart cried suddenly in answer: "Those are not the words she would have used once! That is not destruction. She is not come to this place to destroy."

Dropping on one knee, he plucked the candle from beside the cushions and raised it above his head, drawing himself to his full height—feeling suddenly a giant while that leaping flame spat out its stream of light like an upheld spear-head caught in the sun. He saw three figures grouped in the door—Natalya with thin shadows licking the hollows of her cheeks, Fish

with his flat fingers wrapped clumsily over her sleeve, and behind them the crouching woman, plucking at them, expostulating in high-pitched peevishness: “No, no, not there! Ye can’t always be there! Here she is, in here!” Then, seeing Will and his candle in the room which she believed to be empty, she screamed at what was for her the climax of the supernatural, and turned and fled.

Natalya crossed the room towards him with Fish at her side. They stood dazzled by the candle which was brought to the level of their faces. The loose flesh, hung about Fish’s eyes, rippled as he blinked.

“You here!” she said, and Will saw her gaze leap past him to the ikon. “Where is she?”

Before Will had had time to reply, Fish broke in: “What’s y’ doin’ ’ere anyway? What’s either o’ you doin’? I’m content. I don’ wan’ no buttin’ in ’ere.” He looked at Natalya. “She ain’t got th’ wife’s points, sometime I do think. She’s all bones. But then she’s a lady—ain’t ye? The same as ’a’ laid in princes’ beds—eh? They wer’n’t mightier nor me.”

Her body writhed away from him in disgust, then, suddenly relenting, she approached him again, and, shadowing herself under the mass of him, said to Will:

“Is she gone?”

“No.”

“She sent for us.”

“I heard her send. Why did you hide?”

“Yes,” said Fish. “That’s what I say. I ain’t afeard now. But we was lyin’ ’ere. An’ in come Red Eyes. ‘There’s two comin’ up th’ill,’ says she. ‘Wher’?’ says I. ‘Close,’ says she, ‘two ’orses.’ ‘Send ’em t’ell,’ says I. But the Princess she jumps up taut. ‘Who?’ she says, an’ would ’ave it I should go an’ look, ‘for I bin wonderin’ a long time,’ she says, ‘who might not be a-comin’ to this place.’ But there wer’n’t no seein’ ’em by the back winder wher’ Red Eyes took me, so I ran to the loft and the Princess came runnin’ a’ter me an’ out o’ the winder she stared and stared. An’ sudden she said: ‘Aye, so ’tis.’ An’ a long time she hunched up there among the boxes an’ wouldn’ stir, but kep’ lookin’ at the ladder-’ead. An’ when steps sounded, she jumped up taut again an’ drove her nail into m’wrist, but it wer’n’t none but Red Eyes sayin’: ‘You come down. She won’ do’ee no ’urt, she says. On’y, for the love o’ Gawd, come down. I can’t go down alone,’ she says, ‘not with ’er eyes like that. An’ it’s all yer evil way,’ Red Eyes says. An’ I laugh, an’, ‘Send ’er t’ell,’ says I again. But the Princess she says: ‘We mus’ go. We mus’ go. We mus’ go,’ like she says sometimes over an’ over: ‘I

mus' suffer. I mus' suffer. I mus' suffer.' An' then 'er eyes shine an' 'er teeth smile while she's cryin'. An' she says: 'I mus' suffer.' An' she likes it. . . . So it wer' then. 'We mus' go,' says she. An' then, as we was comin' an' I sayin'——"

"Be quiet, be quiet!" Natalya cried, and to Will: "Quick now! You don't mean us harm, do you? He's quite right. I don't know why I came. You get Irma out of this. You get her away. Say we've gone. How did she know we were here?" And, without waiting for answer: "Say we've gone. Get her away. You will do that—oh, you will, you will?"

Fish broke in again. They interrupted each other like children with a panic-stricken tale, and, if Will moved his lips to speak, they overwhelmed him with the confused flutter of their defiance and beseeching, until at last Fish snatched the candlestick from his hand and turned with so swift a movement that the flame lay back and the room was for an instant plunged in dark.

"Look!" Fish said. "There!"

He held his candle on a straight arm towards the door and, as the light steadied, they saw Irma standing within the room. Natalya ran to her, knocking the candle from Fish's hand as she passed, so that it fell dully among the cushions and the window's pallor lay flat on the night. The walls and the outlines of furniture were thus obscured; only the two edges of the open door stood out sharply, cast forward by the flow of light across the passage. Above this a triangle of pale gold shone upon the ceiling. And across the floor's shifting and deceptive whiteness, Natalya's body was stretched at Irma's feet.

Irma felt the touch of her hands upon her shoes. Was this terror? A great longing came to her that it should be the touch, not of fear, but of a confidence akin to love. She dropped upon her knees beside the fallen body, and, lifting it up, turned Natalya's face to hers and kissed her with a tenderness which she had never yet experienced in herself—a tenderness that seemed to arise like a bright spring from the depths of her being. They tried to speak. Natalya's arms reached up and clung to Irma, and her face was laid against her breast. In their eyes were tears that glistened in the darkness. Natalya began to remember a tale which a priest had told her when she was a child, that death was not to be feared, because, when it came, you were held in strong arms and carried over the mountains, and, although you were travelling at great speed through the air, you felt safe as you had never felt upon earth. She began to wish that death would come now, and that her eyes would not continually catch sight of the blur of two men's faces looking down upon her. She, too, had given something, she knew, for Irma's

tears were falling, and now and then the arms which held her tightened with a woman's impulse. Had she given happiness for happiness, discovery for discovery? She longed to hear Irma acknowledge this in words. She wished she could die, so that there might be no end to this miracle, but the men's faces came nearer and she felt herself lifted up and heard a match struck. They carried her across the room and, because they might lay her among the cushions which she now abhorred, she struggled to escape from them. But they carried her from the room, upstairs, up the ladder, and laid her at last in her bedroom that adjoined the attic. She felt the back of her hand pressed against Irma's forehead, and lay still, remembering how Irma's arms had held her and the tears fallen upon her. A woman's arms, a woman's tears, her memory said. Irma, whom she had always regarded with fear as a being withdrawn from the plane of her life, had come close to her in that instant—was close now. It was as if she had been admitted to a new world. She remembered how she had gone by dark passages toward Irma's room at Flare, how sudden fear had driven her to hide, how at last she had entered and fallen at Irma's feet, and how a barrier had seemed to rise between them, the same barrier between flesh and spirit which all her life had thwarted and tormented her. Now it was down. The body alone would never again be her master; the spirit would never again be remote and terrible. A consciousness of escape, of freedom, of final deliverance, crept over her, leaving her at peace. Life would continue; there'd be battles in the future—but not the same battle, not that hopeless battle fought in the dark in the midst of confining walls.

A pang of memory opened her eyes to search for Fish. She saw without surprise that he was not with her, and instinct told her that he was gone from the house. He was a tramp through the world, entering violently into the lives of others, staying a little while and passing on. She saw him already as one far distant from herself, imagining his escape from the place that could no longer serve his purpose, his great hands fumbling at the latch, his hasty setting out across the moor. She did not attempt to guess in what direction he would go. In her imagining, his face was turned away from her. She knew she would never see it again, and allowed her eyes to close and her thought to exclude him.

Will Drake, too, was gone. Probably he was waiting for Irma below. With that thought came fear that Irma would leave her.

"You will stay with me?" she begged. "You won't go. Even if I sleep, it's all the happiness in the world to have you with me now. To-morrow it will be different. I begin life again then. But now, until I wake, you'll stay with me?"

Irma bent low over her, and touched her hair.

"Yes. Sleep now."

Natalya slept like a tired child on the eve of a day that is to bring happiness—a happiness which is already colour for dreams. Irma, looking down on the sleeping face, saw its lines smoothed by dreams. Its suffering, which had left marks upon it that nothing could obliterate, gave it now a noble calm, imparting to the features, though they were yet young, something of the curious simplicity of great age seen in contemplative repose. Irma picked up the candle, shaded it with her hand, and carried it from the bedroom into the attic. She had healed and created; she knew that the spiritual power in her had found a vital relation with the world. Mrs. Trell she had had no impulse to attack, but that had marked but a negative change in her. Natalya loved and needed her, and her heart leapt at the discovery of connexion between human love and her own spiritual vigour.

In the midst of her new-found joy, a strange uneasiness crept into her mind. Indistinct at first, it gathered strength as the minutes passed until it became a powerful but incomprehensible disturbance of her peace. She rebelled against it as a weary traveller, having but a moment since lain down to rest, might rebel against a summons to press forward. She became aware of a demand, a passionate entreaty that she should instantly be gone to give aid in an unknown distress. It seemed that her name was being called, that the call was being repeated close to her side, that innumerable voices, of increasing urgency and despair, were whispering around her. The candle-sprayed dark of the attic was full of the summons, but she did not know who called her or whither she should go.

She hid her face in her hands and waited.

No sound came to her ears but Natalya's soft breath and the light scraping of dried ivy on the attic's pane, but the ghostly summons was continually repeated though it had neither form of words nor distinguishable tone. At last, she looked up. It seemed that in the pit of black behind the candle's beam a human form stood regarding her. As she watched, its face took nebulous shape but no colour, and she knew it to be the face of Vi Trell. The agony she saw rent her heart, and she started forward with hands outstretched, but, as she moved, the figure moved also, and knelt, and fell upon its face. Another form came near and knelt beside it, a form that suggested no personal recognition but seemed a corrupt menace, vast and universal, having no colour or shape. Irma stood regarding it, a great cold in all her limbs. Gradually all that she saw faded away and there was no more than a pit of blackness behind a candle's beam.

Her first impulse was to go straightway to the ladder-head. Her foot was on the rung, when she paused. Vi's call to her, the last she would ever make, must go unanswered. She must be left to fight her own fight, to find for herself the peace to which the morning would bring her. This knowledge came to Irma as if a detaining hand had been laid upon her shoulder. She turned back, walked to the attic window and looked out, through a fringed silhouette of ivy, at the moors empty under a fading moon.

Alone and with little movement, she allowed the hours to pass by her. The candle-flame bent, fluttered and went out. Clouds lay across the moon, and the attic's still shadows were absorbed in a uniform darkness. At last, over the sea, day began to flow skyward in a dull suffusion of steel.

The sleeper stirred, and woke, and called:

"Irma!" Before there could be reply, she repeated in sudden anxiety: "Irma! Irma!"

"I am here."

"Isn't it near morning now?"

"Yes."

"Bless the day for me."

Irma knelt beside her. "Shall we not both bless it with one blessing?" she said.

Natalya held fast to her hand. Presently she released it and said: "I am happy now. Do not stay with me. Go; but remember me."

Her eyes closed again, and Irma left her. Finding Will sleeping in Silver's room, she stooped and kissed him, but he did not stir. Outside, she found that he had retethered the horses under cover. She mounted hers and rode away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

WHEN COLCHING reached the passage, he advanced placidly a few paces before a shaft of instinct struck him and checked his movement. He wanted to see the room again, to remember it; he'd scarcely looked at it as he came out. After momentary hesitation, he wheeled the candle about him at shoulder-level and faced Vi's door. This he had left ajar; a light push with the balls of his fingers swung it back far enough to admit him.

Two thin intervals between the curtains admitted an ashy dawn. Draught from chimney to door lifted a grey powder from the extinct logs and spread it at his feet. He shivered, walked forward, and considered himself in the dull blue of the mirror. Then, moving a little nearer to the empty bed, he looked at her pillow and tried to distinguish some trace of her profile in the crumpled indentation. He wondered once more where she was, thinking of her with dull indifference to which the frozen disarray of her room added a tinge of disgust. It was too like other rooms of his remembrance.

He smiled at that, a wry smile with a glint of conquest in it. Wherever she was, he was glad she was not at present in the room, for then there would have been love or tears and he was in no mood for either. He was pleased, but beneath his satisfaction an undercurrent of self-pity was flowing. What had happened would take the edge off his excitement on his wedding-day. He would have to go through the tediousness of a marriage ceremony without the anticipatory stimulus of new things untasted.

From this point, it was for him no long step to colourful and, indeed, romantic thoughts of marriage itself. The revulsion he had felt when he looked at Vi's pillow left him. He saw her in her wedding-dress, heard the organ, felt her hand on his arm, thrilled with noble protectiveness. Far from being resentful, she would by then—if she was a true woman as he understood women—be flattered to remember his boldness to-night. He began to feel that he had paid her a compliment at some sacrifice to himself. There were, however, compensations. The wedding would seem a fraud, certainly, but there'd be a good secret shared with Mrs. Trell and it would be amusing to know that her friends who gloated were deceived. Anyhow, what had been had been; embarrassing at breakfast, but a joke by lunch. He found one of his apt proverbs and smiled over it—"You can't have your cake and eat it."

In spite of the curl of his lips, the room in which he stood wearied and chilled him. As he turned to leave it, his eyes fell upon the green door,

standing unlatched as he had left it when he carried Vi away from her mother's bedside; and he was pricked by a new curiosity. With candle carefully shaded, he peeped into Mrs. Trell's room. Here it was almost dark, for the window was small and the blinds close drawn, and he could see no more than the white gleam of the supper-tray and, in the bed, a mound of blankets and eiderdown from which there proceeded the guttural murmur of hard breathing. Mad?—so they said; but a controlled madness, he thought. Sanity would return in time for his wedding. The mound of blankets would become gorgeous and erect; the padded hand would be held, and bowed over, a hundred times; and out of the sharp eyes, now lidded with sleep, glances would be shot at him to which he would knowingly respond. Soon he was in the passage again with the unnecessary flame still fluttering before him.

Some yards ahead, the wall of the passage ceased on his left hand and banisters ran on to the stair-head. Opposite the banisters were the high, unblinded windows of the hall, now concealed from him, but admitting a flat, greyish light that washed across his path. Towards this he advanced, less confident than he had been. The passage walls, dark at his sides, were a comfortable shutting-in, and a certain reluctance to cross the illuminated space slowed his footsteps. It was a reluctance he did not recognize; he had no conscious purpose of delay; but he stopped, nevertheless, to examine a picture that hung beside a bracket on which a bowl of flowers was set.

It was a steel engraving in a maple-wood frame and showed a girl, in an assembly of men dressed as shepherds, looking into a mirror. Beneath it was written: "The Glass in the Dining-Room," followed by an italic inscription of some length which, with the aid of his candle, he proceeded to read:

"*Mercy*, being a young and breeding woman, longed for something that she saw there, but was ashamed to ask. Her mother-in-law then asked what she ailed, for she looked as one not well. Then said *Mercy*, There is a looking-glass hangs up in the dining-room, off which I cannot take my mind; if therefore I have it not, I think I shall miscarry. . . . Now the glass was one of a thousand. It would present a man one way with his own features exactly; and turn it but another way, and it would show one the very face and similitude of the Prince of Pilgrims himself."

As he read this, the light by which he read began to tremble, so that he could read no more. In the picture's glazing he saw his own face reflected, and turned away in fear to see further. As he was about to go forward, a sound from below checked him. A door shut, and footsteps, now clear on the stone, now muffled by rugs, deliberately advanced. Instantly he blew out his candle and pressed himself closely against the darker wall. Whoever this

new-comer might be, he had no wish to be discovered. And yet—was it Vi? Her disappearance, by which he had hitherto been so little troubled, now explained itself in his active mind. Awaking, she had, perhaps, been touched by the revulsion which he himself had experienced, and, slipping away from him, had gone into the open. How cool her cheeks would be with the morning air! He saw them rosy, was fired by them, decided his course. With soft speed he glided towards the flood of daylight where the banister-shadows lay sharp upon the floor. Already his eyes had brightened and his lips were parted; as he leaned over the low rail, striving to penetrate the streaked darkness in the well beneath him, expectant pulses beat in his temples at the thought of Vi's approach, of the startled face she would lift to him, the angry embrace with which he would stifle her hesitations.

Her feet were now on the stairs. They came steadily up, with a light but purposeful rhythm that gave him the first hint of doubt. Vi had a more fluttering tread; this seemed not to be hers.

It was not hers; this was not she. More than surprise tightened his throat; a sickness, the sickness of fear for which he had no reason, drove cold into the limbs which, a moment since, hot blood had warmed. The ascending figure was now visible, its back to him. Soon a turn in the stairs would offer its profile; another turn, and they would be confronted. He began to ask himself if this were all a dream, for he felt himself held fast by the impotence of dreams. That picture—he had never noticed it before—had that also been a part of his dream? It had been unlike him to stand staring at it with uplifted candle—even more unlike him to read the mildewed inscription. "The Glass in the Dining-Room"!—he said the words over to himself; they suggested to him that strange mingling of the banal with the fantastic which is of the essence of dreams. Why couldn't he be master of himself, turn, go, shut the safe door of his own bedroom and be alone there?

Now the twist in the flight was reached, and he saw the profile—Irma's. This he had known—or felt now that he had known—from the first instant of misgiving; nevertheless the certainty and, more than this, her disregarding silence gave him fresh hurt and set him whimpering, not physically and audibly, but with a sort of pitiful whimper of the soul that it was beyond all power of the will to stifle. Another turn of the stairs, and they were face to face—he gazing down at her with a loose droop to his lips that was a doomed smile, and she, while with each step she came up to him and towards him, with eyes of search, and scorn and accusation that seemed a single attacking light not to be endured. All his life, which he had been accustomed to regard as a fluid thing easily flowing, crystallized into fixity and permanence. He saw himself no longer as a being of chance and

pleasure mingled in scattered irresponsibility among the chances and pleasures of a thousand others, but as an isolated soul, naked, without companionship or way of escape. He seemed to have come to a final judgment, beyond the intervention of mercy. Above him was her face, not now distinguishable as Irma's, but a face of wrath in flame. It seemed made of burning gold, like the face of an image, and its movement was the deceptive, tremulous movement of carved features that have been stared into fantastic life by concentrated watching. As it rose near him, it shut out all consciousness but of its own power. His lips moved but his tongue failed. A torrent of light overwhelmed him, flowed like sea-water into mouth, throat and eyes, plucked at his feet, swept him into a vast torture of space. Below him was a shelving and glistening darkness, a chasm that drew him towards it and sent out his arms and fingers in impotent twinings. The inward whimpering became an inward cry of anguish and despair. Had reality been a dream? Had the dream been death? Had he been already long in a tomb and all his lusts been the thwarted imaginings of the unresting dead? Was the light that caught him up the light of the tomb's rending that summoned him from the little glooms of death to banish him into dark perpetual? The terrors of damnation were upon him; he saw the darkness at his feet as the darkness of the pit, and swung towards it, losing all grip on the world's substance. So he fell, as it seemed, great distances. The upward swirl of windows seen in falling seemed the flash of planets in the void. Nor, until the instant between impact and final oblivion, when his own blood flowed across the flagstones and the smell of it passed beneath his close nostril, did the stab of bodily agony tell him that there had been a losing of balance, a throwing up of arms, a physical fall. As his eyes dimmed he saw Irma's face again, her own face now, looking down at him, calm, white and aloof.

The flames which the sight of Colching had lighted in Irma died slowly, and her mind, moving gradually from ecstatic to normal perceptiveness, at last received the impress of a human face known to be the face of one who was dead. "He is dead," she thought. "It is Colching who is dead," but the realization was cold in her, unmixed with fear or pity, as if she had looked over her shoulder at one who passed by, and had said to herself: "That was Colching, and he is gone." She gripped the wood on which her hands were lying, straightened her arms, raised her body, threw back her head as if thus to draw her breath more easily. As she did so, her eyes were lifted away from the dead face. Its pallor, its blood, its twist of muscular distortion became instantly fragments of remote memory, wafted away on departing eddies of thought. She turned where she stood and began slowly to descend

the stairs. With no further regard for Colching's body, she recrossed the hall and went again into the open air.

The first impact of the breeze against her face recalled her to a questioning of time. How long was it since she had entered by that door? How long had she stood looking down into the glazed eyes that were never withdrawn from her? She had no reckoning of the intervals, but she saw that morning was advanced. Now the path by which she went was bright and the grasses quick with sudden movement. Everywhere day was opening: the bark on twigs above her head glistened like satin, the evergreens were filmy with translucent silver. As she went on, the cold wind in her mouth brought refreshment, her step quickened, and her carriage became more buoyant. When a declivity in her path denied her the sun, she went forward steadily, looking neither to right nor left, but when rising ground gave her the sea, she gazed at the water as if it contained for her some secret, the nature of which she could not yet define.

Thus she came to the high land north of Spring Bay and began to go down towards the bay itself. The tide had fallen, leaving a broad segment of sand, firm but still dark from the water's touch, which was broken here and there by golden pools in ribbed basins. Beyond it, a barrier at the bay's southern end, a shelving spit of land, ran far into the sea. An abrupt turn to the north at its outer end gave it the appearance of a finger bent at the first joint, and because, in storm-time, conflicting waves were driven at that point high into the air and formed a cloud of suspended foam, the promontory was called the Smoking Finger by those familiar with it. This morning it was, however, clear in outline, for the sea was calm and the atmosphere of that luminous brightness which is peculiar to autumn dawns at the land's edge.

When she left the Manor, she had been subject to that paralysis of mental faculty, that suspension of deliberate will, which follows a great outpouring of emotional or spiritual energy. She had not chosen the course she would take; no act of reason had drawn her towards Spring Bay. But strength had gradually returned to her, and now, as she crossed the sand, her mind began to establish connection between her present surroundings and her past experience. When she was come near to the Smoking Finger a stream of gulls, moving to and fro above a point on the beach a couple of hundred yards from its tip, drew her attention. As she watched them, her imagination became suddenly definite and clear. She asked herself what had brought her to the place where she now stood, saw in a swift and vivid pageant all the happenings of the night; and knew, with a stab of knowledge, towards what centre the gulls were moving. The point above which they hung was accessible by an irregular rocky causeway close to the promontory's cliff,

and with no further hesitation she went towards it. As she drew near, she saw a smooth white shape that might have been the upward curve of bleached wreckage caught from the tide in the Finger's crook. A high wave had carried it to a shelf of weed and pebble and, receding, had left it in the sun. There it would lie undisturbed until the next rise of tide lifted it and carried it further inshore.

Irma knew that it was Vi's body before her eyes distinguished its outline. When she reached the place where it lay, she knelt beside it. It was inclined forward from its right side, the left hip upraised. Vi's dark hair, dragged up from the neck over the head, was laid out in a fan-shape so regular that it seemed almost to have been deliberately contrived. The right arm, stretched above the head, continued the body's line; the left, fallen at hazard from the upward shoulder, was hugged to the breast. Save the backward curve of the left cheek, the face was hidden.

She was like a child asleep. Here was none of death's ugliness—only a repose made perfect by the robe of sun, by the soft, perpetual murmur of the sea. Irma looked down, first in breathless admiration and wonder; then in pity that curled the muscles of her hands as if she would beat her breast with them; at last in a gathering wrath, that quickened rather than dulled her mind, and filled her eyes with the full light of her power. She rose to her feet, straightened herself like a goddess splendid in battle. The gulls, ceasing their repeated manœuvre, swept in a cloud seaward and their cries were no more heard. The light wind dropped altogether, so that Vi's hair and the finer drift of seaweed which had hitherto shifted their edge a little now and then lay still, and the folds of the stuff Irma wore hung rigid as a carving.

As she stood thus, she felt her power answer her wrath, felt the forces of the spirit gather in her and raise up all her being as a sword is uplifted for its stroke. This life should not end here; violence should not be permitted its conquest; this youth, this beauty should not be wasted in death or this flower of vigour wasted in the sand. She began to see before her the fruit of her power's final exercise—instead of the white body at her feet, a living girl erect at her side, in the limbs the flush of returning blood, on the brow the light of intelligence reawakened, in the eyes the amazement of seeing restored. But as, in this vision, she saw accomplished what by the supreme assertion of her spiritual will she knew she might accomplish, she imagined reproach and unspeakable anguish in the awakened eyes as if, being recalled from the dead, the newly living cried out against the disturber. Seeing this, she paused. Her hands, already half lifted in summons above the still body, sank again to her sides.

The sun lay golden upon the limbs. A renewed breeze lifted a tress of hair and curled it back upon the neck. One by one the gulls returned and spread their deep shadows among the rocks.

Irma knelt again beside Vi's body. She knew that she had now laid aside for ever the violence of her power; with that assurance, peace such as she had never before known came to her and she hid her face in her hands. Natalya had turned to her, Vi had called her. One she had saved; the other she had left to achieve her own salvation. Her power, that had been estranged from the suffering of mankind and the struggle of the human spirit, that had moved so long on perilous, solitary heights like an unknown army speaking an unknown tongue, might move henceforward in the hearts and minds of men and be received by them.

She heard a voice say to her: "I am the spirit of reconciliation between your soul and the soul of the world. War not against evil with a destroying sword, but with love. In the spirit also, resist not evil with violence, but be to them that are in darkness a leader armed with compassion, that they may be led from the streets of conflict to the citadel of peace. I am the spirit of reconciliation between your soul and the soul of the world."

She uncovered her eyes and rose, and, lifting the body in her arms, put it in a safe place where the sea should not touch it. Then, by the causeway by which she had come, she returned to the sandy shore and directed her footsteps homeward. She walked lightly now, with joy in her heart. Here it was that she had come with Will on an afternoon long ago, and here that he had first openly spoken of his love for her. It had seemed then infinitely removed from the range of her existence that she should make, within the world, any answer to his love. Now that answer seemed a necessary sacrament by which to establish her discovery of a new realm of spiritual peace.

Leaving the beach at last, she went forward quickly, keeping to the cliff-path until Conrad's house rose in front of her and the Manor stood clear to her left. From the valley, *The Three Faithful Men* was throwing up its early smoke. She turned towards it, went down the slope by which Conrad had once carried her, crossed the Dedwick road, and entered the inn's gravel yard. In the stables, she saw Jim with Will's horse.

"Late ridin'!" he called in answer to her.

Suddenly all the night's exhaustion fell upon her, and her eyes were heavy. But she was too happy, too sure of her own purpose, to be turned aside. She climbed the stairs to the door of Will's room and knocked upon it. It opened at once. He looked at her with surprise at first; but surprise melted

into understanding of the reason that had brought her to him. When she seated herself by the window, he also drew up a chair, and was about to sit beside her. But, thrusting it away with a sudden impulse, he fell upon his knees and, taking her hands, pressed them to his cheeks and to his forehead and to his lips. They looked, then, into each other's faces. The night had drawn deep shadows on hers, made more deep by the morning's thin light, but there was in her eyes and in her smile something that spoke of new life beginning for her and for him. He knew that she loved him now, as he had always loved her, because love between them was necessary to completed spiritual life. No words were spoken; but slowly, as if, in their unspeakable happiness, they were realizing the rareness among mankind of the harmony to which they had now attained, tears came into their eyes. His grip upon her hands tightened. Together they looked out into the increasing sun. Because their happiness was not communicable, they felt dumb before the world, and for a moment lonely.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

In her tower-room at Flare, Irma waited for Will's coming to her. The Manor was theirs now, for Rory and Peggy had gone south that evening, and none but the servants remained. Irma stretched her hands towards the fire and listened. There was no wind, no footfall, no sound anywhere but of the flames' light ascent and of the powdery fall of dust between the bars.

The face which the fire-light revealed was calm and clear, unstrained by eagerness or any anxiety. Not more than a score of weeks had passed since Vi Trell's death, but the turmoil created by the events of that time had so far faded away that they seemed but a stormy prelude to the new existence now beginning. Mrs. Trell had gone, had returned, had gone again; Colching's body had been taken to London; the cottage on the moor was empty. In the churchyard a new stone stood near to Angela's stone, and, because Mrs. Trell would give no instructions for her daughter's funeral, Peggy, with a generosity half formal and half pitiful, had ordered the mason to carve her own favourite text at the foot of Vi's epitaph. Irma's eye had fallen upon the words as she came through the graveyard that day: "Suffer little children to come unto Me."

She saw them again now, and their irony, which none would afterwards perceive, brought to her lips the gentlest of smiles. She thought, too, of the girl whose body lay beneath the stone—not sadly that she was dead, but with an odd, sisterly regret that she might not in some manner be a partaker in her own happiness. For her love for Will was not jealous or possessive; it did not chain her to itself. It was identified in her mind with an increasing warmth and tenderness towards all things living. Not love only—not a single aspect of nature—but all nature had opened before her as a manifestation of the creative spirit, and with the discoveries of a woman had been mingled the postponed discoveries of a child. Nothing in her heart reproved her ecstasy; no hesitation or misgiving set bounds to it; for every discovered beauty of material things had become a window to the spirit, giving health to the soul and admitting her to sight and understanding of it. "It is not he alone that I have found," she thought, "nor earthly love alone; it is as if a part of me, long asleep, were now awakening; as if something frozen in me were entering upon its spring."

When Will entered, she rose to greet him. The loose robes she wore hung in straight folds from her shoulders and from the wrists of her outstretched hands, giving to her a dignity without period or fashion. Her eyes were bright but of full depth; her hair took its natural fall; her lips were

so laid together that none could have said whether they were parted to the admission of a gentle breath or were indeed softly closed. Candle-gleam fell upon one cheek and light shadows were drawn about brow and chin; and to Will it seemed that something more than a personal love shone in her face. How quiet! was his first thought; then—with what holy quietness! He knelt at her feet, and, taking her hands, kissed them. She then knelt beside him and said:

"I used to think that the love of man and woman was a barrier to the love of God—a wall between their spirits and the universal spirit. Now I know that it may be not a wall but a window. May our love be that always. All other love is lust in darkness, corrupt and abominable in those who have eyes to perceive the light."

"I think of it all very simply," he said. "Indeed, I think of it more simply than of anything else, for it seems to have made a child of me again in many respects. I am happy—and it's a sort of innocent, exalted happiness that does not come to me now from any other cause. And I think that what you wish for our love is true of it now. The idea of loving you is not, in my mind, an idea of achievement or possession, but rather an idea of abandoning myself in something both good and beautiful. Above all, it is an idea of space and light, as if not one window only, but all the windows of my being, were thrown open to admit some sacred warmth and energy flowing from the eyes of the Creator."

When he had ceased to speak of this, one phrase of his remained with Irma and became an impulse to the processes of her mind throughout the night. She dwelt continually upon the idea of abandoning oneself in the good and the beautiful. This was the meaning of love—whether the love of a man for a woman, or of an artist for his work, or of Christ dying upon the cross. It became also, for her, the meaning of her passion when at last, in unbroken darkness, she lay at her lover's side. The joy she felt then, in contrast with the colder joys of withdrawal which she had experienced in the past, was as the joy of some religious craftsman of the Middle Ages who, having formerly expressed his faith only in negative abstention from the earthly and material pleasures of the world, was suddenly touched by the spirit of the renaissance and found that his faith was capable of a positive outpouring in the work of his hands. She shared the ecstasy of those creators who regarded only the glory of the Creator of all things, who builded a tower in the blue eye of an Italian heaven, who designed the great glooms of those cathedrals in which to kneel is to suffer the agony of Gethsemane and to enjoy the abundant peace of a soul forgiven and received into the Courts of God. She saw a narrow street, brilliant with the colours of a market, white

with dust and sun, crowded with passers-by. From the booths a few figures were now and then detached. They refreshed themselves at a fountain, crossed a great expanse of grassy turf for ever open and sacred, and, passing up broad shallow steps, entered into a cathedral. Thither in imagination she followed them, and, being within, knelt down beside one whose face was hid but who seemed to be the bearer of many griefs. As they knelt, others came and went silently. Only the peace and fortitude of these worshippers seemed real; all that lay beyond the door—the street, the market, the clamorous throng at the booths—was ephemeral and fantastic. And the griefs of herself and her faceless companion became also fantastic and ephemeral, as if they were cumbersome garments which might be easily laid aside.

She said then to her companion: "Who are you that led me here and to this joy?" And a voice answered: "I am the spirits of all them who made this place to the glory and preservation of Christ's peace. I turned aside from the world, not as once I turned aside into fearful inactivity, but rather to abandon myself and all my truth in the beautiful and good. I am that without which no artist is. I am a gift of individual beauty to universal beauty, a song given to music, a mosaic given to the floors of heaven, a window to the domes of faith, a triumph of genius offered in humility to the children of the poor. I am joy given to God; which is an artist's sacrifice."

It seemed then that the hand with which her lover touched her was a hand of blessing, and his strength a summons to her strength, and his kiss a seal of everlasting peace. She therefore cried aloud—and her words reached him in passionate whispering: "It is you I love and all creation in you. It is you I worship and all humanity worships in me. For you are not one man nor all men, but that which there is of God in all men which only in their love and in their art is set free. It is you I love and all creation in you. It is you I worship. And in my love and worship all humanity gives glory to God and partakes in the peace of His Creative Spirit."

Oxford: Temple: 3 More's Garden, Cheyne Walk.
1919-1924.

THE END

A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON THE AUTHOR OF THIS BOOK

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Charles Morgan was born in Kent on January 22, 1894. He is the son of Sir Charles Morgan, a director of the Southern Railway and other companies, and President of the Institution of Civil Engineers, 1924.

His boyhood was in outward events similar to the boyhood of most sons of the English professional class. He went to a private school at the age of eight and heartily loathed it, for he was from the outset deeply reserved and, apart from a few quiet friendships, found little pleasure in the companionship of children of his own age. Before he had learned to write, he had continually told himself stories; as soon as he could use a pencil he began to set them on paper. His chief pleasures at that time were found in the company of older people who would tolerate his timidity, or alone in his father's library or on his father's lawns. In the library he came upon books not always accessible to children. Tales of physical adventure, though he read them, attracted him less than work of a stronger sort. "Wuthering Heights," Poe's Tales, "The Ingoldsby Legends," the verse of Blake, Keats and Gray were among the earliest prizes of his random wanderings, and whatever was broadly humorous in "Ingoldsby" left him cold. Blake, the Brontës and the Bible were his jewels then and are still. Milton, too, was read.

He always wanted and intended to write. Nothing else, at any period of his career, has ever seemed of comparable importance. But someone told him—a Victorian jest not intended to be taken seriously—that the fate of writers who had no other employment was to starve in garrets. This warning, confirmed by the discovery of a picture of Chatterton's death, produced a profound impression. The child determined that he must have another employment that would enable him to see the world and give him leisure to write. The sight of cruisers off the coast tipped the balance. He decided to enter the Navy.

He went to the Royal Naval College, Osborne, at the age of twelve. Here and at Dartmouth he was trained for four years. Literature still remained his chief care, but other ambitions sprang up to accompany it. He attained to his own surprise high distinction in games—not because he had a natural taste or aptitude for cricket or football, but because he saw that among boys you obtained neither power nor peace without athleticism, and deliberately compelled himself to take a place in the 1st XI and 1st XV. He became, both at Osborne and Dartmouth, Chief Cadet Captain—a position which corresponds to that of Head Prefect at a public school, but is in fact more

powerful because it is backed by the full strength of the Naval Discipline Act. He passed out from Dartmouth in the first class.

He then went to sea. After a few preliminary months in the cruiser *Cumberland* in the Mediterranean and home waters, he was appointed as midshipman to the *Good Hope*, the flagship of the 5th Cruiser Squadron of the Atlantic Fleet. Here he served six months and was then transferred to H. M. S. *Monmouth*. This took him to China and Japan. But it had at last been forced upon him that the profession of a naval officer was not compatible, in his case at any rate, with the profession of writing, and he determined to leave the Navy without loss of time. He resigned in 1913, having served altogether about seven years, and came home across Russia. In England, after a period of illness and delay, he buried himself in deep country and began to learn as much Latin and Greek as was necessary to enable him to enter Oxford University. A few months later he passed the required examinations and was to have gone up to Brasenose College when the academical year began in October, 1914.

He looked forward to Oxford with deep and passionate longing. During his naval years, Oxford had always been for him a symbol of that contemplative life of spiritual adventure towards which his instinct drew him. Oxford had been for him the unattainable city ever since, as a midshipman who felt himself exiled from all that he cared for most, he had read in his hammock Mr. Thomas Hardy's "Jude the Obscure."

Now, when at last the unattainable seemed about to be attained, the war intervened. He volunteered in the first days without eagerness or reluctance. Detachment and contemplation had become impossible; his essential life was therefore held in suspense; a mechanical instinct, bred of long discipline, took him again to the Admiralty from which he had so recently escaped. He was given a commission in the Royal Naval Division, served in the defence of Antwerp, and after the evacuation was made a prisoner of war in Holland together with the greater part of his brigade. Here, with other officers, he was shut up in the disused and moated fortress of Wierickerschans, near Gouda. He shared in several organized attempts to escape, particularly in the excavation of a tunnel, the work of several months. The tunnel was discovered and the fortress ultimately closed, the British government having ordered their officers to give parole in order to free the Dutch from the trouble and expense of guarding them. For the next two years Morgan shared a cottage with two other officers in remote Dutch country in the province of Gelderland. Here he was happy because he was away from crowds and happier because his friendship with the great Dutch landowner of the district admitted him to the intimacy of a curiously

withdrawn aristocracy, still living in its old castles, proud, aloof, feudal within its own wide estates, highly cultured and at ease in at least four languages, but detached from politics and, indeed, from the mechanical progress of the modern world.

Here Morgan began to contribute verse and prose to English papers and to write his first book, afterwards published as "The Gunroom," an immature novel, with the life of junior officers in the Navy as its background, which was damaged as a work of art by its directly propagandist purpose. It was written in order to make known the conditions in which midshipmen lived and the cruelty to which they were subjected systematically as an unofficial but condoned part of their training. This book had a strange history. It was originally written in the first person, but when it was near completion, Morgan was dissatisfied with it, destroyed it, and wrote it again in the third person. In November, 1917, he obtained leave from the Dutch to visit England on parole and took the second version of his novel with him in MS. Within an hour of England his ship was mined, and sank in seven minutes. Morgan was picked up by a destroyer but his MS. and all his belongings were gone. Because he was determined that what he had to say about the Navy ought to be said, he wrote "The Gunroom" a third time. It was published in 1919 and attracted considerable attention. Certain chapters in it were fiercely debated inside and outside the Navy and the book sold fast. Then, one day, when it was in the full tide of success, its sale suddenly and mysteriously stopped. It was not officially banned. But bookshops which had been displaying it, were found to be stocking it no longer. Assistants who had sold it the day before, now shook their heads and said that they had never heard of it. Of this there has never been an open explanation.

Meanwhile, since 1915, Morgan had been writing verse and prose in various journals, including the *Times* (which published his first poem, sent in as the work of an unheard-of contributor, on its leader page), the *Fortnightly Review*, the *English Review* and the *Westminster Gazette*. In the spring of 1919, he went up to Oxford. Here he was President of the Oxford University Dramatic Society, a debater at the Union and Vice-President of the New Reform Club. He took his B.A. degree, with honours in Modern History in June, 1921.

On coming down from Oxford, he worked for a few months in a publishing office until, in December, 1921, he was appointed to be Mr. A. B. Walkley's lieutenant as dramatic critic to the *Times*. He still holds this position and is also a leader writer to the *Times*. In June 1923, he married

Hilda Campbell Vaughan, of The Castle, Builth, Breconshire, thus renewing his family's original connexion with Wales.

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 *My Name is Legion* by Charles Langbridge Morgan]